The Habit Cycle and Procrastination

Procrastination isn't just a matter of poor time management! It's often a deeply ingrained habit.

Most of our daily behaviors, including putting off tasks, are shaped by what's known as the habit loop: a cycle of cue, routine, and reward (Duhigg, 2012). When we procrastinate, there's usually a trigger (like stress or boredom), a routine (avoiding the task), and a short-term reward (temporary relief or distraction).

This worksheet will help you recognize your personal habit cycles around procrastination and begin to interrupt them with more intentional, productive behaviors. Understanding the cycle is the first step toward changing it.

Example

Current Habit:
Cue: Feeling overwhelmed by a big assignment
Habit: Open social media and scroll
Reward: Temporary relief from stress; distraction from pressure

New Habit:
Cue: Feeling overwhelmed by a big assignment.
Habit: Break task into small steps and set a timer for 10 mins to start.
Reward: A sense of control and accomplishment; momentum to keep going

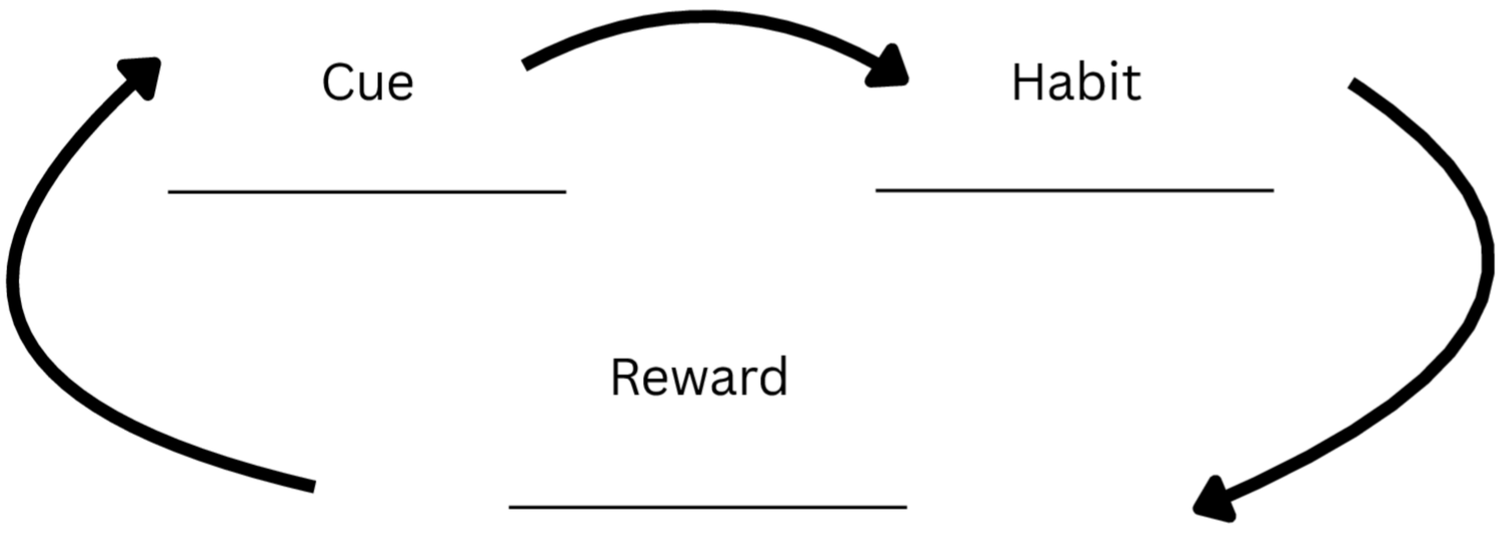
TIP

Procrastination often starts with a cue which is a feeling, situation, or thought that triggers the habit.

Common cues include feeling overwhelmed, perfectionism, boredom, or even checking your phone "just for a second."

To break the cycle, start noticing what happens right before you procrastinate. Are you avoiding a certain emotion? Is there a particular time of day or environment where you lose focus? Keeping a short journal for a few days can help you spot patterns and take back control before the habit takes over.

My Current Habit:



