In the Mind of a Master Procrastinator

eslvideo.com Quiz by: LiceoRussell

1. What was Tim Urban's major in college?

○ a.) Science

○ b.) Government

○ c.) Arts

2. How did a normal student approach writing papers?

○ a.) They start early and finish slowly.

○ b.) They spread the work out over time.

○ c.) They wait until the last minute.

3. What was the size of Tim's senior thesis?

○ a.) 30 pages

○ b.) 60 pages

○ c.) 90 pages

4. How did Tim plan to work on his thesis?

○ a.) Start heavy and finish light.

○ b.) Start light and increase work later.

○ c.) Work on it all at once.

5. What happened as the deadline approached?

○ a.) Tim finished early.

○ b.) Tim did not write anything.

○ c.) Tim wrote a lot.

6. How long did Tim take to write his thesis?

○ a.) 72 hours

○ b.) 48 hours

○ c.) 24 hours

7. What did Tim think about his thesis after submitting it?

○ a.) It was excellent.

○ b.) It was very bad.

○ c.) It was average.

8. What is the name of Tim's blog?

○ a.) Wait But Why

○ b.) Think Fast

○ c.) Procrastination Nation

9. What did Tim want to explain to non-procrastinators?

○ a.) Why procrastinators are lazy.

○ b.) What goes on in the minds of procrastinators.

○ c.) How to avoid procrastination.

10. What did Tim find in the MRI lab?

○ a.) His brain and a non-procrastinator's brain.

○ b.) A monkey's brain.

○ c.) A scientist's brain.

11. What does the procrastinator's brain have that the non-procrastinator's brain does not?

○ a.) A Rational Decision-Maker

○ b.) An Instant Gratification Monkey

○ c.) A Panic Monster

12. What does the Instant Gratification Monkey prefer?

○ a.) Hard work

○ b.) Easy and fun activities

○ c.) Planning for the future

13. What does the Rational Decision-Maker do?

○ a.) Makes fun decisions.

○ b.) Plans for the future.

○ c.) Takes naps.

14. What is the Dark Playground?

○ a.) A place for fun activities.

○ b.) A place for unearned leisure activities.

○ c.) A place for hard work.

15. Who is the guardian angel of the procrastinator?

○ a.) The Rational Decision-Maker

○ b.) The Panic Monster

○ c.) The Instant Gratification Monkey

16. When does the Panic Monster wake up?

○ a.) When there is a deadline.

○ b.) When there is free time.

○ c.) When there is no work.

17. What happens when the Panic Monster wakes up?

○ a.) The Monkey takes control.

○ b.) The Rational Decision-Maker takes control.

○ c.) Nothing changes.

18. What is the second kind of procrastination Tim mentions?

○ a.) Procrastination with deadlines.

○ b.) Procrastination without deadlines.

○ c.) Procrastination for fun.

19. What can long-term procrastination lead to?

○ a.) Happiness and success.

○ b.) Frustration and regrets.

○ c.) More deadlines.

20. What does Tim suggest we should do about procrastination?

○ a.) Ignore it.

○ b.) Start working on it today.

○ c.) Wait for a deadline.

Transcript

So in college, I was a government major, which means I had to write
a lot of papers. Now, when a normal student writes a paper, they might spread the work out
a little like this. So, you know -- (Laughter) you get started maybe a little slowly, but you get enough done in the first week that, with some heavier days later on, everything gets done, things stay civil. (Laughter) And I would want to do that like that. That would be the plan. I would have it all ready to go, but then, actually, the paper
would come along, and then I would kind of do this. (Laughter) And that would happen every single paper. But then came my 90-page senior thesis, a paper you're supposed to spend a year on. And I knew for a paper like that,
my normal work flow was not an option. It was way too big a project. So I planned things out, and I decided I kind of had
to go something like this. This is how the year would go. So I'd start off light, and I'd bump it up in the middle months, and then at the end,
I would kick it up into high gear just like a little staircase. How hard could it be
to walk up the stairs? No big deal, right? But then, the funniest thing happened. Those first few months? They came and went, and I couldn't quite do stuff. So we had an awesome new revised plan. (Laughter) And then -- (Laughter) But then those middle months
actually went by, and I didn't really write words, and so we were here. And then two months turned into one month, which turned into two weeks. And one day I woke up with three days until the deadline, still not having written a word, and so I did the only thing I could: I wrote 90 pages over 72 hours, pulling not one but two all-nighters -- humans are not supposed to pull
two all-nighters -- sprinted across campus, dove in slow motion, and got it in just at the deadline. I thought that was the end of everything. But a week later I get a call, and it's the school. And they say, "Is this Tim Urban?" And I say, "Yeah." And they say, "We need to talk about your thesis." And I say, "OK." And they say, "It's the best one we've ever seen." (Laughter) (Applause) That did not happen. (Laughter) It was a very, very bad thesis. (Laughter) I just wanted to enjoy that one moment
when all of you thought, "This guy is amazing!" (Laughter) No, no, it was very, very bad. Anyway, today I'm a writer-blogger guy. I write the blog Wait But Why. And a couple of years ago,
I decided to write about procrastination. My behavior has always perplexed

