

"I'm Just Gonna Fail" Forrest--Grade 11

Chelsey J. Herrmann

Michigan State University

Case Summary

Forrest is an eleventh grade student in a junior-level English course. In class, Forrest exhibits classic traits of learned helplessness and failure syndrome. Wentzel and Brophy (2014) stated that "failure syndrome students often fail needlessly because they do not invest their best efforts. Instead, they begin half-heartedly and give up easily" (p. 173). Forrest struggles to complete assignments or sometimes even begin them. If Forrest does attempt the assignment, he often gives up when he becomes frustrated. He says things like "I'm just gonna fail anyways," and if he does complete an assignment, he sometimes says, "The teacher just did it for me." Even if you show Forrest that he has a passing grade, he will sometimes insist that he is failing. Forrest's friends makes similar comments about themselves, and the group seems to help each other believe the narrative that they are "dumb" and "just gonna fail." Forrest rarely reads in class even when allowed choice and admits that he has not finished a book in recent years. When asked about a recent book he said he was reading, Forrest wrote, "Its Dumb like all the Rest of them" [sic] and "I hate reading with a passion." Forrest often leaves his assessments half-finished. He tends to default to "I don't know" or "I'm not doing this" as his responses. When he gets his tests back and sees failing grades, Forrest sees it as proof that he is a failure.

Forrest struggles in other classes besides English. He has a 1.65 grade point average and is a special education student with a specific learning disability in the areas of math calculation and math problem solving. Although his learning disabilities are in math, he sometimes takes his English assessments in the resource room at his own request. He is also granted extended time on assignments. Forrest is in general education courses with one directed studies class with a special education instructor. Forrest has an estranged relationship with his mother who abandoned the

family when Forrest was at a young age and little interaction with his father who just moved across the country to be with a woman he met on the Internet, leaving Forrest with his grandparents on their farm. Forrest has a lot of physical responsibilities on the farm, especially since his dad just left. Forrest's grandmother is supportive when contacted by the school. He does not seem to have close friends, although he and the other similar-minded boys hang out together at school and joke around during class.

Forrest has been known to struggle with anger issues and when he was younger, occasionally had "explosions" where he would need to leave the classroom to cool off. These behavior problems have improved as he has gotten older and he has fewer explosions, but they do still happen. Forrest has sworn to the teacher in front of his classmates, stormed out of the room, and made disrespectful comments to the teacher in front of others. He has been referred to the office, phone calls have been made to his grandmother, and conversations have been had with the vice principal. Still, Forrest has seen no significant consequence to his behavior. His special education teacher tells him to "knock it off" or "be quiet" but does not enforce consequences for even extreme profanity. Some teachers have noticed a particular disrespect from Forrest toward female teachers, perhaps stemming from his poor relationship with his mother.

Forrest has always struggled in school academically. He does not want to go to college after high school and sees himself working on his family's farm doing manual labor. He does not see the relevancy of the school curriculum to his everyday life or future. Forrest currently completes about 25% of his assigned work in English class, but this number is sometimes higher when the special education teacher requires him to complete assignments with her during the

hour he has her class. Forrest does not participate in extracurricular activities. He has tried playing football in the past but could not finish the season due to eligibility: more confirmation for Forrest of his destiny to fail. One positive Forrest has going for him is his good attendance.

Forrest’s teachers have tried a number of approaches and strategies over the years with little success. His special education teacher is a strong advocate for him but has been criticized for sometimes doing the work for him, so Forrest sees it as another example of someone else doing the work that he cannot do. Forrest’s motivational struggles are deeply ingrained, and his teachers are concerned that he will not graduate or be able to hold down a job due to his attitude and behaviors in school.

Motivational Assessment

The learning setting analyzed in this study is a junior-level English class. Forrest has this class every day as his final period, lasting 55 minutes. After the students sit in their assigned seats, I typically begin with an overview of the day’s learning targets and tasks. The lesson is then broken up into small group work (typically with the people sitting at assigned tables), independent work, and whole-class discussion. The class often ends with some kind of closing activity and an opportunity for the teacher to remind students of any homework and clarify any final questions. While the lessons vary greatly based on the unit, one lesson may include reading a chapter of the class novel independently, responding in writing, and discussing the chapter in small groups and then as a class. While students are working, I circulate the room and assist students needing help.

