
The Eisenhower Matrix

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The Eisenhower Matrix is a productivity, prioritization, and time-management tool designed to help you prioritize a list of tasks by categorizing them according to their urgency and importance. The name was coined by Stephen Covey, the author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, who took inspiration from a speech given by Dwight D. Eisenhower, the 34th President of the United States. Eisenhower quoted an unknown university president during a speech, stating, “I have two kinds of problems: the urgent, and the unimportant. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent.”

Also called an Eisenhower Decision Matrix, Eisenhower Box, or Urgent-Important Matrix, this time management approach consists of drawing a four-box square with an x-axis labeled, “Urgent” and “Not Urgent,” and the y-axis labeled, “Important” and “Not Important.”

The Difference Between Urgent and Important Tasks

As a busy graduate student, it is easy to synonymize the words “urgent” and “important” when you are tackling a long list of tasks and attempting to balance your time with responsibilities outside of class. However, understanding the difference between the two is crucial to identifying which tasks should be completed right away or delayed for another day.

Urgent tasks require your immediate attention, and likely have clear consequences if not completed within a specific timeline. These are the tasks that, if avoided or delayed for a significant period of time, can lead to higher levels of stress and burnout. Examples of urgent tasks include finishing a project or assignment with a fast-approaching deadline, studying for an upcoming exam, or emergencies at home or work.

Important tasks do not require your immediate attention, but should be completed because they help you achieve your long-term goals. These are the tasks that still matter despite not being due right away, and take careful planning so that you can use your time and resources efficiently. Examples of important tasks include planning for a long-term project or assignment, reviewing lecture notes, exercising, and attending professional development opportunities.

Once you have a better understanding of the difference between urgent and important tasks, you can begin planning your days, weeks, and months using the Eisenhower Matrix.

The Four Quadrants of the Eisenhower Matrix

The goal of the Eisenhower Matrix is to help you separate your tasks into four quadrants:

1. Urgent and Important: Tasks with deadlines or consequences
2. Urgent and Not Important: Tasks that require your attention, but do not have deadlines or consequences.
3. Not Urgent and Important: Tasks with unclear deadlines that contribute to long-term success.
4. Not Urgent and Not Important: Unnecessary tasks, distractions, and time-wasters.

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	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	<p>QUADRANT 1</p> <p>Tasks with deadlines or consequences</p>	<p>QUADRANT 2</p> <p>Tasks with unclear deadlines that contribute to long-term success</p>
Not Important	<p>QUADRANT 3</p> <p>Tasks that require your attention, but do not have deadlines or severe consequences</p>	<p>QUADRANT 4</p> <p>Unnecessary tasks, distractions, and time-wasters.</p>

Example SPS Student Eisenhower Matrix

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework assignment due at 11:59pm tonight • Take-home exam due tomorrow at 12:00pm • Conference proposal outline due tomorrow at 5:00pm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing lecture notes • Going to the gym • Planning a project that's due in 3 months • Setting goals for study group
Not Important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responding to emails and phone calls • Attending a NYC excursion tonight that was posted on SPS Engage • Fielding unexpected interruptions from work • Doing a favor for someone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking or posting on social media • Attending unnecessary meetings • FaceTiming friends for hours • Binge-watching your favorite show

Quadrant 1 – Do Right Away: Tasks placed in quadrant one should be completed as soon as possible.

Quadrant 2 – Schedule for Later: As a student, quadrant two is key to academic success. The tasks placed in this quadrant are the ones you should schedule using a planner to maximize your time and help you achieve your goals.

Quadrant 3 – Delegate or Avoid: If possible, tasks in quadrant three should be avoided or delegated to someone else. If it is a task for a part-time or full-time job that a co-worker has the skillset for, ask if you can delegate the responsibility to them. If it's a task for a group project, ask a team member for help.

Quadrant 4 – Remove: Tasks or activities in this quadrant should be removed your to-do list, as they get in the way of accomplishing your goals.

Tips and Tricks for Prioritization

Once your Eisenhower Matrix is filled in, you can begin to prioritize your tasks based on their urgency and importance. The tips below may be useful:

- Limit the number of tasks in each quadrant to no more than 10. This will help keep your matrix from becoming cluttered.
- If it is easier, try making separate to-do lists for your work, school, and personal responsibilities. This might help you compartmentalize different tasks and effectively manage your goals.
- If you are a visual learner, you may want to color code your tasks based on the quadrant they were placed in. This will help you organize your high priority and low priority items.

The next page contains a template of a blank Eisenhower Matrix.

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important		
Not Important		