

Want better grades? Make a date with your calendar

May 6 2026, by Sayan Tribedi



A student writing out tasks and goals in a planner, showing how concrete scheduling habits (like checklists) can support better grades. Credit: Glenn Carstens-Peters

It turns out that your planner isn't just for show. A huge analysis of thousands of students proves that meticulously scheduling your days can

seriously boost your grades.

College students juggle classes and jobs, and time management is often touted as the key to success. But how big is the payoff? A new meta-analysis has combed through decades of data. The result: Better planning isn't a miracle cure, but it still gives students a measurable edge.

Time management is perceived as an essential component of self-regulated learning. At the college level, where the individual has to make their own timetable, organization becomes all the more important. According to the experts, those who plan and prioritize tend to perform better, although previous research on time management has yielded contradictory results, with some finding a significant improvement in grades whereas others found almost no impact. In a recent experiment conducted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the performance of stressed-out individuals worsened.

A 6% difference to remember

Published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, the [new study](#) pooled 31 reports with over 13,000 college students. Overall, it found a moderate positive link: Students with better time-management habits tended to have higher grades (correlation $r \approx 0.25$). Translating this into plain numbers, the authors note that "time management alone explains approximately 6.25% of the variance in college students' learning outcomes."

That isn't a huge chunk on its own, but in a field as complex as education, even a one-sixteenth slice of success can be meaningful.

Undergrads get the biggest boost

Interestingly, the advantage of effective time management was strongest for undergraduate students. The meta-analysis revealed that time management strategies have the most pronounced effect on the learning outcomes of this group. The authors concluded bluntly that "the stronger the time management ability, the better the learning outcomes of college students"—a link that held especially true for freshmen and sophomores.

This is likely because undergraduates, particularly in their earlier years, often transition from more structured K–12 environments to a university setting with significantly more autonomy and unstructured hours. For them, developing and applying structured time allocation for course-based learning can quickly yield substantial benefits.

By contrast, graduate and upper-year students have often already developed stable learning styles and self-regulation strategies, and frequently juggle more demanding and complex schedules (e.g., research, internships). For these more experienced students, adding more planning might make less of a difference to their grades, as their academic success may depend more on fluid metacognitive strategies that go beyond conventional time management frameworks. This finding highlights a critical window for intervention: Early undergraduate years are the prime time for time management training to maximize its impact.

Measuring habits, not hopes

One more wrinkle in understanding the impact of time management is how it's actually measured. The meta-analysis found that the type of time management measurement instrument significantly moderated the relationship with learning outcomes. Specifically, surveys that focused on assessing actual planning habits and behaviors, such as using time management behavior scales (TMBS), showed stronger correlations with academic success. In contrast, instruments that measured more general attitudes toward time management or an individual's disposition (like the

adolescent time management disposition scale, ATMD) showed weaker links.

That is to say, merely being organized and having a predisposition towards proper time management was not sufficient for seeing improvement, but the ones who engaged in actual, practical habits like calendar use, making plans, and goal setting were those who benefited the most. In effect, what this implies is that it's not enough to have proper intentions or a positive attitude when it comes to time management, but the continuous implementation of effective practices will yield results in terms of planning efficiency and thereby enhance learning.

Not a magic bullet, but a real skill

The researchers stress that the 6% figure is an average trend, not a destiny for every student. All the data came from self-reported surveys of college students, so outcomes do vary by context. Still, even this modest effect is meaningful: They note that one modifiable skill accounting for over 6% of performance is "considerable." The takeaway is that time management isn't a guarantee, but it can consistently nudge outcomes upward.

That means schools have an opening. Time management is a skill that can be taught and improved. The authors highlight that their findings have "practical implications for designing [interventions](#) that directly support the growth of students' self-regulation capacities via structured time management training." In practice, that could mean workshops or coaching to help students turn minutes into measurable gains.

Make every minute count

The main lesson that students should take away from this is that time management is an easily learned skill, not an innate gift. It may only make up a handful of percentage points on one's success, but it is something that can be gained through practice. Minor adjustments in how you spend your time could lead to significant improvements in your GPA. Consider the fact that even shaving off some wasted moments from your schedule will have a cumulative effect.

More information: Baoru Liu et al, Systematic review and meta-analysis of the impact of time management on college students' learning outcomes, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2026). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1700298](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1700298)

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