



*a podcast about  
how we learn,  
how we teach,  
and how they overlap*

### **Episode 14: Learning How to Prioritize**

[Theme Music]

**Adam:** Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an Academic Life Coach and professor in Los Angeles.

**Dinur:** And Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

**Adam:** And this is Learning Made Easier, the podcast where we discuss how we learn, and how we teach, and how they overlap.

**Dinur:** Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 14, the third episode of our time management series. In this episode, we'll talk about how to use the Eisenhower box to prioritize what you need to get done, what can wait for a little bit, and what, perhaps, doesn't need to be done at all.

**Adam:** So, the second part of time management is learning how to prioritize. And this can be terrifying for someone who has no practice at deciding what's really important and what can wait.

**Dinur:** And that's because time management instruction really often includes the idea of prioritizing what's most important and get that done first. But for many college students, who always had things planned out prioritized for them back in high school, it's really a total mystery how to figure out why this assignment takes priority over a different assignment.

**Adam:** So, this leads to the situation where the first time a student will pay attention to anything is its due date. Or if they're really lucky, and really on their game, the day before the due date. But that leads to a spiral of ongoing panic as they rush to get something, anything, completed before they have to turn it in. And this leads to sloppy work, it leads to work that isn't going to get the grade you want, and meanwhile, you're still mystified. They say "prioritize, how do I do that? Everything I've got seems equally important."

**Dinur:** So, like Adam just asked, how do you prioritize which assignment to do first? They all seem so important.

Well, Dwight Eisenhower, the 34th President of the United States, had a simple but really effective method for prioritizing what he needed to do every day. And I mean, he was President, he had stuff to get done. And one of his most famous tools was the Eisenhower Box. The Eisenhower Box forces you to determine whether something is urgent, important, both urgent and important, or neither of them, and then, you deal with the task appropriately.

**Adam:** So, in the show notes, you're going to find several files, and the first one is just called the Eisenhower Box. Now, this box is pretty simple. It's a square, it's divided into four smaller squares; two on the top, and two on the bottom. So, if you're looking at it like a spreadsheet, you have two rows and two columns. Two of the boxes deal with whether something is urgent or not, and the other two boxes deal with whether it's important or not. And the intersection of the boxes gives you both urgent and important; not urgent, but important; not important, but urgent; and neither.

The example we provided here is styled after how James Clear, the author of Atomic Habits, and the blog, [JamesClear.com](https://www.jamesclear.com) sets up His Eisenhower Box.

It's also color coded, the first one. The two top boxes are green and the bottom two boxes are red, and there's a reason for that.

Now, the Eisenhower Box creates for combinations of two conditions, urgent and important. The column on the left is urgent, the column on the right is not urgent, the top row is important and the bottom row is not important.

**Dinur:** But before we go any further, let's define a few things. The first one is the idea of being "urgent." If something is urgent, it needs to get done within the next 24 to 48 hours, no time to lose.

**Adam:** So, things like taking out the trash, that's probably pretty urgent. If you leave the trash sitting, it's going to make your room smell bad. If you don't go get your groceries, then you're not going to have any food the next day. So, these are urgent things.

Now "important" is the second criteria. And this means it has some serious consequences for some outcome that matters to you like your grade in the class or your sports eligibility or your GPA; maybe your housing situation, maybe your employment situation.

And these are just a few examples, I'm sure you can think of more.

**Dinur:** Right, you can think of things like you have a big paper due, you have a test coming up, you just got hired and you need to submit paperwork, otherwise you don't get paid. These are all very, very important things.

So, the next box would be the combination, things that are both urgent and important. So, these are things that have to get done in the next 24 to 48 hours and there are serious consequences if it doesn't get done, right. Whether it's a lower grade, whether it means you don't get the job, whether it means you're still hired, but you've got to wait longer to get your first paycheck because your paperwork got process late. These are things that you need to take care of and you need to take care of them right now.

**Adam:** And finally, we have the last box, which is neither, it can wait. Maybe it doesn't even need to be done at all.

**Dinur:** And James Clear labels the top left-hand box, the combination of urgent and important as “do it now.” The top right-hand box, which is not urgent, but important is “decide.” As in decide when you're going to do it.

**Adam:** Now, the bottom left-hand box is the combination of urgent and not important. So, James Clear labels this box “delegate,” decide who else can do it. And the bottom right box, which is not urgent and not important is that “delete” box, it's stuff you don't actually need to do at all.

**Dinur:** The Eisenhower Box lets you ask two important questions about all the tasks, jobs, activities, and obligations that are pressing in on you, and then decide, based on your answers, what actually goes in each of these boxes. Ask yourself, will doing this activity, task or job help me achieve the goal that I want to achieve?