Forrest’s English III class consists of 29 students and one teacher, myself (Mrs. Herrmann). I am in my third year teaching in this school and my fifth year of teaching overall. The students are seated at eight table groups with three to four students per group. My desk is at

the front of the room along with a whiteboard, projector, and screen, used to display the learning targets, tasks, and directions for the day. It is a rather small classroom with little space to walk easily when the room is full of students as it is in this class.

Initial Assessments

I began my observations by informally observing Forrest in English class early in the school year. During one lesson, students were asked to create a slideshow on the computers summarizing and analyzing a chapter in *Lord of the Flies* they were given time to read in class the day before. Forrest got a computer and had it open in front of him, but as I circulated the room, I noticed that Forrest was looking at pictures of trucks on the Internet. I reminded Forrest of the task and asked him to begin working. He exited out of the truck web site but said, "I don't know anything about the book. I'm not reading this dumb book." After some suggestions, encouragement, and reminders, I asked Forrest to close his computer and read the novel if he needed to get caught up; Forrest did put his laptop away and opened his book but did not read.

In addition to this interaction, I observed Forrest's behavior when not engaged in discussion with the teacher. During whole-class instruction, Forrest is usually quiet and is not disruptive. He typically does not take notes when directed. During large-group discussion, Forrest does not participate. If called upon, Forrest will occasionally answer and sometimes say "I don't know" in an aggressive tone. When working with a small group, Forrest tends to sit back and allow others to discuss or complete the assignment. Throughout my week of observations, I found myself giving little feedback to Forrest, positive or negative, in front of the class. My primary interactions with Forrest were the two one-on-one conversations mentioned previously, which occurred quietly during class work time.

To follow up on these informal evaluations, several surveys were given to Forrest over the course of a few days. The first survey was a “Measure of Attributions for Performance on Academic Tasks” adapted from Stipek (2002, p. 67). This survey revealed that Forrest mostly attributes his successes in English to the work being easy (external) and his failures to him not being smart (internal) and the teacher not helping or explaining things (external) (see Table 1 in Appendix for full results). Attributing failures to a lack of ability and successes to external causes is not uncommon in students with a history of poor performance like Forrest (Stipek, 2002, p. 65). It was hypothesized that Forrest’s attribution of some failures to the teacher stems from a poor teacher-student relationship. Data was collected on this via a survey adapted from Stipek (2002, p. 155). Forrest emphatically revealed that he believes his English teacher does not have affection, attunement, or dependability for him (see Table 2 in Appendix for full results). Finally, an assessment was given to obtain data on Forrest’s achievement-related values. This survey, also adapted from Stipek (2002), found that Forrest attaches little to no importance, usefulness, or interest to English (p. 151) (see Table 3 in Appendix for full results). The results of these assessments confirmed my observations and hypotheses of Forrest’s motivational struggles and provided the foundations for where to begin on the motivational intervention.

To provide a baseline for behaviors of learned helplessness, a survey was given to Forrest’s teachers. This survey asked teachers to record how frequently Forrest exhibited behaviors and attitudes of learned helplessness, adapted from Stipek (2002, p. 69). Response options were 1 = never, 2 = rarely (once every few weeks), 3 = occasionally (once a week), 4 = often (multiple times a week), 5 = very often (daily). There was also a place for teachers to leave comments if they chose. On average, Forrest showed high levels of learned helplessness

behaviors across the board with the exception of maneuvering to get out of or to avoid work.

However, Forrest’s learned helplessness behaviors in welding class were much lower than those in his academic classes (see Table 4 in Appendix for full results). Forrest’s welding teacher said, “The only time [Forrest] "shuts down" is during a written test. Paper work is not his strong suit. When it comes to hands on work.....get out of his way because he is all about learning welding and working with his hands.” These surveys will be given to Forrest’s teachers again at the conclusion of the semester to record the impact of the motivational intervention.

