

# Importance of deadlines assignment

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I'll grant that in the current economic circumstances, with many academic units at many colleges, universities and branches underfed and understaffed, faculty and staff alike are being asked to do more and more work with fewer people, fewer resources, and less time. But if we're being honest we have to admit that the problem of faculty who are unaccountable to deadlines is an older problem than the current economic crisis; within academe the problem is endemic, systemic, epidemic.

Regardless of the cause, when the routine, sometimes mundane business of the university is neglected or even just delayed, complications and stress cascade through the ankh, amplifying the problems that fellow faculty, staff, and even students must then deal with and solve. Even worse, sometimes the most egregious offenders when it comes to blowing off deadlines are senior faculty, who should, frankly, know and behave better.

One step toward reducing the stress and work we create for others, and ourselves, might be to take more seriously the deadlines that often accompany our work, but that are sometimes neglected when faculty perceive, often quite wrongly, that there are no negative consequences for missing a deadline. Some deadlines are absolutely rigid, such as the filing dates for theses and dissertations, the sorts of deadlines that must be met if one hopes to graduate on time.

These rigid deadlines are the types of bureaucratic deadlines that we have to navigate routinely in order to complete graduate degrees, apply for grants, or otherwise navigate the complex institutions of the modern academy. Other deadlines are effectively rigid. When your department chair or a fellow

faculty member assigns you a task with a due date, it behooves all faculty members to regard those sorts of deadlines as GUID, especially if you don't have tenure. Such deadlines might be negotiable in some circumstances, but they aren't to be disregarded altogether.

Blowing off your campus bookstore's deadline for textbook orders, for example, may seem like a trivial lapse. But potentially, missing even such a seemingly small deadline creates additional work for the already-swamped employees placing the orders, and it can result in higher costs for students if books have to be rush-shipped or if the window to order used texts is missed. Even though you are unlikely to suffer personally for missing the deadline, there may suffer.

A whole other set of the deadlines that we face in academe are self-imposed, milestones that we set for ourselves in order to complete the nebulous, long-running projects that often comprise research and scholarship. Even though such self-imposed deadlines are "soft," in that there is no enforcer that will come forward and punish, chastise, or cajole us if we miss them, I think that it's generally a bad idea to miss even the deadlines that we set for ourselves. Assuming, and this is a big assumption, that the deadlines we set for ourselves are realistic.

These soft deadlines can't be taken too lightly ? the ability, or inability, to set and meet goals without external guidance or enforcement will determine whether or not a tenure-track faculty member is able to meet expectations for scholarly productivity and ultimately win tenure. One of the tricks to managing these soft deadlines is learning to set goals that are both

meaningful and realistic. It is much easier said than done, and hopefully an advanced graduate student receives extensive mentors on how to manage the research workload.

Cooperative, self-policing structures like writing ropes are one way to formalize soft deadlines and hold ourselves accountable to ourselves and to others to complete, or at least make progress on, our long-term projects. An important part of managing our work is knowing how to differentiate between soft and rigid deadlines, and how to prioritize deadlines across all of the varieties of work required of faculty. Deadlines matter in our interactions with students as well.

My feeling is that if am going to hold students strictly accountable to a deadline, then I too need to be accountable in similar ways. When I give my students writing assignments, each assignment is accompanied by a specifically articulated series of deadlines for when drafts and peer reviews are due, a deadline for each stage of the writing process, each of which students are expected to meet. But my assignments also include deadlines for myself, essentially promises Of when I will return things like graded papers.

Holding students strictly to deadlines, but then failing to return work in a timely manner, sends a message of hypocrisy to students that they immediately detect and disdain. Hold myself as accountable to self-imposed deadlines, just as hold my dents accountable. By advertising my own deadlines for tasks like grading, in this case on the writing assignment itself,

create a mechanism that forces me to be accountable. When it comes to interacting with colleagues, also work hard to meet deadlines.

As a junior faculty member, I never want to be the squeaky wheel, never want to be the committee member who fails to turn in work on time and holds up other people and an entire process. My unwillingness to be branded as a shirker is in addition, of course, to the glaringly obvious point that it is simply a common courtesy to meet administrative deadlines. Everyone in the university has work to do, much of it important work, and failing to do our own work in a timely, professional manner unnecessarily delays the work of others.

There are certainly times when we realize that we will be unable to meet a deadline. If you foresee missing an externally imposed deadline, it's both courteous and good policy to let interested parties know, sooner rather than later, that you may be delayed in delivering your work. Such a warning at least allows others involved in the work to improvise an accommodation. Simply allowing a deadline to pass without a word of warning is discourteous and doesn't allow others to help ameliorate the effects of our own delays.

And missed deadlines are almost always noticed, even when the matter at hand may seem trivial. As you progress in your career, you may be asked to peer-review manuscripts that have been submitted to journals in your subscribing. It is especially important to meet an editor's deadlines when conducting reviews of manuscripts. Some disciplines have a culture of turning reviews around quickly, while other disciplines (particularly in the

humanities) are notorious for a tradition of taking months, sometimes even over a year, simply to review manuscripts.