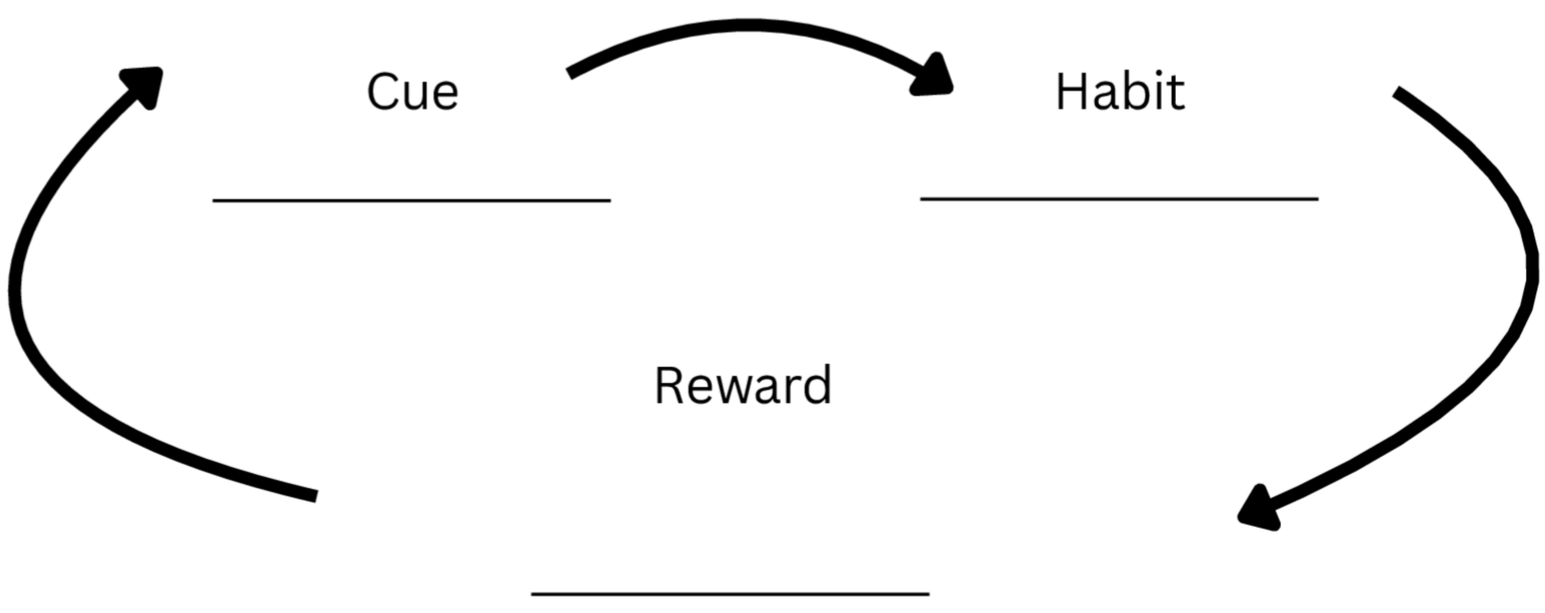
TIP

To break a habit, add a small change at the very start.

If you usually procrastinate when you open your laptop, try opening a specific document or setting a timer for five minutes of focused work instead.

This small shift helps you pause and choose a better action. With practice, this can become a new habit.

My New Habit:



Duhigg, C. (2012). The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business. Random House.

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Understanding Why You Procrastinate

Knowing why you procrastinate can help you take steps to change those habits. Each of the patterns below can act as a cue that triggers a habit cycle. When you understand your cues, you can start to interrupt the cycle and replace it with a more helpful response.

Skills Gaps

If you are not sure how to start a task, it is easy to avoid it. Ask for help from your professor, a classmate, or someone at the Academic Success Center to get started with confidence.

Low Interest or Motivation

Some tasks may feel boring or irrelevant. Try to connect the task to a bigger goal or something that matters to you to stay focused.

Fear of Failure

Worrying about making mistakes can stop you from trying. Remind yourself that success means progress, not perfection. Picture yourself doing well and moving forward step by step.

Resistance or Rebellion

Sometimes you may push back against expectations or rules. Try making your own goals and routines that work for you and still help you succeed.

What factors contribute to your own procrastination habits?

_____

_____

_____

Tips to Change the Habit of Procrastination

Find Your Best Study Space

Choose a place where you can focus and avoid distractions. This might be the library, a quiet coffee shop, or a reserved room on campus.

Make a To-Do List

Write down what you need to get done and keep it with you. Use sticky notes, a whiteboard, or a digital app.

Create a Routine

Plan a weekly schedule with set times to work. Use a free ASC planner and notice when you feel most alert and productive during the day.

Reward Yourself

Give yourself a small reward after finishing a task. It could be a snack, a short break, or something fun you enjoy. Only reward yourself when the task is truly done.

Break Tasks into Smaller Steps

Large tasks can feel overwhelming. Break them down into smaller pieces with your own deadlines to make progress feel more manageable.

Use the "Tolerable Ten"

If a task feels hard to begin, set a timer for ten minutes and just start. Most of the time, once you begin, it becomes easier to keep going.

Keep Study Materials Close

Carry flashcards, notes, or reading materials with you so you can use small chunks of time during the day to study or review.

Mix Study Tasks WIth Enjoyment/Breaks

Pair a task you do not enjoy with something more pleasant. For example, listen to calm music while you read or study.

Switch It Up to Stay Focused

If your energy drops, switch tasks to refresh your focus. Study one subject for a bit, then move to a different one.

Use Your Resources

Academic coaching and support services at the ASC can help you better understand your habits and create a plan that works for you.

Identify 2-3 of the tips listed above you will employ to overcome your procrastination habits.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____