

Insights 6

2 Just don't do it!

Each year, the most prestigious works in science, literature and peace are rewarded with a Nobel Prize. At the same time, the not-so-prestigious works are also rewarded at the Ig Nobel ceremony at Harvard University. The main idea is to promote science and research that first might make you laugh and then think. The following text covers the work of a philosopher called John Perry, who won the 2011 Ig Nobel Prize in Literature for his Theory of Structured Procrastination.

You know, I wrote this at the last minute. I really intended to get it done earlier, but stuff kept coming up, and it kept looming on my to-do list. But you know, I've been so busy, and...

...ok, never mind. I'm a really effective procrastinator. That's the real reason.

But reading this paper, I realized that my procrastination efforts !!! They are what make me EFFECTIVE! And you can be too! Just trust the guy who wrote the paper (and yeah, he totally wrote it at the last minute).

Presenting the Ig Nobel Prize in Literature, to John Perry for his Theory of Structured Procrastination!

The idea is this. Most of us procrastinate, put things off till the last minute. But there are two WAYS to procrastinate. The first way is to procrastinate by doing nothing. People who procrastinate in this manner have a few important tasks on their list. They then work very hard to clear their list of other tasks, figuring that if they do so, they will complete the important items. And I guess they do, eventually. But in the meantime, what do they do? Pretty much nothing. Surf the internet, maybe.

And then there is the other kind of procrastinator. This one procrastinates like I do. I have a couple of very important, theoretically deadlined but not in actuality time-sensitive (though for the benefit of my career they probably should be) items on my list. But I never do them (ok, I'll do them eventually). Instead, I get done all the smaller tasks that feel more urgent. I clean the kitchen, I blog, I run that extra experiment, extract that bit of RNA, make a poster or presentation, you know. And the net result? Get my big items done about as often as the first type of procrastinator does, but in the cracks, I'm a heck of a lot more effective. So much so, that I've actually got a reputation for being really high powered and getting a lot of stuff done. It's just...not the stuff I SHOULD be getting done. Oops.

Perry proposes to trade upon this second type of procrastination to make us all more effective human beings. Procrastination is not exactly a good trait, but by using it to get everything ELSE done, you can make it work for you. Perry proposes establishing a hierarchy of the things you have to do. The most important stuff is on top, of course, but there are LOADS of important things you need to do further down the list. You have to...clean the bathroom! That's right! And vacuum the cat! And write that blog about farting in gnats! By doing all of these worthwhile activities, you procrastinate doing the things higher up on the list. The net result? You get a lot done, and still manage to procrastinate. See how effective you are?

Of course, Perry points out that this involves a certain amount of self-deception. You have to be able to convince yourself that all the other stuff you have to do is more important and due a lot sooner than the items higher up on your list (I mean, OBVIOUSLY the cat is getting unbearably hairy and dusty, and that paper on gnats farting is going to be super important and massively high traffic, and if you don't cover it someone else will...). But they are so much more ACHIEVABLE than writing, say, that grant that's due. And think of how effective everyone else will think you are!

And hey, it works for me (sometimes). I started an entire BLOG devoted to procrastination. Jorge Cham started a whole comic strip devoted to procrastination, and look what happened to him! And you too can be an effective procrastinator. Just listen to Perry, after all he won a prize. And even though he was procrastinating his hardest, he still manages to be a professor of Philosophy at Stanford.

And sure you might have a lot of things to do, but you can put this post on your to do list and read it first, after all it's still going to be useful. See? That simple! Look how effective you are!

Copyright © 2011 by Bethany Brookshire. Reprint of the blog post "IgNobel Prize WINNER: The Power of Effective Procrastination."