

Executive Skills Questionnaire---Suggestions

Please rate yourself in the range 1-7 for each of the 28 numbered and bolded items below

[1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=tend to disagree, 4=neutral, 5=tend to agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree.]

Usually, you are not rating the limits of your biology, *but the limits of the habits that you currently have*. We often accept certain habits until we perceive that they are hurting us in some way. These 28 will help identify some of those. Below each numbered statement are some suggestions for improving your rating with respect to that question.

Activation:

1. No matter the task, I believe in getting started as soon as possible.

The mind's initial assessment of something is often more grand than the reality. Getting started does not mean that you have to accomplish a measurable or even tangible amount of the task. Set a timer for 5-10 minutes, think about the task, what you think it might entail, and what you might need before getting started. Ask your teacher/supervisor if these bring up any questions. Set dates on a calendar for addressing various aspects that came to your mind.

2. Procrastination is not usually a problem for me.

Everyone procrastinates to some degree; keep it manageable and eventually it might no longer be much of an issue. In other words, don't compound a tendency with guilt, but rather with action directed at the right places. Rather than being a flag for laziness, procrastination is often an indication that you have built up a larger-than-life image of what the task is (see #1). Getting started is commonly a slippery slope (the good kind!), so find a way to get started, however short. This forboding about a task may also mean that you just don't know quite where to begin. Try something; anything. You can also ask your teacher/supervisor/friend more about the task to overcome this hurdle, but before you do, it is helpful to have thought about it enough to think of some good questions.

3. I seldom leave tasks for the last minute.

If on the day of the assignment of the task you spend 5-10 minutes mapping out what you think the task will entail, (see #1), then I believe that you'll seldom find yourself working up until the last minute. An important reason to get started early is that often additional information or time is needed for some elements of the task. Arrange the list of sub-tasks in a rough 'what is needed first' basis and accomplish those pieces early on. In that way, these will not be a log-jam to finishing the task, and with those done you'll usually see a pathway to completing the rest of the task.

4. I usually have no trouble deciding which tasks are more important.

I think that everyone initially has some difficulty ranking the importance of tasks. Thankfully, the mind quickly learns and adapts when it is exposed to challenges; it picks up clues over time and stores them away. However, it needs some experience to get started. Over time, you will get better and better at it. Even the first time, if you get a small portion underway, rankings will become more clear. When you have decided upon a few tasks which are important, choose one and move it forward a little. Once you reach a good stopping point, choose another of those tasks and move it forward a little. Continue this until your timer expires. This will register with the mind that you made these decisions, and the small progress on each of them will also inform the mind some of what each entails. Your mind will work from there even while you are not, and the next time you pick up your task list, you will have a better idea of what to rank first. As you get more practice with this, you will find it much easier.

Summary of Activation:

A lot of the difficulty here is thinking of assignments or tasks as more massive than they are. Not only is this overwhelming, but you are likely to form a block against the tasks and this will make it even more difficult for you to see what is involved.

- Getting started doesn't have to mean a huge time commitment. Instead, begin with 5-10 minutes of investigation of what is being asked and thinking about how one might begin and what might be involved.
- Once this has been done, later sessions can isolate the aspects identified in previous sessions, or address ideas that have come to mind in the mean time. The mind is working through it even though you're doing other things; it just needs to get introduced to the tasks.
- Set aside all distractions in another room, and use a timer...probably a timer other than the one on your phone. Set the timer to the desired amount of time for that session, and work on what you've selected for that session. Not only will this allow some time solely dedicated to the work, it will also provide the comfort that 'This won't go on forever'.
- The dedicated time without distraction is necessary because we cannot multitask in a productive fashion. Work when you work and relax/play when you relax/play.
- Finally, the last thing before turning in for the night, list the items you want to move forward the next day. It will help sleep better, and the next day you will be able to get the ball rolling quickly.

