

# Deadlines Don't Have to Be Deadly

Are you having trouble completing important projects on time? So was Coach Sandy—until she hired a “nanny” to watch her every move.

**T**he word “deadline” dates back to the Civil War. At the notorious Confederate prison camp at Andersonville, Georgia, a line was drawn 17 feet inside the perimeter fence. Guards were authorized to shoot any prisoner who crossed the line.

We ADDers don't exactly need a gun pointed at us to get us going on projects. But many of us have a hard time completing projects—especially when they seem difficult or boring. This is certainly true for me. Take this column; I assured my editor that I'd have no trouble getting it done on time, and yet the more I thought about it, the harder it seemed to write. So here I am, one day before my deadline, and I'm just now starting.

I've had similar difficulties in trying to complete my master's thesis (after many years as an ADD coach, I returned to school three years ago). Obviously, it's not easy to write a thesis, especially when your entire work week is spent seeing clients. But to make matters worse, I was given only a *suggested* deadline. I could take as long as I wanted, as long as I kept paying my tuition bills.

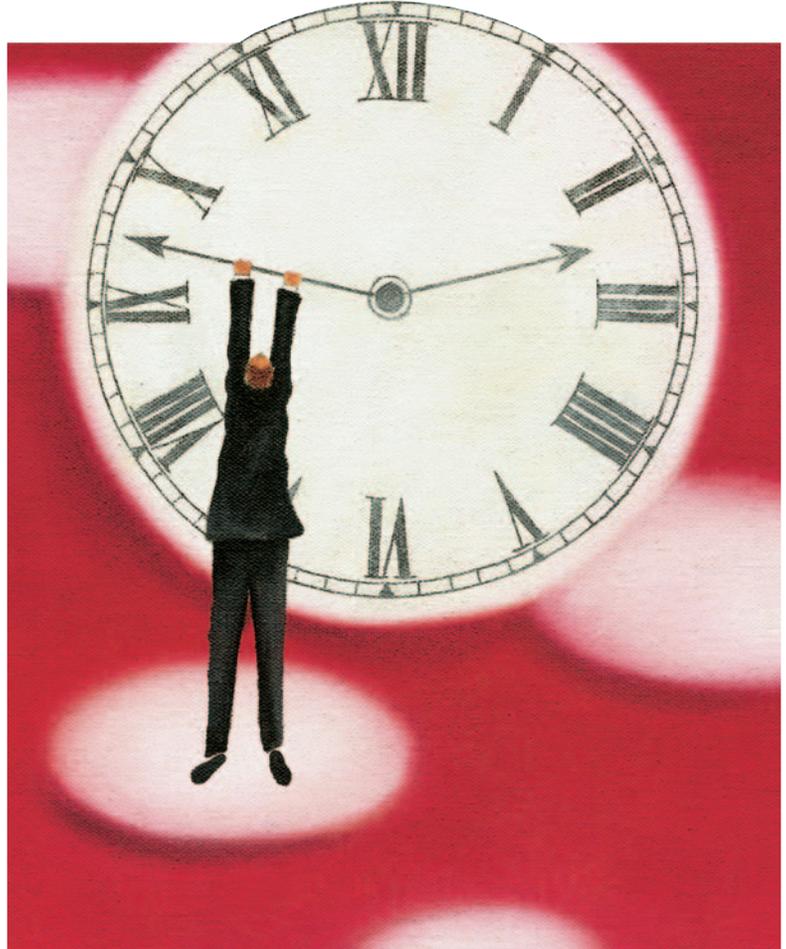
You can guess what happened. The suggested deadline—last October 17—came and went, and I had gotten nowhere. Research was no problem, because I enjoyed it. But sitting down to write was no fun. I knew so much about my topic that I felt overwhelmed.

Three months ago, I decided it was time to buckle down and devote every weekend to writing. The first weekend passed, and I still didn't have anything on paper. I did have a spotless kitchen, an empty laundry basket, and a well-stocked pantry. The ensuing weekends weren't much more productive. Sometimes I just gave up and went to the movies. It was torture. How would I ever finish?