Preconditions for Motivation

From my point of view as the teacher, I see myself striving to reach the preconditions for motivation, although if I imagine Forrest’s perspective, I think he would feel differently. I feel I have done my best to create a supportive environment, ensuring that the classroom is conducive for learning with the layout, organization, and cheerfulness. Although this week has had a couple negative conversations, I have known Forrest for over a year (he was my student last year in tenth grade English) and have had many positive interactions with him. Even so, Forrest’s comments make me doubt that he always views our relationship as supportive. As another precondition for motivation, I do continuous monitoring of all my students by moving around the room and stopping to speak with them one-on-one. I also check in with Forrest’s special education teacher on a weekly basis. Furthermore, although I am a fairly new teacher, I feel confident in my level of expertise in my school, students, and content. I know I still have areas to improve on, but I do not feel like these areas get in the way of Forrest’s motivation. I use both individual and collaborative activities in class and try to be as responsive as possible during instruction.

One precondition for motivation I have struggled with is the level of appropriate challenge for Forrest since he has turned in very little work for me to analyze. Due to his low test scores and reticence to complete assignments, I am led to believe Forrest may find the level of challenge to be too high. I also know through several conversations with Forrest that he does not see school, especially English class, as meaningful to him and his life.

TARGET Model

Applying the TARGET analysis to Forrest's preliminary motivation reveal several strengths and many areas for improvement. Forrest's tasks (T) could certainly be reconsidered to better fit his level of ability. Since I have little data to use, it can be a struggle to know how to differentiate the task appropriately for Forrest. I have not sat down with Forrest to set individualized, short-term goals.

I try to allow my students some authority (A) in their learning by giving them opportunities to redo their work in a format that makes sense for them; Forrest has never taken advantage of this. Teaching at a small school makes it easier to connect with students and their interests in one-on-one conversations. Although their interests are not incorporated into class on a regular basis, I do try to find opportunities to use them. For example, I may incorporate vocabulary words into sentences about hunting because I know that is an interest of many students.

In regard to recognition (R), I typically praise my students' accomplishments, whether they are mastery or improvement, with written feedback, grades, and private verbal recognition. If students do poorly, their feedback comes in low grades, written feedback, attempts at one-on-one meetings, opportunities to reassess, and sometimes parent contact.

For grouping (G), I rotate seating assignments on a monthly basis, having the computer randomize the seating chart and only making changes if I foresee problems with particular students working together. I rarely have competitive activities and instead teach norms for group work and offer opportunities for groups to work cooperatively. I do not usually have to worry about Forrest and who he sits by in class, but there are a few students who also struggle with motivation in school who tend to not work well with Forrest. If I separate this group of students, they are more likely to at least attempt the work; if they are together, they convince each other not to try.

Evaluation (E) takes place on an individual basis with no public displays of scores. I allow all students the opportunity to reassess the material in a format that works best for them. I do not discuss students' grades in front of other students, and I try to keep my feedback focused on objective criteria. I provide rubrics whenever possible and keep a consistent 4-point grading scale.

Finally, the time (T) of each class period is limited to the school schedule: lasting from 2:15-3:10 P.M. I do allow students to turn in late work with no penalty and re-do assignments as often as they want. Forrest is allowed extra time as part of his special education accommodations, but this is something I allow of all of my students.

Conclusions

Forrest seems to be motivated by a desire to hide what he sees as a lack of ability. If he does not try, he can then attribute his failure to a lack of effort rather than a lack of ability. Forrest does not receive positive feedback very often and could benefit from setting short-term, realistic goals to begin fostering feelings of success. Helping Forrest see the connection between

school and his life may strengthen his motivation, as would individualized assignments and goals. Forrest’s history of failure, negative self-concept, and struggle to see the relevancy of school to his personal life seem to be at the heart of his motivational struggles.

Motivational Intervention

It was determined that a cognitive intervention would be the most appropriate for Forrest. Although he evidently lacks intrinsic motivation with English and much of school in general, Wentzel & Brophy (2014) claimed that “intrinsic motivational strategies apply when students already value (or can learn to value) the activity itself” (p. 69). Data collected through observations, surveys, and conversations revealed that Forrest is a long way from valuing the material and skills of English class. Therefore, a primarily cognitive approach will be used to address Forrest’s attitudes toward himself and his learning.

One goal of the cognitive intervention will be to increase Forrest’s completion of in-class tasks and assessments to 80% by the end of the semester in January. Another goal will be to decrease Forrest’s learned helplessness behaviors as measured by teacher surveys. To accomplish these goals, three specific areas will be addressed: teacher-student relationship, goal setting, and task value.