Focus:

5. I find it easy to stay focused on my work.

Focus can often be a state of both mind and environment. Focus is an undivided directing of thoughts towards the accomplishing of a task (or some portion of a task). Thus, by definition, we cannot multitask and focus at the same time. You have to set the stage for focused work on your task, or it will be incredibly difficult. The phone/tablet/computer is a wonderful thing and has various levels of value about them. However, unless the task involves one of them, they introduce more opportunity for distraction than value for the task. Thus, to move forward something important, it would be helpful to have the device in another room. If the absence of the phone has you uneasy and distracted then try bringing the device back but 'tagging' the thought every time you think of touching the device. That is, as you are working and the thought comes to mind to touch or use the device, think 'want device' or write down 'want device' and then go back to the task. This often works with other distractive thoughts: you acknowledge the stray thought with a 'tag' (label), and then go back to the task. Your mind will allow you to work uninterrupted for awhile because it is comfortable that you have recognized its notice. It is still probably good to set the phone to be as minimally distractive as you are comfortable making it (on silent, or with various focus settings, on airplane mode, etc). Ideally, schedule 20-30 minutes on a timer, direct your mind to the task and tag stray thoughts that come up during the session. *Without a timer, your focus will be distracted by wondering the time so that you can get to your next commitment on time.* See 'Activation' for getting started.

6. Even when interrupted, I find it easy to get back and finish the job at hand.

Depending upon the kind of interruption, it can be difficult to get back to the task at hand. It might be useful to get a 'mindfulness' phone app to use for just a week or so to get some practice with 'tagging', as mentioned in #5. When a thought comes up which is irrelevant to the task, 'tag' (label) it as whatever it is (get gasoline after class, call Mom, go to ice-breaker event)...maybe even write it down, and then direct yourself to go back to the task. We're all human; our thought trains will be disrupted on occasion; just acknowledge the thought, label it, and move on with the task. *Holding yourself to impossible standards that few others meet, is never helpful. Acknowledge and get back to the task.* If a friend stops by or calls, do what seems rational for the situation, but reset the time and give your task its due.

7. When I have a lot to do, I can easily focus on the most important things.

See the answer to #4 regarding identifying what is most important. Try to make decisions based upon the elements of the tasks, not on your stress-level. Stress is only good at alerting you that action must be taken; guilt that you've lost time to a distraction is only good at alerting you to a behavior that needs changing. Any more than just a little bit of either is neither helpful nor healthful. As mentioned in #6, "tag" the idea that you have a lot to do, and just get started on and give full focus to *something*; after you get started it will be easier to hone in on the most important tasks.

8. I have no trouble shifting my focus when it is time to change tasks.

The operative clause here is 'when it is time to change tasks'. If you are already focused on something critically important, and you are being productive at it, then it might be a good thing to stay focused on that. If you are beginning to get frustrated in your current task, then "tag" the task that you are working on and do something relaxational or fun. If you really are being called to another critical task, "tag" the task by writing down where you were and what you see as needing to be done next, and then move on. Don't be bogged down on the perfect wording or whether or not you're certain what needs to be done next. As Voltaire said "Perfection is the enemy of Good."

Summary of Focus:

Do whatever you do, while you are doing it; set the stage for limited distraction. Set a timer to help you both stay with the task for some period of time, and (if it is a tiring task) to give you the comfort that the time is limited. "Tag" things that get in the way, either assign each a word or phrase, and then get back to the task at hand. You might have a pad of paper where you tag by writing something down about the distraction. If you tag stray thoughts by writing down the tag, tally up your tags in each category and see if you notice any patterns that might be interesting. For instance, if you have a ton of tags for 'throw out the mushy zucchini' then maybe you ought to clean out the vegetable drawer in the fridge; if you have a ton of 'call Mom' then call your mother that evening. Stray thoughts may still be of value, but just not at that particular time. Finally, if you wake up at 4:00 and your mind is racing, write down those thoughts and you might have both saved a good idea and be able to go back to sleep.

Effort:

9. When I plan my day I identify priorities and stick with them.

As I mentioned earlier, before you head to sleep, jot down a few things that you want to do or get started upon the next day. You might do so at some other earlier time that day instead, but it is good to have the first domino ready to fall as the day begins. It is true that you do not want to be distracted away from your priorities by things which are irrelevant to those priorities. However, you want to be the Captain of your day, so it is appropriate to make mid-day decisions, based upon what is happening at the time, which might delay one or more of the tasks that you had planned for the day. To avoid the irrelevant distraction, remember to 'tag' irrelevant thoughts and side-activities and keep working on your priority. Mainly, diverting from the day's priorities should be a decision backed by a reason.

