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## LETTERS TO YOUNG SCIENTISTS



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School's (somewhat) out for summer: Five tips to help academics make the most of the season

By [Neil A. Lewis, Jr.](#), [Jay J. Van Bavel](#), [June Gruber](#), [Leah H. Somerville](#), [William A. Cunningham](#) | May. 28, 2019, 11:00 AM

**Family member:** *What are you going to do while you're off for the summer?*

**Academic:** *I'm not off.*

**Family member:** *But you're not taking classes or teaching.*

**Academic:** *I know, but I'm still working—I'm doing my research.*

It's summertime! (Well, almost.) Classes are ending, grades are being finalized, and colloquiums and other meetings are winding down. Many academics will soon open their calendars and see plenty of blank spaces over the next 3 months.

On one hand, that can feel liberating: "Finally! I have time to **WRITE ALL THE WORDS** and do everything else I failed to complete over the past 9 months." On the other hand, the sudden lack of structure can lead to a "**summer slump**"—the common experience of feeling isolated and struggling to reach our goals.

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## No. 1: Actually take some time off

Take advantage of summer's relative freedom to actually take some time off. For much of the year, it can feel like we need to be the Energizer Bunny—we are dealing with one thing after another and keep going and going to get everything done. By the time the academic year grinds to a halt, many of us are exhausted. To combat **burnout**, take care of your mind *and* body. Summer is a good time to actually pause and take a break. Whether it's taking a vacation, a staycation, or working shorter days to make time for your favorite leisure activities, it is helpful to take some time and space to clear your mind and find some balance between your work and the rest of your life.

## No. 2: Take stock of what you've done to plan what you should do next

Once you have rested and returned to your work, it can be helpful to sit down and make a list of current projects, their status, and what it would take to complete them. Having that list in front of you will make it easier to generate priority areas to focus on during the summer months when you have uninterrupted time. For example, Neil has several projects on his list to work on this summer. But when he made his list, it became clear that there is one in particular that he must prioritize for the summer. It has been sitting on the backburner since January because it needs about five full days of undivided attention to finish, and he just has not had that block of uninterrupted time since the semester began. Now is the time to make sure he finishes it. In addition, June finds the **Eisenhower Matrix** another helpful way to lay out and better clarify what tasks are important (or not) and which ones are urgent (or not).

## No. 3: Retain some structure in your schedule

One thing that can contribute to the summer slump is a loss of structure for your time. When there's little that has to be done by a particular time, there can be little motivation to start. One strategy to combat this is to create a schedule that you treat the same way you treat other commitments during the year. We've found it helpful to create our own recurring schedules. For example, if finishing a writing project is at the top of your agenda for the summer, scheduling writing time each morning and sticking to that schedule—rather than saying you'll write when you feel like it—helps maintain more focus on that goal.

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These schedules can contain not only plans for work, but also plans to reward yourself for that work—maybe a trip to the beach, for example. It may be more motivating to go to work if you know that you must finish that day's work before meeting up with your friend at 3:30 p.m. to hang out. Moreover, because there are likely fewer distractions—fewer emails, fewer people dropping by and interrupting you—you may find that you can get more done in those fewer hours than you can at other times of the year.

## No. 4: Connect with colleagues

Other major factors that contribute to the summer slump are feelings of loneliness and isolation. When people disperse for the summer, it is true that there are fewer distractions. But because we are **social animals**, we can also feel lonely and unmotivated as a result. One strategy for addressing that is to find peers who are still around and schedule time to work and/or socialize together. Jay's lab has a monthly lunch to check in about **writing goals**, which helps maintain a sense of accountability and creates an opportunity for all the members of the lab to enjoy one another's company outside the office. They do this year-round, but creating this kind of structure during the summer can be particularly fun and productive. Another approach is to connect with collaborators—current, former, and future—to catch up, share ideas, and set shared goals for the summer to help ensure you stay on track. It is easy to let these relationships fray during the chaos of the academic year, but many corners of academia are increasingly becoming "**team sports**," and nurturing these relationships is critical to our well-being and success.

## No. 5: See the forest beyond the trees

The first four tips focus on concrete steps for remaining productive during the less restrictive summer months. But a very different way to be productive during this time is to focus on the abstract. During the academic year, it can feel like we are scrambling from one meeting or deadline to the next. This frenzied pace can be exhilarating, but it often keeps our focus on immediate goals rather than our broader vision. Summer can be a time to step back and ask why we are interested in certain ideas rather than how we can execute them or meet a deadline. This is a time for reading, reflection, and synthesis. Focusing on the big picture is what inspired many of us to pursue a career in academia, and it is often the most intrinsically rewarding part of the job. Thinking abstractly is also helpful for **achieving our goals**. It can be hard to step off the treadmill of email, studies, and grant writing, but summer offers a great opportunity to do so. And prioritizing it is usually worth the effort, as it fosters clarity of purpose in time for another busy academic season ahead.

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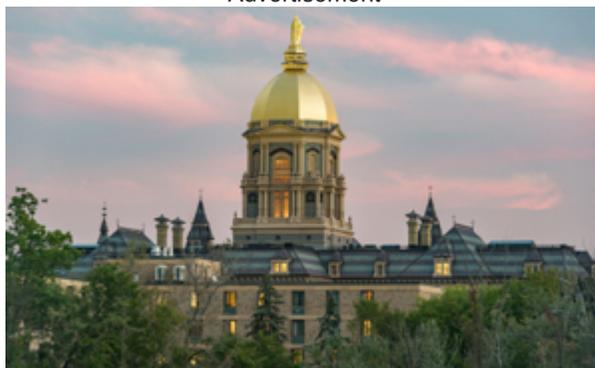
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