

Crash Course in Decision-Making

Many students experience difficulty making decisions about course of study, internships, career paths, and job offers. This handout, developed with the UW Counseling Center, discusses decision-making fears, factors, styles, and processes, as well as exercises that can help you make effective decisions.

FEARS

All of us experience some level of fear when making important decisions. Our fears often negatively impact our ability to make decisions. Recognizing and addressing these fears is an important step in the decision-making process. List some fears that you or others have experienced when trying to make an important decision.

1. EXAMPLE: I might make the "wrong" decision.
2. EXAMPLE: This decision will impact my life for years to come.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
11.
12.
13.
14.
15.

INFLUENTIAL FACTORS

Many factors can influence us as we try to make decisions. Some of these factors are internal and others are external. While some factors influence us overtly, others often influence us on a subconscious level. Identifying, analyzing, and addressing these influential factors can help us make more satisfying decisions. List some factors that have influenced you or others in the past.

<u>Personal / Internal</u>	<u>Relational</u>
1. EXAMPLE: Self-esteem	1. EXAMPLE: Parents' opinions
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.
8.	8.
<u>Societal / Cultural</u>	<u>Other</u>
1. EXAMPLE: Traditional gender roles	1. EXAMPLE: Geographic preferences
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.
8.	8.

STYLES

Put an X next to the statement(s) below that best describe how you typically make decisions. Be honest with yourself. You will be the only person who sees this questionnaire.

_____	I approach decision-making in a systematic, step-by-step manner. I set a goal, identify alternatives, collect information, identify the best option, and take action.
_____	I attempt to make decisions in a systematic, step-by-step manner but I tend to think too much, get stuck, and fail to reach a decision.
_____	I am usually able to select one alternative over another, with good outcomes, without too much thinking. I typically listen to my feelings.
_____	I like to decide quickly, without spending time thinking about or feeling out various alternatives.
_____	I typically seek input from everybody I know and rely heavily on their opinions. I sometimes even allow others to make decisions for me.
_____	I don't believe I have control over the events of my life. I believe my life circumstances are largely determined by external forces.
_____	I tend to recognize that a decision needs to be made but procrastinate (or avoid) making it because of fear, lack of information, or lack of motivation.

Niles, S. G., & Harris-Bowlsbey, J. (2005). *Career development interventions in the 21st century (2nd ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

List three **strengths** you typically exhibit during the decision-making process. Then think about how you might want to adjust your decision-making style as you think about job opportunities and career paths in the future and list three possible **adjustments**.

Strengths:	Adjustments:
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

PLANFUL PROCESS

Making decisions about job opportunities and career paths takes time. Following a planful process makes it easier to make decisions. This seven-step process can help graduate & professional students make good decisions.

1. What am I trying to decide? Identify the decision to be made.

Trying to figure out which career direction you'll pursue after graduation? Thinking about leaving your program? Thinking about starting another graduate degree program? Wondering which jobs are a good match for you? All of the above? Lumping two or three decisions together makes it more difficult to decide. Put into words what the decision is that needs to be made now. Try to think about one decision at a time. Keep it simple.

2. What do I need to know? Gather information.

You'll need to gather relevant data, see things as they are, and be realistic. Read books and websites. Compare and contrast what you know about yourself (your skills, interests, values, etc) with what you know about your options (requirements, labor market, etc). Collect detailed information about options under consideration.

3. What options will work? Generate alternatives.

Explore your options by talking to others and getting hands-on experience. Consider all the possibilities. Use your imagination. Brainstorm with others. List the possible courses of action. Do not leave out an attractive possibility just because you do not, at the moment, see how it can be done. Explore several options and then determine those that are the best match for you. Think big!

4. What are the pros and cons? Weigh the evidence.

Carefully consider each option using your head and your heart. What might happen if you choose each option? What are the disadvantages, costs, and consequences? What are the advantages and benefits? How much do you care about the things that might be gained or lost by each possible alternative? What steps do you need to take to get there? What barriers might get in the way (no related experience, location, etc.)? How will your choice affect you and others? Read books. Visit web sites. Talk to academic advisers and career counselors, faculty, other students in your discipline, and professionals working in jobs and careers you are considering.

5. This choice seems best! Choose among alternatives.

Prioritize your options. Once you've narrowed down your options to 2 or 3 that might work for you, choose the one that seems best. Identify a "Plan B" and a "Plan C" in case your first choice doesn't work out. You may not be totally sure but at some point you have to bite the bullet and make a decision with the information you have. Try not to let your fears get the best of you here. Don't obsess, catastrophize, etc.

6. Take action.

Do it! Taking action could involve enrolling in courses, dropping courses, pursuing internships, or taking a job that will provide you with experience in your chosen field. These experiences can confirm or cause you to question your choice. What will your next step be? Set a deadline to insure that you will get it done.

7. Did I make a good decision? Review your decision and its consequences.

Evaluate your decision and your decision-making approach. Does this still seem like the best option for you? If "yes," congratulations! If "no" or "not sure," don't feel ashamed or frustrated with yourself. Sometimes you have to make a choice and try it to find out that it's not the best decision for you. Eliminating options is progress. Review and revisit steps 2 - 6 above. Have back-up plans. Review again which alternatives might work better for you. Also, consider how you would change your approach next time you make a career decision.

MATCHING EXERCISE

1. Think about ONE option (job or career) you’re considering. If you are trying to choose between two options, only think about one of the options for this exercise. Write the name of the option in the space provided.
2. In the 1st column, list various responsibilities and requirements associated with this option.
3. In the 2nd column, list the skills, interests, and values you most want to express in your job or career.
4. Take a writing utensil (preferably a **green** marker or crayon) and draw lines between the responsibilities and personal characteristics that seem to **match** with one another.
5. Take a different writing utensil (preferably a **red** marker or crayon) and draw lines between the responsibilities and personal characteristics that **do not match**.
6. Repeat steps 1-5 with another option you are considering.
7. Reflect on the number and pattern of red and green lines for each option you are considering.

Option: _____

<u>Responsibilities / Requirements</u>	<u>My Skills, Interests, Values</u>
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.
8.	8.
9.	9.
10.	10.

ENERGY ANALYSIS

Students often have a hard time prioritizing and choosing among many competing interests, roles, and responsibilities. If you are trying to make decisions about how to spend your time, consider analyzing the energy you give to the activities in your life and the energy you receive back as a result of participating in those activities. Try to identify the costs and benefits of certain activities in terms of your overall energy level by drawing arrows between your energy reserve and your activities.