10. Once I start an assignment I work diligently until it is completed.

As in #9, one should not look upon this too rigidly. As in Activation, make a task-list for the assignment on the calendar and keep moving it forward to complete it on time. As in #8, sometimes it might be better to put it aside for a bit, and sometimes it might be better to continue to forge forward. It should be your decision based upon reasons, not mere distraction by the irrelevant. Set up a system for continually moving things forward, with times of focus, (and times of rest) and follow the system; don't get mired down by individual components and common rules when something uncommon arises and suggests that you should switch tasks.

11. I typically break big tasks down into subtasks and timelines.

Maybe you haven't been formally breaking big tasks into subtasks, but it is something that is valuable to learn. If you have a task so broad that there are components which either have a time-dependency (one must be done before another) or they are completely independent of one another, then separate these into separate sub-tasks and begin with one that needs to be completed earlier. You might have noticed sometime in your past that a large task itself forced you to do portions of it first, before others could be done. That is a signal that those sub-tasks could possibly have been broken apart earlier and that might have helped you be more efficient. Start doing so, and you will find that it soon becomes natural (see Activation). This is the case with anything. Don't get mired down in what you currently do or don't do. Find good strategies and try to adopt them.

12. I usually get enough sleep and feel rested when I work on projects.

Sleep is incredibly important; it is what your whole day's mental outlook and productivity are built upon. When one sees so many opportunities around them, it is difficult to opt for the 'more sleep' option, however, I recommend frequently giving that a try and see how much better your next day becomes. When you're stressed and your mind doesn't want to let you sleep, write down a few of the things that are stressing you, and a few things that you can do tomorrow (perhaps about some of those stresses), and then opt for sleep; you are "tagging" your stresses for later. Sleep will help you deal with them tomorrow. Very few things are so time sensitive that they *must* be addressed *now* when you are tired and unable to think about them efficiently. In fact, late in the day certain hormones are depleted and everything looks more bleak; an unbalanced perspective is unlikely to lead you to a good resolution. Tag it for tomorrow. Finally, the blue light of phone/tablet/computer screens will mess with your sleep and so late in the day you should keep their use to a minimum. Use your phone's or computer's internal settings to warm its light later in the day. Healthful food and exercise are also important to good sleep.

Summary of Effort:

Effort is a massive package of many other things. If you don't feel like putting in the effort, then is it really laziness? Probably not. Don't look to place blame, look at what else might be contributing to this:

- Have I had enough sleep?
- Have I identified a task to get started upon or work towards?
- Have I set up a game-plan for addressing this task (subtasks, time-frame on calendar, etc)?
- Do I need more information from my teacher/supervisor to really know what I need to do?
- Have I set aside a time, with a timer, to focus in upon the task?
- Have I set time aside to relax, go to dinner with a friend, exercise (go to the Wellness Center with a friend)...just chill? It needs its own time too.

Emotional Regulation:

Summary of Emotional Regulation:

It is impossible to cover the bases of all possible emotional events. If you are feeling overwhelmed more than average, Murray State has offices and people on campus who can help. I think that there is still room to hold in mind that a different perspective (by working on it at a different time, or with some other person) may shed helpful light on it; that is, don't consider something to be as absolute as it might seem to you when it comes up.

For basic emotion-related interruptions, rather than think of emotions or stresses as good or bad, realize that they are human and quite natural. They are not things to avoid. This may give you some breathing room that allows you to regulate them. Working with these emotions can be viewed as a task; assign it a priority and a time that it can be done productively, perhaps with another person who might be helpful.

13. My emotions seldom get in the way when performing tasks.

We are not machines. Sometimes emotions will demand attention; don't fight that human side, but do things to help keep it balanced. To let the emotional issue and your task fight with one another for attention is not going to be effective for addressing either one, but only more upsetting. Set a timer to give the emotional situation its time to be considered, but then tag it and set it aside for another time. Perhaps think about who might be able to assist you with it.