**Adam:** And then the second question is, do I actually need to be doing this? In other words, does it have to be me who does it?

So, if you're a college student, and it's a class assignment, the answer to this is almost 100% certain to be, yes, it has to be you. But maybe it's a trip to the store, do you have to do that? Maybe it's your roommate's turn. Maybe it's cleaning the bathroom, have you done that for the last three weeks? Maybe it's your little brother's turn.

So, if it has to be you, and it has to be done in the next 48 hours, urgent and important, then it goes into the “do” box. And if it has to be you and it has to be done, but not in the next 48 hours, it goes in the “decide” box.

**Dinur:** And then if it doesn't have to be you, and it has to be done in the next 48 hours, it goes into the “delegate” box where you decide or you tell someone else that they have to take care of it. So, if you've been getting the groceries for you and your roommate, you guys are out of food, now it's your roommates turn to get it. And then the last box, if

it doesn't have to be you and it has no real consequences for any of your goals, it goes in the “delete” box.

**Adam:** So, let's take the to-do list that we created in an earlier episode, and do some prioritizing of all the tasks with the Eisenhower Box. Now, you can find this visual example as Eisenhower Box 1 in the show notes.

So, in this graphic, we have in the urgent and important box, the do box, there's a biology lab, they need to call their mom and dad, they've got to go to Professor Smith's office hours, they've got laundry to do, and they need to talk to their calculus tutor or at least find a calculus tutor.

**Dinur:** In the decide box, the combination of not urgent, but important; they have their English paper, their geography project, they have to get some new socks, they have to check and respond to some important emails and they need to talk to their roommate.

**Adam:** Now in the delegate box, which is urgent but not important, they've got a bunch of things that they've probably been doing for weeks. So now, they're going to ask their roommate to go get the groceries, to take out the garbage, to vacuum and to clean up the bathroom.

**Dinur:** And then their last box, the not urgent and not important box or delete things like checking social media, watching TV and non-important emails go in. Because these are things that you do not need to worry about right now.

**Adam:** They're also things that generally, waste your time, especially when you've got a geography project, and an English paper, and a biology lab and office hours; these take away the time that you need to do those things.

**Dinur:** Just notice how much time you'll spend on things once you stop doing them. You're going to be amazed at how much more time there seems to be in your day if you limit at least, how frequently and how long you check social media or how frequently and how long you're watching TV for. It's not saying never do those things, it's saying do them last, do them after you've been accomplishing your goals.

**Adam:** Once you have the box filled out, then you just follow the methods we discussed about using a planner in the last episode to move the items from the do box right into your planner. And then each of those big projects in the decide box, break them down into small tasks if you need to, and use the backwards forward method to do it, and then get them scheduled into your planner as well.

**Dinur:** One of the really great things about the Eisenhower Box is that you can use it for an entire semester or a single day. The example we gave with the Eisenhower Box 1 is for a period of about three weeks. But you could also create an Eisenhower Box for a single day. Let's look at Eisenhower Box 2, and again, this is just for a single day. So, in

the important and urgent box, the do box, there's finishing the biology lab by one o'clock, doing laundry while working on the lab.

**Adam:** And then in the decide box, in the schedule the time to do it box, which is important and not urgent, we've got research a calculus tutor, call three of them and get quotes, call mom and dad, and talk to your roommate about household responsibilities.

**Dinur:** In the delegate box, not important but urgent, figure out who can do something for you. If it's getting groceries, ask your roommate to do it and give them money for your half of the food.

**Adam:** And then finally, in the non-urgent and not important box, the delete box, get rid of the Buffy marathon on TV. In this way, you're making sure that you're working toward the important goals of passing your biology class, passing your calculus class. And you're also making sure that your living situation is tolerable by getting the laundry done and getting the groceries bought.

Now, the Buffy marathon's not going to do anything for your long term goals, with one major exception, so you should ditch it. But I've had students push back on this. I had an intro class where a student put their hand up and said, "What if I'm a film major or a folklore major, and I'm watching the Buffy marathon as part of my classwork?"

Well, then it's not going to go in the delete box in the first place, is it? It's going to go in either the do or the decide box, depending on when it's airing and where you're at right now. I mean, if it's going to happen in 20 minutes, you put it in the do box. And if it's going to happen tomorrow, then you put it in the decide box, schedule it for tomorrow.

But the only people who get a pass on watching the Buffy marathon are people who have to do it because it's for class work. So, if you're doing it for your folklore class, if you're doing it for your film class, then watch it. But if it's not for those classes, let it go. It's not that important. You have DVDs, you'll be able to get it on Netflix. But right now you have a geography project to get done, you've got a bio lab to finish. And those have to take priority over Buffy.

