

Goal Setting

Setting goals is an essential part of time management. Goals can be short term: to exercise for 30 minutes daily, to arrive at work by 8:15 am, or to read 25 pages from the psychology textbook every day. Goals can also be long term: to earn a bachelor's degree, to become a lawyer, or to buy a car. Goals motivate us, help us make decisions and guide our priorities. To be useful, goals must be specific, testable, attainable, and relevant. Use the **STAR** acronym to remember the criteria for setting goals.

Specific: Vague or non-specific goals are difficult to reach. A goal like “I want to do better in chemistry” is admirable, but what exactly do I want to improve, to what extent, and how will I do that? Creating specific goals helps me know when I have accomplished the goal. “Study really hard for chemistry” is not specific enough because I’ll never know whether I’ve actually accomplished it or not. Examples of specific goals are:

“Read Chapter 7 and answer 10 end of chapter questions at 6:00 p.m.”

“Eat at least 2 meals with fruit and/or vegetables daily.”

“Create and use vocabulary cue cards to prepare for biology midterm.”

Testable: Academic goals are most effective when they are measurable (“Can I recite all the definitions for Chapter 7?”) and are set with a specific time frame in mind (“I will memorize this vocabulary by Thursday”). Too frequently, we set goals that are difficult to measure. “I want to become a scientist,” for example, is a much harder goal to measure than “read my lab assignment before I go to lab” or “do at least two Organic Chemistry problems every day until the next Organic Chemistry exam.” Both of these goals could lead to becoming a scientist but are smaller and more manageable than “become a scientist.” Testing whether I have met my goals increases my chance of success (i.e. “Did I read the lab assignment? Did I solve two problems every day?”).

Attainable: The goal must be challenging, but it also should be something that can realistically be done. Climbing Mt. Everest is both specific and testable, but it probably is not particularly attainable without some major life changes (save money, quit school, get in shape, etc.). Students often set unattainable academic goals. “Get an A+ in Organic Chemistry” is not attainable if chemistry and math are a struggle for me. However, getting a B+ might be a realistic goal. Reading a 900 page novel in 24 hours is not really an attainable goal but reading 100 pages might be.

Relevant: Goals also need to be relevant. Non-relevant goals will often lead to procrastination and avoidance. When looking at the larger time management picture, consider whether the short-term goals are in line with the long-term goals. For example, does taking a math class relate to my long-term goal of earning a degree in Psychology? Does spending time perfecting every aspect of an assignment in a class I find easy interfere with my more crucial or essential goals, like passing a class I find difficult?

Finally, setting goals will help me know when to say “no” to demands on my time that do not help me to reach my goals

Adapted from:

Schubert Walker, L.J. & Schönwetter, D.J. (2003). Success secrets of university students. Prentice Hall. p. 102-4.