14. Little things do not affect me emotionally or distract me from the task at hand.

See #13. These are going to come up. If you are in the middle of a task, particularly in a focus-period, tag it, perhaps in writing, where you give it a time later in the day to think about. That may help you get back to focus on the present task. One advantage too, is that later in the day (or whenever you tagged that emotional item to be considered) you will have a slightly or maybe greatly different perspective. I think that it is often good to take the time to see *any* item, emotion-related or not, from a different perspective.

15. I can defer my personal feelings until after a task has been completed.

This is pretty broad. I think that most of us are going to have some personal item which is going to demand attention at the time that it comes up. I think that it is important to remember that life is a balance and that you're not a machine. Give yourself permission to be side-tracked on occasion, particularly if you found that 'tagging' it was not sufficient. Overall, as you learn to get Activated on tasks, get a schedule set up to Focus on them and get your questions answered about the task, so that you can put Effort towards them when you've scheduled that effort, then the individual events like this will be more like another task that you can schedule into the day.

16. When things get tough, I don't get overly frustrated, but try a different approach.

One is not born thinking in this way. However, one can learn to operate in this way. Everyone gets frustrated from time to time. When you begin to get frustrated, *make it a choice to disengage* until you can get a fresh look at the task; sometimes frustration comes from getting in a thinking rut which you cannot see outside of. Also, consider getting some assistance from your teacher/supervisor, rather than waiting until the frustration has ground you to a stop. There is a price to pay for that level of frustration.

Memory:

17. I have a good memory for facts, dates, and details.

It is impossible to think of this as isolated from all of the above. If stress or emotional events or lack of sleep or diminished focus are at play, then almost nobody will have a good memory. Thus, you can affect this by addressing relevant items from the other components of this document. However, some things will help.

- Whatever you do, think about what you are doing as you are doing it. Think about why you are doing it. Write it down in your own words if it is something that is new to you. The process of writing it requires that your mind organize it enough to put it into words, and the use of the hand to record it also contributes to remembering it.
- Whatever you write, think about what you are writing as you are doing it. If it is a non pronouncable item like a mathematical or physics expression, say it quietly to yourself as you are writing it and think about why it is true.
- If it is a timed event, put it on a calendar...particularly a physical calendar...there is something about the use of a hand which commits things further to memory.
- If you begin to get frustrated, write it down and seek assistance from your teacher/supervisor later, rather than letting the frustration dilute your ability to put the thoughts into memory.

18. I am very good at remembering things that I have committed to do.

Similar to item #17, our ability to remember commitments that we've made hinges upon how much our ability to do so is hampered by other things: stress, matters of emotion, a heavy commitment load, etc. There are ways to improve, regardless. When you make a commitment, think to yourself who you are making the commitment to, a tiny bit about what that commitment will involve (perhaps while still talking to the person), and when you might work on it. (or write it down) Thoughts are like wisps of smoke. Without being written down or committed to memory in some way, they are gone in 10-20 seconds...replaced by some other thought...which will be replaced by some other thought...which... If we don't put down landmarks in our head for a thought, or write it down, it is gone.

19. I seldom need reminders to complete tasks.

You are at a point in your life where you are moving from few deadlines for only a few different people to many task deadlines for many different people. In the workplace or in college both responsibilities and professional contacts increase. If you are already juggling 4 tasks and deadlines and you get hit by a fifth, one of those other 4 will start to fade. You're only human. As you become busier, it makes sense to write down reminders no matter how highly you rate yourself here. Also, think about it from a standpoint of personal expenditure: the personal cost to write down all your commitments and time frames in a calendar or booklet vs the personal cost of having to explain to someone why you didn't complete their task on time, having to squeeze your other priorities to get their task complete as soon as possible. and finally the trust which might have been lost with that person.

20. I'm not afraid of losing my train of thought when taking part in discussions.

Some degree of fear of most things is natural. If you adopt a mindfulness about whatever you do (see #17), and don't let fear/stress take over, I believe that this will take care of itself. Most of these items are natural; this is not about being perfect, it is about learning strategies to make one's natural traits into helpful ones not stressful ones.