the non-procrastinators around me, and I wanted to explain
to the non-procrastinators of the world what goes on in the heads
of procrastinators, and why we are the way we are. Now, I had a hypothesis that the brains of procrastinators
were actually different than the brains of other people. And to test this, I found an MRI lab that actually let me scan both my brain and the brain of a proven
non-procrastinator, so I could compare them. I actually brought them here
to show you today. I want you to take a look carefully
to see if you can notice a difference. I know that if you're not
a trained brain expert, it's not that obvious,
but just take a look, OK? So here's the brain
of a non-procrastinator. (Laughter) Now ... here's my brain. (Laughter) There is a difference. Both brains have a Rational
Decision-Maker in them, but the procrastinator's brain also has an Instant Gratification Monkey. Now, what does this mean
for the procrastinator? Well, it means everything's fine
until this happens. [This is a perfect time
to get some work done.] [Nope!] So the Rational Decision-Maker
will make the rational decision to do something productive, but the Monkey doesn't like that plan, so he actually takes the wheel, and he says, "Actually, let's read
the entire Wikipedia page of the Nancy Kerrigan/
Tonya Harding scandal, because I just remembered
that that happened. (Laughter) Then -- (Laughter) Then we're going to go over to the fridge, to see if there's anything new
in there since 10 minutes ago. After that, we're going to go
on a YouTube spiral that starts with videos
of Richard Feynman talking about magnets and ends much, much later
with us watching interviews with Justin Bieber's mom. (Laughter) "All of that's going to take a while, so we're not going to really have room
on the schedule for any work today. Sorry!" (Sigh) Now, what is going on here? The Instant Gratification Monkey
does not seem like a guy you want behind the wheel. He lives entirely in the present moment. He has no memory of the past,
no knowledge of the future, and he only cares about two things: easy and fun. Now, in the animal world, that works fine. If you're a dog and you spend your whole life doing nothing other than easy and fun things, you're a huge success! (Laughter) And to the

Monkey, humans are just another animal species. You have to keep well-slept, well-fed and propagating into the next generation, which in tribal times
might have worked OK. But, if you haven't noticed,
now we're not in tribal times. We're in an advanced civilization,
and the Monkey does not know what that is. Which is why we have
another guy in our brain, the Rational Decision-Maker, who gives us the ability to do things
no other animal can do. We can visualize the future. We can see the big picture. We can make long-term plans. And he wants to take
all of that into account. And he wants to just have us do whatever makes sense
to be doing right now. Now, sometimes it makes sense to be doing things that are easy and fun, like when you're having dinner
or going to bed or enjoying well-earned leisure time. That's why there's an overlap. Sometimes they agree. But other times, it makes much more sense to be doing things that are harder
and less pleasant, for the sake of the big picture. And that's when we have a conflict. And for the procrastinator, that conflict tends to end
a certain way every time, leaving him spending a lot of time
in this orange zone, an easy and fun place that's entirely
out of the Makes Sense circle. I call it the Dark Playground. (Laughter) Now, the Dark Playground is a place that all of you procrastinators
out there know very well. It's where leisure activities happen at times when leisure activities
are not supposed to be happening. The fun you have in the Dark Playground isn't actually fun,
because it's completely unearned, and the air is filled with guilt,
dread, anxiety, self-hatred -- all of those good procrastinator feelings. And the question is, in this situation,
with the Monkey behind the wheel, how does the procrastinator ever get
himself over here to this blue zone, a less pleasant place, but where
really important things happen? Well, turns out the procrastinator
has a guardian angel, someone who's always looking
down on him and watching over him in his darkest moments -- someone called the Panic Monster. (Laughter) Now, the Panic Monster
is dormant most of the time, but he suddenly wakes up
anytime a deadline gets too close or there's danger of public embarrassment, a career