**Dinur:** We've been gearing this a lot towards students, but we also think teachers can use this. And one thing that Adam and I think is that when you take your students through the to-do list, help them prioritize what's on their list using this method. Literally work through the Eisenhower Box with them step by step, because we may be coming in having known how to prioritize, but we had to learn somehow. And if we can pass this on, we teach people, we're not just teaching class material, this is a skill that people need. We need to know how to manage our time.

**Adam:** And the way that I teach, I use a standards-based grading system, which means students don't have to do every single assignment to get an A. They just have to do enough of the right kinds of assignments with a score that helps them get to "I've

passed,” and there's a pass mark that they have to hit in order to finish what they need to finish for the class. Now, students will come in, they'll see this list of assignments and assume that they have to do them all. So, this is a perfect time to tell them. No, no, you're going to prioritize. What are the things you have to do or you won't be able to pass at all? Those go in the do box and the decide box. What are the things that you can do if you get the time? They go in the decide box. Look at the things that are critical for your grade and then the things that you can boost your grade up, but they're not critical for passing the class.

For some students, I had one student who told me that they were stressed out about my class because they had had to do all the work. And I said “how much are you doing?” Well, it turned out they were trying to do like five items every week. And I'm like, “No, no, no. What's the important one this week?”

“Well, they're all important.”

“No, no, they're not all important. Let's take an Eisenhower --” and we actually did this, we took an Eisenhower Box, we sat down with all the stuff that was on the list of here's what you can do. And I said, “What do you have to do?”

And it took them a while. But when they finally went through that list, they said, “Oh, okay, so the quizzes are, I have to do those and these collaborative notes assignments, I have to do those. But the stretch assignments are extra credit.”

And I said, “Right, so you do those if you want to or if you have the time, but you don't have to do them in order to pass the class.”

And as we've talked about before, I got a shocked look, because they had never considered that not everything has to be done to pass the class, that you don't have to do every single assignment to pass the class.

Now, there will be some of you out there, teachers who assign three exams and a paper, and everything has to be done to pass the class and that's fine. But what you might want to do is, then, help your students prioritize when they're going to study, how they're going to study, what kind of study tools they're going to use, and when they're going to create those study tools, so that they have a stepwise process towards your exams, or the different things they have to do to build a paper, so that their paper will work instead of just being marginal.

**Dinur:** And something that students need to know, and how they can use this, is that this goes in addition to using your planner and your wall calendar. You're using all three things together, because the idea is making your time visible, reminding you what you need to get done and then actually getting it done. So that your goals, whether it's a grade, whether it's something for work, whatever you're trying to accomplish, you actually get done. And you can use these both long term for a whole semester, you can

use the medium term where you're going week by week. You can use them short term where you're trying to manage your time for a single day.

**Adam:** I also suggest that if you are a student who's not really aware of time, when you put together, say, a daily Eisenhower Box, do these things today, next to it, put your estimate, how long do I think this is going to take?

Let's go back and look at Eisenhower Box 2, how long do I think it's going to take to finish the biology lab? Now we've got here by 1 pm. Okay, but if you're making this at 12 o'clock, and it's a four-page biology lab, you might need to allow yourself a couple more hours to do that. How long does it take to do laundry? This is actually pretty easy to estimate, you know, how long does washer take, how long does the dryer take? Most of us know, for example, where I live, the wash usually runs for about 40 minutes, and then the dryer takes about an hour. So, that's going to be at least two hours, because I also have to include in loading them, unloading them and folding them. That's all part of doing laundry. So, I allow two hours for one load of laundry. So, here you might put two hours.

When it comes to researching a calculus tutor would probably allow maybe an hour and a half to two hours for that calling your parents depending on how long you want to talk to them or how much you like them, could be anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour. So, put an estimate of how much time these things take. Because if you're loading down your urgent box with nine things, there's no way you're going to get it all done. There's just no way. And so be mindful about how much time things take as part of what you're developing by using this tool and these are the tools that we've been teaching you.

**Dinur:** And in addition to being mindful of how long things take, also be mindful of your energy levels at different parts of the day. Because you'll have more energy to get your tasks done at different points. Some people do really good work early in the morning and that might affect how you prioritize what gets done, what gets in the urgent box. Some people work better, mid or late afternoon, some are night owls. You know what your energy level is at different parts of the day. And that's part of what you manage. So, it's not just time, it's managing both your time and your energy, your managing your focus.

And that's it for Episode 14.

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**Adam:** And be sure to join us next week for episode 15, when we talk about how to make everyday occurrences, a vital part of your time management.

[Theme Music]

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**Adam:** If you want to support us, please go to [www.patreon.com/LearningMadeEasier](https://www.patreon.com/LearningMadeEasier).

**Dinur:** We look forward to seeing you next week.