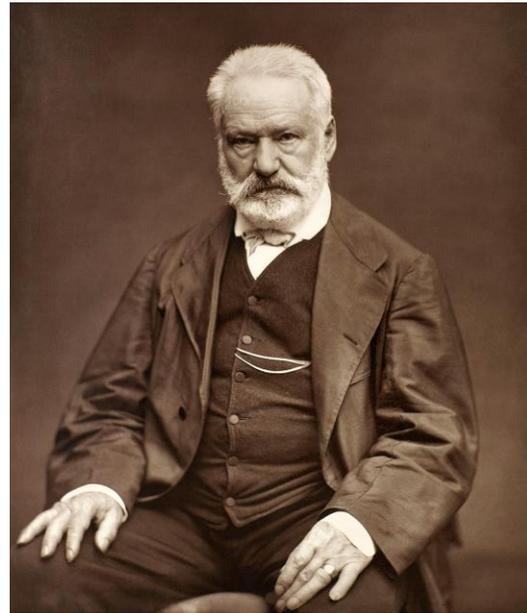


The Akrasia Effect: Why We Don't Follow Through on What We Set Out to Do and What to Do About It

By [James Clear](#) | [Behavioral Psychology](#), [Choice Architecture](#), [Goal Setting](#), [Procrastination](#)

By the summer of 1830, Victor Hugo was facing an impossible deadline. Twelve months earlier, the famous French author had made an agreement with his publisher that he would write a new book titled, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.



Instead of writing the book, Hugo spent the next year pursuing other projects, entertaining guests, and delaying his work on the text. Hugo's publisher had become frustrated by his repeated procrastination and responded by setting a formidable deadline. The publisher demanded that Hugo finish the book by February of 1831—less than 6 months away.

Hugo developed a plan to beat his procrastination. He collected all of his clothes, removed them from his chambers, and locked them away. He was left with nothing to wear except a large shawl. Lacking any suitable clothing to go outdoors, Hugo was no longer tempted to leave the house and get distracted. Staying inside and writing was his only option.

The strategy worked. Hugo remained in his study each day and wrote furiously during the fall and winter of 1830. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was published two weeks early on January 14, 1831.

The Ancient Problem of Akrasia

Human beings have been procrastinating for centuries. Even prolific artists like Victor Hugo are not immune to the distractions of daily life. The problem is so timeless, in fact, that ancient Greek philosophers like Socrates and Aristotle developed a word to describe this type of behavior: Akrasia.

Akrasia is the state of acting against your better judgment. It is when you do one thing even though you know you should do something else. Loosely translated, you could say that akrasia is procrastination or a lack of self-control. Akrasia is what prevents you from following through on what you set out to do.

Why would Victor Hugo commit to writing a book and then put it off for over a year? Why do we make plans, set deadlines, and commit to goals, but then fail to follow through on them?

Why We Make Plans, But Don't Take Action

One explanation for why akrasia rules our lives and procrastination pulls us in has to do with a behavioral economics term called “time inconsistency.” Time inconsistency refers to the tendency of the human brain to value immediate rewards more highly than future rewards.

When you make plans for yourself — like setting a goal to lose weight or write a book or learn a language — you are actually making plans for your future self. You are envisioning what you want your life to be like in the future and when you think about the future it is easy for your brain to see the value in taking actions with long-term benefits.

When the time comes to make a decision, however, you are no longer making a choice for your future self. Now you are in the moment and your brain is thinking about the present self. And researchers have discovered that the present self really likes instant gratification, not long-term payoff. This is one reason why you might go to bed feeling motivated to make a change in your life, but when you wake up you find yourself falling into old patterns. Your brain values long-term benefits when they are in the future, but it values immediate gratification when it comes to the present moment.

This is one reason why [the ability to delay gratification](#) is such a great predictor of success in life. Understanding how to resist the pull of instant gratification—at least occasionally, if not consistently—can help you bridge the gap between where you are and where you want to be.

The Akrasia Antidote: 3 Ways to Beat Procrastination

Here are three ways to overcome akrasia, beat procrastination, and follow through on what you set out to do.

Strategy 1: Design your future actions.

When Victor Hugo locked his clothes away so he could focus on writing, he was creating what psychologists refer to as a “commitment device.” Commitment devices are strategies that help improve your behavior by either increasing the obstacles or costs of bad behaviors or reducing the effort required for good behaviors.

You can curb your future eating habits by purchasing food in individual packages rather than in the bulk size. You can stop wasting time on your phone by deleting games or social media apps. You can reduce the likelihood of mindless channel surfing by hiding your TV in a closet and only taking it out on big game days. You can voluntarily ask to be added to the banned list at casinos and online gambling sites to prevent future gambling sprees. You can build an emergency fund by setting up an automatic transfer of funds to your savings account. These are commitment devices.

The circumstances differ, but the message is the same: commitment devices can help you design your future actions. Find ways to automate your behavior beforehand rather than relying on willpower in the moment. Be the architect of your future actions, not the victim of them.

Strategy 2: Reduce the friction of starting.

The guilt and frustration of procrastinating is usually worse than the pain of doing the work. In the words of Eliezer Yudkowsky, “On a moment-to-moment basis, being in the middle of doing the work is usually less painful than being in the middle of procrastinating.”

So why do we still procrastinate? Because it’s not being in the work that is hard, it’s starting the work. The friction that prevents us from taking action is usually centered around starting the behavior. Once you begin, it’s often less painful to do the work. This is why it is often more important to [build the habit of getting started](#) when you’re beginning a new behavior than it is to worry about whether or not you are successful at the new habit.

You have to constantly [reduce the size of your habits](#). Put all of your effort and energy into [building a ritual](#) and make it as easy as possible to get started. Don’t worry about the results until you’ve mastered the art of showing up.

Strategy 3: Utilize implementation intentions.

An implementation intention is when you state your intention to implement a particular behavior at a specific time in the future. For example, “I will exercise for at least 30 minutes on [DATE] in [PLACE] at [TIME].”

There are hundreds of successful studies showing how implementation intentions positively impact everything from exercise habits to flu shots. In the flu shot study, researchers looked at a group of 3,272 employees at a Midwestern company and found that employees who wrote down the specific date and time they planned to get their flu shot were significantly more likely to follow through weeks later.

It seems simple to say that scheduling things ahead of time can make a difference, but as I have covered previously, implementation intentions can make you [2x to 3x more likely](#) to perform an action in the future.

Fighting Akrasia

Our brains prefer instant rewards to long-term payoffs. It’s simply a consequence of how our minds work. Given this tendency, we often have to resort to crazy strategies to get things done—like Victor Hugo locking up all of his clothes so he could write a book. But I believe it is worth it to spend time building these commitment devices if your goals are important to you.

Aristotle coined the term enkrateia as the antonym of akrasia. While akrasia refers to our tendency to fall victim to procrastination, enkrateia means to be “in power over oneself.” Designing your future actions, reducing the friction of starting good behaviors, and using implementation intentions are simple steps that you can take to make it easier to live a life of enkrateia rather than one of akrasia.