Last month, I hired someone to watch over me. That's right, a nanny. I gave her strict instructions. She was to arrive at 8:00 A.M., fix breakfast for me, and make sure I was at my desk by 9 o'clock. There was to be no radio, no TV, no telephone—and no e-mail. At 10:30, I was allowed a 15-minute break to go to the bathroom, get a drink of water (no soda!), and grab a carrot, yogurt, or some other healthful food. At 12:15 P.M. sharp, she was to have my lunch ready. At 1:15, I had to be back at my desk, where I was to work until 5:00.

One last instruction to my nanny was for her to call me at 10 P.M. to remind me to go to bed. Just about the only thing I *didn't* ask her to do was to shoot me if I tried to leave my desk between breaks. I cannot tell you what a

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difference she made. After months of procrastination, I am now close to finishing my thesis. I've completed four drafts and am halfway through my final draft. I'm confident that I will finish before the current quarter is over.

Taking twice as long to do my thesis as my classmates makes me feel different, but I have to remind myself that I *am* different. After all, who but an ADDer would think to hire a nanny?

Here's my 10-point plan for meeting all of your deadlines, big and small:

- 1 Don't bite off more than you can chew.** Consider how much time is available in your busy schedule, and plan accordingly. If you take on a new project, you may have to cut back on other activities in order to finish it on time.
- 2 Post your deadlines where you will see them.** This will remind you to use your time wisely. For my

Course work, I highlighted the syllabus and put it on the wall over my desk. For the thesis, I created a computer screensaver that read “February 26 or Bust.”

**3 Break big projects into smaller projects, and assign a deadline for completing each.** Most of the time, we’re given a deadline for the date by which the *entire* project has to be completed. To keep yourself on track, mark the date by which you should complete one-quarter of the project, one-half, and so on. Those dates will alert you to problems while there’s still time to play catch-up.

**4 Set deadlines for others.** We ADDers dislike deadlines so much that we’re often reluctant to set appropriate deadlines for others. Often, as I was working on my thesis, I’d find that I needed to ask my professors a question. To make sure I could get going on time each Saturday morning, I asked them to get back to me with answers no later than Friday afternoon. Otherwise, I would have lost momentum—or relied upon the excuse that I *couldn’t* keep working because I was unsure about what to do next.

**5 When time runs short, outsource.** I was spending way too much time putting the finishing touches on my thesis (preparing the table of contents, checking citations, and so on). So I sent those pieces of the project off to an editor. That saved me at least a full day’s work.

Don’t assume that you must do every portion of a project. In many cases, it makes sense to outsource or delegate.

**6 Take frequent breaks.** Those who fail to get away from a project occasionally are likely to start avoiding the project—or to just plain give up. I asked my nanny to make me take breaks, even when I didn’t want to. I knew that would help me avoid burnout.

**7 Start and end when you say you will.** While writing my thesis, I started at 9 A.M. and ended at 5 P.M., so I had time to socialize in the evening. Knowing I would quit at 5 kept me going. I could say to myself, “only two more hours...only one more hour,” and so on. If I hadn’t committed to stopping at 5, I might have thought, “I’ll take a break and do something else and work on it later in the evening.” This kind of thinking is dangerous for ADDers, who are easily distracted.

**8 Change your inner voice.** Think of positive things you can say to yourself to stay motivated. Some of my clients write down “positive affirmations” and keep them nearby to glance at. Example: “I’m going to feel great when I hand this in to my boss on time.” Or, simply, “I can do this!” As I was writing my thesis, I often caught myself thinking, “Oh, well, I can just sign up for another quarter and take my time.” Each time I did, I immediately changed that to, “NO! You WILL get this thesis done THIS quarter!”

**9 Define your objectives.** When I started my thesis project, my objective was to learn as much as possible about my topic. I accomplished that, but it wasn’t until my objective became saving money and finishing by the end of February that I was able to stay focused on the hard part: writing. Finishing on time is one of the most important objectives for ADDers.

**10 If all else fails...hire a nanny!** It seemed an extravagance at the time. But in the end, the nanny cost a lot less than another quarter of school. She was worth every penny! ▲

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