disaster or some other
scary consequence. And importantly, he's the only thing
the Monkey is terrified of. Now, he became very relevant
in my life pretty recently, because the people of TED
reached out to me about six months ago and invited me to do a TED Talk. (Laughter)
Now, of course, I said yes. It's always been a dream of mine
to have done a TED Talk in the past. (Laughter) (Applause) But in the middle of all this
excitement, the Rational Decision-Maker seemed
to have something else on his mind. He was saying, "Are we clear
on what we just accepted? Do we get what's going to be now
happening one day in the future? We need to sit down
and work on this right now." And the Monkey said, "Totally agree,
but let's just open Google Earth and zoom in to the bottom of India,
like 200 feet above the ground, and scroll up for two and a half hours
til we get to the top of the country, so we can get a better feel for India." (Laughter) So
that's what we did that day. (Laughter) As six months turned into four
and then two and then one, the people of TED decided
to release the speakers. And I opened up the website,
and there was my face staring right back at me. And guess who woke up? (Laughter) So
the Panic Monster
starts losing his mind, and a few seconds later,
the whole system's in mayhem. (Laughter) And the Monkey -- remember,
he's terrified of the Panic Monster -- boom, he's up the tree! And finally, finally, the
Rational Decision-Maker
can take the wheel and I can start working on the talk. Now, the Panic Monster explains
all kinds of pretty insane
procrastinator behavior, like how someone like me
could spend two weeks unable to start the opening
sentence of a paper, and then miraculously find
the unbelievable work ethic to stay up all night
and write eight pages. And this entire situation,
with the three characters -- this is the procrastinator's system. It's not pretty, but in the
end, it works. This is what I decided to write about
on the blog a couple of years ago. When I did, I was amazed by the response. Literally
thousands of emails came in, from all different kinds of people
from all over the world, doing all different kinds of things. These are people who were

nurses,
bankers, painters, engineers and lots and lots of PhD students. (Laughter) And they were all writing,
saying the same thing: "I have this problem too." But what struck me was the contrast between the light tone of the post and the heaviness of these emails. These people were writing
with intense frustration about what procrastination
had done to their lives, about what this Monkey had done to them. And I thought about this, and I said, well, if the procrastinator's system
works, then what's going on? Why are all of these people
in such a dark place? Well, it turns out that there's
two kinds of procrastination. Everything I've talked about today,
the examples I've given, they all have deadlines. And when there's deadlines, the effects of procrastination
are contained to the short term because the Panic Monster gets involved. But there's a second kind
of procrastination that happens in situations
when there is no deadline. So if you wanted a career
where you're a self-starter -- something in the arts,
something entrepreneurial -- there's no deadlines on those things
at first, because nothing's happening, not until you've gone out
and done the hard work to get momentum, get things going. There's also all kinds of important things
outside of your career that don't involve any deadlines, like seeing your family or exercising
and taking care of your health, working on your relationship or getting out of a relationship
that isn't working. Now if the procrastinator's only mechanism
of doing these hard things is the Panic Monster, that's a problem, because in all of these
non-deadline situations, the Panic Monster doesn't show up. He has nothing to wake up for, so the effects of procrastination,
they're not contained; they just extend outward forever. And it's this long-term
kind of procrastination that's much less visible
and much less talked about than the funnier, short-term
deadline-based kind. It's usually suffered

quietly and privately. And it can be the source of a huge amount of long-term unhappiness, and regrets. And I thought, that's why those people are emailing, and that's why they're in such a bad place. It's not that they're cramming for some project. It's that long-term procrastination has made them feel like a spectator, at times, in their own lives. The frustration is not that they couldn't achieve their dreams; it's that they weren't even able to start chasing them. So I read these emails and I had a little bit of an epiphany -- that I don't think non-procrastinators exist. That's right -- I think all of you are procrastinators. Now, you might not all be a mess, like some of us, (Laughter) and some of you may have a healthy relationship with deadlines, but remember: the Monkey's sneakiest trick is when the deadlines aren't there. Now, I want to show you one last thing. I call this a Life Calendar. That's one box for every week of a 90-year life. That's not that many boxes, especially since we've already used a bunch of those. So I think we need to all take a long, hard look at that calendar. We need to think about what we're really procrastinating on, because everyone is procrastinating on something in life. We need to stay aware of the Instant Gratification Monkey. That's a job for all of us. And because there's not that many boxes on there, it's a job that should probably start today. Well, maybe not today, but ... (Laughter) You know. Sometime soon. Thank you. (Applause)