Summary of Working Memory

- Your mind will take care of most things for you, if it is given a chance. Adopt a mindfulness strategy of not doing anything automatically, without thinking about it. However, there are extenuating circumstances of heavy workloads and stressful times, so it is helpful to have designated calendars and notebooks where you can record critical information.
- You only have about 4 or 5 mental registers in which you can hold information to use to tackle a priority; if you can express several of them on paper as a diagram then that frees several registers to hold additional ideas to address that priority. Similarly, if you can chunk several of those ideas into a single concept which expresses them all, these several ideas are now held in your mind using just a single register.

Action/Behavior Monitoring:

21. I am good at maintaining systems for organizing my work.

It is probably true that none of us are good at this from the start. However, chaos is never helpful. It not only makes it difficult for us to keep track of our work/tasks/commitments, it also makes it difficult for us to find sufficient order to prioritize or do much of anything else. Eventually we need to adopt some organizational system or we'll work ten times as hard at our tasks and responsibilities than everyone else. Ask around or read around and find out what systems others use. Perhaps keep a notebook for every class...maybe a 3-ringed binder so that you can put clarifying pages between the pages of your notes, and keep them in order. Have a different one for each class. ...maybe a small one for each project. Find a system that works for you.

22. I routinely evaluate my performance and devise methods for improvement.

This is another of those 'I wasn't born this way, but I eventually discovered that it was helpful.' Set aside a bit of time each week to look at yourself from the outside, identify things that you've done over the course of the week, how in retrospect you might have done them better, what worked particularly well. Write these things down, use them for next time, and then update them. When you do these things, remember that it is just for yourself; be brutally honest, but don't attribute them to anything more than habit (good or bad). Remember from earlier, stress and guilt have only a microsecond of value; use that microsecond and move on. Ask a teacher/supervisor what they suggest that you do better.

23. I am able to step back from a situation and make objective decisions.

This is a learned art. Very few things are so time-critical that they wouldn't benefit from taking the time for a different perspective. Practice stopping for a few seconds and trying to see something from another perspective. Get used to identifying an objective scale from which to make decisions about something, rather than acting upon emotion.

24. I "read" situations well and can adjust my behavior based on the reactions of others.

This is also a learned ability. I think that a good strategy to fall back upon is deciding what adds energy to a system and what dampens the energy. If you are in a class activity, you might want to add energy to your group in a way that you think is constructive (you'll develop this sense over time...but not without trying something). If an argument is brewing between some people, you will probably want to avoid adding energy to the system but think about how to diffuse the situation. There are few absolutes here; we can't anticipate all situations. Few things are learned without some degree of practice.

Summary of Action/Behavior Monitoring:

I believe that generally, all of these are learned arts. We can't learn to do them without diving in and trying some things, and we will get better over time. It is worthwhile that you try to filter out those attempts which do not feel *constructive* to you. By testing the waters conservatively in this way, experience will lead you forward. Being so careful that you do nothing, will keep you from getting this experience.

As with almost all of the others, Perfection is the enemy of the Good.

Regarding what is constructive:

- be respectful of all people (that does not mean that you agree with them; it means you are trying to navigate the situation effectively); it also means that you are returning their communications promptly!
- do not expect the world to operate to your rhythm or time. The world may be happy to make exceptions when they are exceptions. However, doing or not doing something just because it is easier or because you feel like it, will result in people seeing you as someone with a shelf life (as in "Best if engaged with by next Friday; then ignore.").
- be kind and helpful rather than inert or disruptive.

Overall Summary:

- Buy a stand-alone timer, and both a physical calendar and a physical notebook in which to record important information related to responsibilities and tasks that you have.
- Adopt a handful of the strategies from this document and that will give you a tangible sense of control over your responsibilities and your responsibilities will appear smaller and more manageable. Take the time to adopt these as habits. Know that you will always be a work-in-progress on any one of them, at least until you no longer think about them but are doing them automatically. That is true of each of us; there is no reason to compare yourself to anyone else, because (a) the challenges and loads that each of us face are not the same, (b) others might already be using many of these habits to operate as they do, (c) it is not productive, and (d) it doesn't matter. Compete only with yourself. Do not demand perfection of yourself; demand only that you try.
- Finally, give yourself the grace to not be perfect. Some 'defects' will likely remain...I like to call those things 'personality'. Often what I enjoy most about a friend has to do with the quirks about them.