Motivational Strategies: Teacher-Student Relationship

The first component of the motivational intervention will address the teacher-student relationship. Stipek (2002) noted that “many children who fail in school have consistently negative interactions with their teachers...often they deserve being sanctioned, but the classroom becomes a very unpleasant place for children who have mostly conflict and discipline-related interactions with their teachers” (p. 151). Despite my attempts at establishing a positive

relationship with Forrest by engaging with him in conversations about his interests and trying to be patient and encouraging, Forrest’s interactions with me have revealed that the teacher-student relationship is not a positive one from his perspective. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs “implies that lower-level needs, such as being in a safe environment and experiencing a sense of belongingness and relatedness to others, must be satisfied before the higher-level needs can become operative” (Wentzel & Brophy, 2014, pp. 192-93). The teacher-student relationship is a critical aspect of student effort and achievement in school, so therefore it will be addressed first.

To improve the teacher-student relationship, Stipek (2002) recommended showing genuine interest in students “as human beings as well as students” (p. 157). Since the current approaches I have been taking do not seem to be working, as evidenced by the teacher-student relationship survey, new strategies must be implemented. The first course of action will be to invite Forrest to join the history teacher and me for lunch at school one day. Forrest’s history teacher is one of the few teachers with whom Forrest says he feels he has a positive relationship. The conversation will be about non-school things, like Forrest’s farm and other interests. To follow up on this lunch conversation, other lunch “meetings” may be scheduled if Forrest enjoys them, but at the very least, I will continue to seek out at least two conversations with Forrest per week about non-school topics. By including the history teacher, hopefully Forrest will find the situation to be less threatening, and by socializing with teachers about non-academic topics, the goal is that Forrest will begin to feel more valued as both a human being and a student.

To further improve the teacher-student relationship, care will be taken to communicate high expectations for Forrest and hold him to them. Wentzel & Brophy (2014) reported that teachers’ expectations of their students can often influence student performance, so it is

important that Forrest feels that his teacher believes he can and will be successful (pp. 196-97).

Currently, Forrest is allowed to get away with doing very little in class, partly because his teachers are afraid that he will erupt in anger if pushed too much. However, because he does not complete the in-class assignments, Forrest struggles on assessments. His teachers know that his lack of effort is the main reason for his failures, but Forrest attributes his failures internally.

Stipek (2002) stated that “one of the best ways to show respect for students is to hold them to high standards--by not accepting sloppy, thoughtless, or incomplete work, by pressing them to clarify vague comments, by encouraging them not to give up, and by not praising work that does not reflect genuine effort” (p. 157). If Forrest does not complete a practice assignment to the best of his ability, he will be asked to re-do it before he takes the assessment. If it seems like Forrest needs additional support in order to complete the assignment, the teacher can offer help, he can work with the special education teacher, or additional resources or modifications can be provided. By requiring to Forrest to complete the practice assignments, high expectations will be communicated and Forrest will also do better on his assessments, increasing his experiences with success. These strategies will work toward improving the trust and rapport between teacher and student.

Motivational Strategies: Goal Setting

The second primary area of intervention will be goal setting. Working with Forrest to set short-term, realistic goals will give him a clear focus and, if designed and supported correctly, should provide opportunities for Forrest to experience genuine success by reaching those goals.

Wentzel and Brophy (2014) stated, “The simplest way to ensure that students expect success is to make sure they achieve it consistently so they can adjust to each new step without much

confusion or frustration" (p. 153). Forrest has experienced little success in school throughout his life, especially English class. He tends to fall into a cycle of anticipating failure, trying very little, and then failing. This is a pattern also observed by Stipek (2002), who found that "children can fall into a self-perpetuating cycle in which they attribute failure to causes over which they have no control, do nothing to avoid failure in subsequent situations, and consequently fail again, thus confirming their perception of themselves as low in competence" (p. 70). In order to break the cycle, I will ask the special education teacher to assist me in working with Forrest to set proximal (short-term), specific, and challenging goals, as recommended by Wentzel & Brophy (2014, p. 154). Forrest will be provided options of potential goals to increase the amount of choice he has. Possible goals might be writing a paragraph that uses one quotation cited correctly, completing fill-in-the-blank notes independently after hearing a scene from Macbeth read out loud in class, or attempting four out of five sections of an assessment with reasonable best effort. Achieving these goals will be celebrated as successes for Forrest, and they should also help him perform better on the assessments since they are linked to things that are tested and graded.

