

I'm worried that I don't have time to go through this reading (or: podcast, lecture recording, class exercise), because if I don't start my assignment soon, I might not get an A grade. Help!

Is stress about getting perfect grades starting to be a problem? Check out these practical suggestions for how to manage problems with study, deal with stress, and set realistic expectations for yourself.

When you're worried about getting perfect grades

Most students want to be successful at Uni. We all have personal aspirations for the future, for our lives and professional careers. Ambition is fine if it gives you a competitive edge and motivates you to do your best work. However, ambition is not okay if it means insisting on an impossible standard of performance, cheating or acting unethically, or transforming from Group Leader into Ivan the Terrible.

If you're stressing about getting perfect grades, the first step in addressing the problem is to identify the real source of the stress. Consider the following:

- Are you finding the work more difficult than you expected?
- Is managing study alongside all your other commitments proving problematic?
- Are family members placing pressure on you to get high marks?
- Are you putting pressure on yourself to keep up with your friends' grades?
- Are your expectations of yourself realistic?

There are a few different issues here. Let's unpack them a bit more.

When the subject seems too hard

Are you feeling daunted by a subject or an assignment? Does it all seem too hard?

It's important to accept that being a student is all about experiencing the learning curve. Your lecturers have high standards and they want you to do well, but getting an A grade is not the goal – the goal is to develop your skills and understanding. That's why strategies like copying other students' work or paying someone to write an essay for you will ultimately hurt you, rather than help you—as well as breaching university regulations and risking serious penalties. Copying an assignment now won't help you to pass the exam; cheating on a

statistics test won't help you to crunch the numbers as a new hire in a graduate job! And coordinators are rightly suspicious of 'perfect' marks.

If you make mistakes or if you don't know something, your lecturers, tutors, and student support staff are there to help you learn, not to judge you. If getting started on an assignment seems impossible, ask your tutor or lecturer, chat online to a librarian, or set up an appointment with an Academic Skills adviser (via your Student Centre). Don't keep putting it off – do it now.

The order of work in a subject is typically designed to allow you to build your skills over time; for example, by starting with smaller assignments and moving on to bigger ones. You should feel confident that you will be given opportunities to develop your skills as the subject progresses.

Sometimes, though, your life changes and the plan you had for your studies is just not workable any more. Maybe you get a full time job offer. Maybe your spouse or child falls ill, or you have to move away. Or maybe you experience a tragic personal event, like a death in the family. When your life circumstances change, you should seek help with getting extensions, special consideration, deferring your studies, or withdrawing from a subject or course. It's important to do this as soon as possible.

So, if you are finding it tough, don't be shy about asking for help – kill small problems now, before they turn into bigger ones.

Try the following:

- Read the Academic Skills Unit resources on [Managing Stress and Active learning – getting better value from your study time](#).
- Get tips on dealing with [Procrastination](#).
- Check the International Student Services webpages on ['When life circumstances change'](#) for advice on getting extensions, special consideration, or leave of absence
- [Contact your Student Centre](#) to speak to a Student Adviser or make an appointment with an Academic Skills Unit staff member
- Visit [thedesk](#), a site to support Australian tertiary students to achieve mental and physical health and wellbeing.

When you're running out of time

If you're running out of time to complete a set task or assignment, there are some practical strategies you can use to boost the chances of completing your work at a reasonable standard, while still maintaining good academic practice. Things like using Google Scholar instead of Google, making an essay plan, and using reference management tools (like EndNote or RefWorks) can really make a difference.

To find out more, visit the scenario pages: [Help! I've Left It All to the Last Minute](#) and [Help! Reference Tracking](#)

When there is pressure from home

If you're stressed out because of your family or your parents, and their expectations of you, take a moment to stop and reflect. Are you confident that you know what your family's expectations of you really are? It's normal for parents to want their children to do their best, but your family also needs to give you some independence and mental breathing space. Is your family aware of all the different things you are juggling? Is the problem that your family expects nothing less than A grades, or is the problem that you have not really talked to them about your own personal goals and wishes? Does your family know what you are really aiming for – and do you?

Try the following:

- Check out the [Ask Counselling posts on 'Families'](#) or [contact Counselling for confidential advice](#)
- Send your parents a copy of the university leaflet, '[Tips for Parents](#)' (designed for parents of first year students)
- If talking to your family is too much, try writing them a letter or an email that explains how you feel
- Take time out to do something relaxing: go for a walk in the park, read a magazine, meet a friend for a cup of tea. Remind yourself there is life outside your studies.

When you feel like a failure if it's less than perfect

Unfortunately, many students experience stress from having unrealistically high expectations of themselves. Do you feel like your work is never good enough—even though you're passing your subjects, and maybe even getting high marks? Healthy goal-setting is fine, but perfection-seeking can create a 'vicious circle' where you set yourself up for failure. It's important to deal with the negative 'all-or-nothing' thinking that characterises perfectionistic attitudes, because perfection-seeking can reduce your satisfaction and self-esteem, and can actually cause you to achieve less.

Try the following:

- [Read the leaflet on 'Perfectionism'](#) in the Further Reading / Resources list
- [Make an individual appointment \('itute'\) with the Academic Skills Unit](#) to get advice on improving your work, managing time, and setting realistic goals
- Check out the Counselling and Psychological Service advice pages on [what to do if you're struggling](#)
- Ask a friend to name three skills or personal characteristics that they see as being your strengths, or make one for yourself
- Make a list of the times when you didn't do something perfectly but ended up learning from the experience and everything ended up being OK

- Make a list of the activities you enjoy doing the most
- Draw a picture that says something positive about how you see yourself in the future

Further Reading / Resources:

Perfectionism (2010). Counselling and Psychological Services, University of Melbourne.

http://services.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/362050/Perfectionism2010.pdf

Tips for Parents (2010). Counselling and Psychological Services, University of Melbourne.

http://services.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/359781/ParentTips2010.pdf

Self-Esteem. Counselling and Psychological Services, University of Melbourne.

http://services.unimelb.edu.au/counsel/resources/resources/wellbeing/self_esteem

Richard N. Bolles. What Colour Is Your Parachute? A practical manual for job-hunters and career-changers.

Berkeley, Calif. : Ten Speed, c2013. University of Melbourne Library holdings:

<http://cat.lib.unimelb.edu.au/record=b4872049~S30> [Ref.: 650.1405 BOLL]

Paige Williams (2010). "Find Out What You Were Born to Do." The Oprah Magazine. November. Republished online at: <http://www.oprah.com/money/Aptitude-Tests-Find-the-Right-Job-For-You/1> [Access date: 16-04-13]