

# A Simple Activity for Teaching About Procrastination

By Dave Stuart Jr. | [Read on the blog](#).

My ninth graders tend to ride the struggle bus when it comes to procrastination. There are, of course, always the kids who make my jaw drop with their teachability on work habits — when I teach them how to apply bits of effort to their studies each day, these kids put it into practice and keep it going all year long — and the ones who shock me with how put together they are on Day 1 (KLev, looking at you). But those kids tend to be, well, the exception.

Know what I'm talking about?

In this simple lesson, I hope to give my students the best lesson on procrastination that I've ever not taught (because basically, Tim Urban is going to teach them), and to establish a shared vocabulary in my classes for dealing with what is basically a really serious problem. [1]

## Materials

- Something to write on and with
- [Tim Urban's TED Talk](#)
  - *Note: I don't think this has any swearing in it, but when you preview the video double check to make sure. Tim's writing has swearing in it at times (see next note), so it's possible his talk could. I didn't notice any while watching it the second time, but while I was watching it I was writing this post so, you know, multi-tasking.*
- (Optional) [Tim Urban's article on his TED Talk](#)
  - *Notes: I would recommend this if A) your students can access it digitally — there are just too many drawings to make it printable and not 17 pages, and B) you're comfortable with Tim using the word "shit" a couple of times or have a way in which you can replace it with another word.*

## Activity Steps

### Step 1

"Hey class, so here's a question I want you to answer by show of hands: how many of you have been called a 'procrastinator' before? Nice! Right now I want you to think of a time when you put something off until the last minute, something that you knew you probably shouldn't have. It doesn't have to be school related."

Pause.

"Got it? All right, you've got 30 seconds to tell the story to your partner; let's start with the partner closest to the window. Go to it."

### Step 2

Kids talk in pairs ([Think-Pair-Share](#) has been established in the classroom by this point); teacher circulates, bringing them back together after 60 seconds.

### Step 3

“All right — let’s hear the procrastination tales of a few folks in the room.”  
Randomly call a couple kids using [index cards](#) and take a couple volunteers.

## Step 4

“Thank you for sharing those. Please never do things like that again, okay? Hahaha.”  
Actual cheesiness level of my teaching.

“So what we’re going to do now is watch a TED Talk from a blogger named Tim Urban. Who has ever seen a TED Talk before? What the heck’s a TED Talk? ... All I want you to do is listen to what Tim is saying and write down any questions you might have — we’ll discuss those at the end.”

Probably the hardest vocabulary in the video is ‘instant gratification,’ but I think Tim gives enough examples to make the meaning clear; I won’t be previewing complex vocab for kids prior to this video.

Watch the video.

## Step 5

“All right, first — were there any questions?”

Answer them; avoid teaching the key concepts at this point; you’re just trying to clarify.

“Now, with your partner, I want you to decide what the top three key points or concepts from Tim’s talk were. Your partner group should write these down.”

Give 1.5 minutes for this.

“That was good, focused work I saw. Now, let’s get the key points on the board.”

Randomly call on kids using index cards; these are the points I’ll want on the board:

- instant gratification monkey
- dark playground
- panic monster
- everyone is a procrastinator
- value of deadlines

## Step 6

“All right — it’s time to save the world! Every year, I see ninth grade students lose credit and dig themselves into an academic whole because of the good ol’ instant gratification monkey. They let that thing run their lives, they ignore the panic monster, and before they know it they’ve got a GPA they’re embarrassed about and they’re starting to doubt their future career aspirations. That won’t happen to you now, armed as you are with the ideas in Tim’s TED Talk, but I want to ensure it doesn’t happen to students in other classes.

So what you’re going to do is write a short (150 words minimum) letter to a fellow ninth grader giving advice for overcoming procrastination. You don’t need to use the terms from Tim’s TED Talk, but you do need to explain to them why procrastination is a problem and how to overcome it.”

## Optional Step 7

Have kids read Tim Urban’s [article on his TED Talk](#). (See caveats in “Materials” section above.)

### Footnote:

1. I’m painfully aware that when my students don’t “take off” academically during the ninth grade year, it becomes increasingly unlikely that they will do so in the

future. The ninth grade year is “Make It Or Break It,” which you can read about [here](#).

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