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# Eat That Frog!: Some Thoughts About Procrastination

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Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

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## Eat That Frog!: Some Thoughts About Procrastination

Last week, a friend of mine posted this quotation as his Facebook status: "If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first." The quotation was attributed to Mark Twain. I posted that I doubted Mark Twain actually said that—first because I had never seen it before, but more importantly because it did not sound like him. I checked the Twain quotation sources that I trust, and none of them had it, as I suspected. But when I googled the quotation, I got several hundred hits, all of them attributing the quotation to Mark Twain (although none of them cited a source in his works). I mentally added this one to the growing list of things Mark Twain never said, but that many people think he did.

That would be the end of the story, but the spurious Twain quotation kept haunting me. I saw it cited in blogs, in advice to writers, and especially as

business advice. Apparently this strange (and unsettling) quotation about eating frogs has become very widespread. And at the center, other than faux Mark Twain, is a book by motivational speaker Brian Tracy, *Eat That Frog!: 21 Ways To Stop Procrastination and Get More Done in Less Time*. I have not read his book, but I think this idea of eating frogs can be helpful for all of us, faculty and staff, and also students.

I suppose I am not the only person around here who is prone to procrastination from time to time. When I have a long to-do list, I get paralyzed sometimes. My natural reaction is to nibble at the edges of my list, to tackle what I can do quickest. But this advice tells me to do the hardest first, to eat the frog on my list first. And if there are two hard or distasteful tasks, tackle (eat) the hardest first.

What's your frog? My biggest frog is grading

papers. Another is writing reports. Since I have many more papers to grade than reports to write, I will focus on that frog.

I learned what a bad frog paper grading is for me my first year of teaching, a long, long time ago, in a land called the 1970s. I was fresh out of college and teaching high school English in Mooresville, NC. Four of my classes turned in research papers, all at the same time. I took them home and put them on a shelf. They sat on that shelf. A few days. A week. Two weeks. The students would ask about them. I would say, "I am working on them. I want to give them back all at the same time."

I was lying. I had not touched the ugly and detestable frogs. I did not even like to look at the shelf they were sitting on. If I could have, I would have avoided walking into that room.

After about six weeks, and

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## Continued from page 1

many student requests. I realized that the grading period was about to end and that I would have to grade those papers, about a hundred of them. When I finally got to them, I had one of the worst weekends of my life. A whole lot of frog eating!

This taught me a valuable lesson: papers are not going to grade themselves. Those darn frogs will just sit there!

Here is another lesson I learned about grading papers. I would be tackling a set of papers and come to one I knew was going to be trouble, one that would be so bad that I would have to spend a lot of time reading it just to understand it. I would move that one to the bottom of the pile. Then another bad one, bottom of the pile. Then another. The result: when I got to the end of that stack, I had four or five truly bad and hard papers to grade. Big mistake! I learned to eat the bad frogs first—or at least to take them as they came and not put them off.

Grading papers are my biggest frogs and can lead me to procrastination if I let them. But the advice in the non-Twain quote is very true: if you make yourself eat those frogs, the rest of your day will be

better. And I find that an old saying of my grandmother's is quite true of paper grading: “Once begun, half done.” Just starting, just breaking the inertia and eating that first odious frog, is enough to help me get through the job.

Maybe part of the answer is to learn to enjoy eating frogs. If I can remind myself that these papers I don't want to face are actually the vehicle for my students' best learning, perhaps I can motivate myself better to do the hardest part of my job.

Guess what I need to do before tomorrow's class? That's right, about 15 frogs. They prey on my mind, they torment me. During the summers, when I don't have any papers to grade, I often have nightmares about a stack of them awaiting me. Just the prospect of having to tackle them makes me want to do anything else. I have gotten up from a stack of papers at my kitchen table and decided it was extremely important for me to get a stepladder and clean the top of the refrigerator!

Some days, like today, the biggest frog that faces me is writing this column for *The Weekly Reader*. Some weeks, I know

exactly what I am going to write, so it's not a very big or bad frog. But other weeks, I have no clue, and this little column becomes my big frog for the day. Today, though, writing about eating frogs is just another way for me to put off grading those papers, so this relatively little frog becomes a bit of a pleasure and even an indulgence. I never enjoy cleaning the top of the refrigerator, except for the times I do it to keep from doing what I really don't want to do.

We get on our students all the time about their procrastination. Those students who just gave me those papers had that assignment three weeks ago, but I didn't get many of the required drafts from them until the day before it was due. One student had the gall to send me a draft for me to check about four hours before the paper was due! They need to learn about frog eating too.

But I have learned from bitter experience that academics can be the worst procrastinators of all. So, again the question: what are your frogs? Even though Mark Twain apparently did not say this particular bit of wisdom, eat that frog!

## XXITE 2.0 ----- The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with

those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and

technology. You'll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at <http://wuxxite.ning.com/> Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: [kosterj@winthrop.edu](mailto:kosterj@winthrop.edu) The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: <http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/>

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just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or [birdj@winthrop.edu](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu).

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People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

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- NEW POSTS ON THE RENOVATIONS**  
Posted by [Mark Y. Herring](#) on June 22, 2012 at 2:09pm
- CORE VALUES**  
Posted by [Mark Y. Herring](#) on June 5, 2012 at 9:41am
- PLAYING TO TYPE**  
Posted by [Blaiz C. Herring](#) on May 25, 2012 at 10:22am
- TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING IN THE CLASSROOM**  
Posted by [Amanda Hiler](#) on March 15, 2012 at 12:11pm — 1 Comment
- GONE WITH THE WIND...**  
Posted by [Jo Koster](#) on March 6, 2012 at 10:33am — 2 Comments

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**NOTES**

- DO COLLEGE PROFESSORS WORK HARD ENOUGH?**  
Created by [Jo Koster](#) Mar 25, 2012 at 11:34pm. Last updated by [Jo Koster](#)
- WHO OWNS YOUR COURSE?**  
Created by [Jo Koster](#) Mar 19, 2012 at 12:07pm. Last updated by [Jo Koster](#)
- STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF TABLETS INCREASES, PREFERENCE FOR GROWING**  
Created by [Jo Koster](#) Mar 14, 2012 at 11:24am. Last updated by [Jo Koster](#)

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Thought  
for  
The Week

"I don't see any p'intn about  
that frog that's any better'n  
any other frog." --Mark  
Twain