Motivational Strategies: Task Value

The third and final area of motivational intervention will be task value. Although increasing task value is more of an intrinsic strategy than a cognitive one, the results of the preliminary survey confirmed that Forrest currently sees little to no value in his English class. He does not view English as important, useful, or interesting. In order to encourage Forrest to commit to goals and putting forth more effort in English, it is therefore believed that efforts must be taken to help Forrest find at least some value in what he is learning. Forrest sees himself doing manual labor on his grandparents' farm after high school and needing no reading or

writing skills to do this. In order to increase relevancy for Forrest, steps will be taken to match the curriculum to his life and interests. I will reach out to Forrest’s grandmother, who currently handles the paperwork for the farm according to Forrest. I will seek her input on ways to connect English class to skills that Forrest may need to keep the farm running. Since Forrest has shown interest in welding class, I will also speak with the welding teacher for ideas on what types of reading and writing are required in that profession and then find opportunities to incorporate that into Forrest’s English curriculum. Additionally, to increase Forrest’s interest in English, I will provide more opportunities for Forrest to make choices, supported by Wentzel & Brophy (2014, p. 59). For example, after reading a scene from Macbeth with the class, all students, including Forrest, will have a choice of completing a writing assignment, visual representation, or hands-on project. Opportunities for Forrest to do hands-on projects may appeal to him, as his welding teacher has noted. Since writing is an integral part of English class, choices of prompts will be provided so Forrest can choose the one most interesting to him. Increasing Forrest’s value in English may be challenging since it is currently so low, but hopefully even minimal gains will improve Forrest’s motivation and efforts.

Reapplying the TARGET Model

Upon applying the TARGET framework to the motivational intervention, there are many clear changes from the preliminary assessments while some factors have remained consistent. Setting attainable, personalized, proximal goals will provide an appropriate level of challenge for Forrest when he completes a task (T). Incorporating Forrest’s career interests and choices into the curriculum will help make the tasks more meaningful and interesting to Forrest and lead to an increased value in what he is learning.

The authority (A) is now more shared between the student and teacher. Giving the class options in assignments or writing prompts when possible will give them more ownership over what they are doing. Additionally, by addressing the strained teacher-student relationship, an increase in trust will help this authority feel more balanced for Forrest.

While I will still offer recognition (R) to Forrest and other students mostly in private through verbal and written comments, I will now be personalizing the recognition more to help Forrest find success. I will recognize Forrest when he reaches one of his personal goals and shows improvement. Comparing Forrest’s work to his own goals and agreed-up definitions of success will provide genuine recognition for Forrest that he is currently lacking.

The grouping (G) in my classroom will be mostly similar to how it was before the motivational intervention. Students are seated in groups that change monthly and cooperative learning activities are used when suitable for the curriculum. I sometimes allow students to choose their own groups, increasing ownership and allowing for grouping based on interests and personalities. However, since Forrest is often drawn to like-minded peers who struggle with motivation, I will find ways to implement individual accountability measures into groups when possible.

Standards-based grading is still in place in my classroom, forming the foundations for evaluation (E). Forrest and all students are allowed opportunities to redo their work until they show mastery and grades are not discussed publicly. Raising my expectations for Forrest by not accepting incomplete or poorly attempted work will encourage Forrest to view learning as a process by tying the practice work more directly to the assessments.

Although the time (T) of the class is structured by the school schedule, time is more flexible in my class as all students are allowed extra time on assignments when necessary and the ability to redo assignments until the end of the marking period when final grades are due. I will use this flexibility in time to give Forrest opportunities to redo work that he struggled on or did not attempt additionally. This will help Forrest meet his newly-set goals and strengthen the teacher-student relationship even more.

Rationale

A primarily cognitive approach was chosen for Forrest due to his clear struggles with attitudes and beliefs about his abilities and performance in English class. The informal observations, teacher survey, and student assessments demonstrated a poor teacher-student relationship, attribution struggles, and low task value. Therefore, targeting these three areas through a variety of motivational strategies should lead to an increase in Forrest's overall motivation in English class. Forrest demonstrates high levels of learned helplessness behaviors and failure syndrome, much like "Helpless Hannah" in Stipek (2002). Thus, efforts will be made to improve the ways Forrest views himself, the teacher, his abilities, and the English curriculum through mostly cognitive measures like Stipek recommended with Helpless Hannah.

Expected Outcomes/Results

As Stipek (2002) noted, "Learned helplessness is...the motivational problem most resistant to change by even the most clever and persistent teacher" (p. 3). Therefore, it may be unrealistic to anticipate dramatic improvements in Forrest right away, and that has indeed been the case so far. The goal of 80% work completion will be monitored by tallying the percentage of assignments Forrest complete, and the hope is that these motivational interventions will help that

number move closer to the goal. The other target of the motivational interventions was on Forrest’s learned helplessness behaviors. Again, while these behaviors are difficult to completely erase, with enough time and patience, improvements can be made. At the end of the semester, the same teacher survey will be given to Forrest’s teacher. The hope is that the averages of learned helplessness behaviors and attitudes reported by the teachers will have decreased from the initial assessment. Finally, Forrest’s teachers primarily want to see him graduate high school and become a productive member of society, so any improvements in Forrest’s attitude, behavior, and efforts in school will be seen as successes.

References

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York: Routledge.

Appendix

Table 1

Measure of Attributions for Performance on Academic Tasks

	1 = not at all a reason	2	3	4	5 = an important reason
<i>When you do well in English class, is it usually because: (rate the importance of each explanation)</i>					
you studied hard?		X			
you studied the right things?		X			
you are smart?		X			
the teacher explained things well to you?	X				
someone helped you?		X			
the work was easy?				X	
<i>When you do poorly in English class, is it usually because:</i>					
you didn't study much?				X-----	-----X
you didn't study the right things?			X		
you are not smart?		X-----	-----X		
the teacher didn't explain things well to you?	X				
you weren't helped by anyone?		X			
the work was hard?					X

Table 2

Student Rating of Teacher-Student Relationship

	1 = not at all true	2 = not very true	3 = sort of true	4 = very true
<i>Affection</i>				
My teacher likes me.	X			
My teacher really cares about me.	X			
My teacher doesn't seem to enjoy having me in class.				X
<i>Attunement</i>				
My teacher spends time getting to know me.	X			
My teacher talks with me.	X			
<i>Dependability</i>				
My teacher is always there for me.	X			
I can count on my teacher to be there for me.	X			
I can rely on my teacher to be there when I need him/her.	X			
I can't count on my teacher when I need him/her.				X
I can't depend on my teacher for the important things.				X
My teacher is never there for me.				X

Table 3

Assessment of Achievement-Related Values

Importance (<i>Attainment Value</i>)			
For me, being good in English is...	not at all important	somewhat important	very important
Some students find what they learn in one subject or activity is more important than what they learn in another. Compared to most of your other classes, how important is it to you to be good at English?	not at all important	somewhat important	very important
Usefulness (<i>Utility Value</i>)			
Some things that you learn in school help you do things better outside of class--that is, they are useful. For example, learning about plants might help you grow a garden. In general, how useful is what you learn in English?	not at all useful	somewhat useful	very useful
Some students find what they learn in one subject or activity is more useful than what they learn in another. Compared to most of your other classes, how useful is what you learn in English?	not at all useful	somewhat useful	very useful
Interest (<i>Intrinsic Value</i>)			
In general, I find working on English assignments...	very boring	somewhat interesting	very interesting (fun)
How much do you like doing English?	not at all	somewhat	very much
Some students find that they like one subject or activity much more than another. Compared to most of your other activities, how much do you like English?	not at all	somewhat	very much

Table 4

Averages of Preliminary Teacher Assessments of Learned Helplessness Behaviors and Attitudes

	1 = never	2 = rarely (once every few weeks)	3 = occasionally (once a week)	4 = often (multiple times a week)	5 = very often (daily)
Says "I can't" or other negative self-talk					
Doesn't pay attention to teacher's instructions					
Doesn't ask for help, even when needed					
Does nothing (e.g., stares out the window)					
Guesses or answers randomly without really trying					
Doesn't show pride in successes					
Appears bored, uninterested					
Is unresponsive or argumentative to teacher's exhortations to try					
Is easily distracted					
Doesn't volunteer answers to teacher's questions					
Maneuvers to get out of or avoid doing work (e.g., has to go to the office)					

"I'M JUST GONNA FAIL" FORREST