

How to Make an Effective To-Do List

“People who regularly write down their goals earn nine times as much over their lifetimes as people who don't, according to one academic.”

“No matter the format, what you write down gets done....No matter how lofty or simple your goals may be, reaching them requires a systematic approach. That begins by writing down your to-do list. Don't just think it, ink it!”

Tips for Writing Effective To-Do Lists:

1. **Write your lists down in something that you've earmarked specifically for your lists.** Why? Because those haphazard notes and lists on a sticky note or random pieces of paper can get easily lost or ignored.
2. **Establish a morning To-Do routine.** Take 3 minutes each day to write down what you want to accomplish.
3. **Look over your lists each morning before you start your day.** This will help you focus on what is most important to accomplish that day.
4. **Be specific!** Don't say “Study English.” Say “Complete study guide, ch. 2.” “Make flashcards of key terms, ch. 2.”
5. **Prioritize the items on your list.***

↓ ABC Prioritized Daily Task List		

Write here the things you want to do today. Once you've listed them, prioritize each task according to its importance. Put A, B, or C next to each one in the column provided.

A = The most valuable things you could accomplish today

B = Important, but they could wait if necessary

C = Would be nice to get done, but they won't lose value if postponed

After assigning priority, number each task 1, 2, 3, etc., within its category so you know which to tackle first.

The following is really good material from the *Harvard Course in Reading Strategies*.

FIVE TIME MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

1. Work in 15–minute stretches.

We tend to approach big jobs by thinking we need big stretches of time to do them. We say to ourselves, "I need to write this paper. It's 1:00 now. I'm free until dinner at 6:00. That's five hours. I should get a lot done." But in fact, we barely make a dent. We brush our teeth, do our laundry, water our plants, pay a few bills, straighten out room, make a list of errands, hang out with our friends, chat on the phone. But we spend very little time on task (e.g., the task of writing the paper or doing the problem set). That's because few of us can work for five solid hours on one thing, especially something as difficult and anxiety–provoking as writing or problem–solving.

Especially if you are having difficulty getting started or staying with an onerous task, try to work for very small stretches of time. Work for fifteen minutes, break for five, it is not a bad guideline. You may be surprised at how much you can get done in fifteen focused minutes. It is much better to work for fifteen minutes and get something done, however small, than to keep thinking for five hours that you should be working and be so daunted or scared that you get nothing done and then feel discouraged, demoralized, and guilty.

2. Use the "So/And Even So" Exercise.

Whenever you find yourself saying, "I have only fifteen minutes, **so** I can't do anything productive," try saying, "I have only fifteen minutes, **and even so**... I could make a phone call/jot a few notes about what questions I might address in this paper/skim the beginning and end of this chapter to identify the question the writer's addressing."

The **So/And even So** exercise can work even when you are feeling tired, sad, lonely, scared, discouraged, or overwhelmed. A similar strategy was used by a coach to help his runners meet their training goals. He told them they didn't need to run every scheduled running day, but they just needed to suit up on those days –that is, they had to put on their running clothes and running shoes. If they said to themselves, "I'm tired (busy, sad, lonely), so I can't run today," he asked them to say instead, "I'm tired (busy, sad, lonely), **and even so**... I can suit up." The runners found that once they were all suited up, they felt that they were already on their way, and taking a run was not as daunting a prospect. Similarly, if you put yourself in a position to do your homework and take even a small step in that direction, you might find that you can, and even want, to keep on going.

When you find yourself saying things like "I'm sleepy, so I can't work on this"; "I haven't called my best friend in a week, so I can't work on this"; "I have rehearsal in half an hour, so I can't work on this"; "I really want to see a movie, so I can't work on this"; or "I'm scared I'm going to fail, so I can't work on this, try replacing the **so** with an **and even so**: "...and even so, I can work for fifteen minutes on tracing the line of thinking that leads me to define my questions"; "...and even so, I can skim this chapter to see if I can get the main idea"; "...and even so, I can read for fifteen minutes to see how this author defines this particular term."

3. Take frequent breaks.

To sustain your focus and concentration, you need to pace yourself. Pacing requires well-timed breaks. Take a break before you get to the "breaking point," that is the point at which you are so exhausted that you collapse or so frustrated that you avoid getting back to the task.

Many people say, "But my 'little' breaks inevitably last for hours and hours." You can avoid the potential for dangerously long breaks if you a) develop a repertoire of refreshing activities; b) experiment with breaks of different sizes; and c) develop a sensitivity to when you need a break and what kind and what length of break you need at any given point. Your repertoire of breaks might include talking with a friend, meditating, dancing in your room to a favorite song, reading the mail, making a phone call, getting something to eat or drink, taking a brief nap (notice how long is "just right" for you), reading a novel or newspaper, doing the dishes, taking a walk, doing some artwork, starting a letter to a friend, getting exercise, or running an errand. When you take a break, ask yourself what you need right now. Do you need a change of activity (e.g., to do something physical rather than something sedentary or to work on an art project rather than a problem set)? Do you need a change of environment (e.g., to get some fresh air or to work in a friend's room)? A change of perspective (e.g., to talk with a friend or to see a movie)? Sleep? Company? Nourishment? Distraction? Entertainment? Notice which sorts and size of breaks are most responsive to particular needs. Sometimes only a long break will do. But frequent, brief breaks can be surprisingly restorative.

4. Negotiate with yourself.

When you seem to be sabotaging your own efforts to do what you intent, listen for internal voices that express your competing needs, desires and fears. Part of you might be saying, "Me, I really do want to do well in this course. I want to get down to work." But another part might be saying, "Me, I'm going to make sure I get some time to hang out with friends no matter what." And yet another part might be saying, "Me, I'm afraid I'm really not competent to do this project. I'm afraid that if I work on it now, I'll just discover that I really don't know what I'm doing or that I can't do as good a job as I want to."

At times like this, it is as if our behavior is being guided by an internal committee whose members each have a vested interest in their own particular preferred activity. The committee as a whole has trouble either accomplishing a task or enjoying itself wholeheartedly, because its members keep quibbling over which activity should have priority. Worktime tends to be compromised by the desire to rest or play, and playtimes tends to be compromised by guilt and anxiety over not working.

To work and play with less internal conflict, you need to form alliances among the various parts of yourself—for example, among the part of you that aspires to do your best, the part that values other things in life besides achievement, and the part that is afraid of failure, compulsive working, loneliness, or other potential risks of engaging with your work. To form an alliance requires that all of the separate, uncooperative, "me/I" voices join to create a generative "we/let's" voice (e.g., "Okay, we have a lot of different things that matter to us. Let's figure out how we can get going on this project and also help manage our fear about not being good enough and also guarantee that we can have time to play."). In creating a "we/let's" voice, you bring together all of your energies in the effort to live a life that feels whole and true to the complexity of who you are.

5. Accept that anxiety and anxiety management are part of time management.

At the completion of his doctorate, a graduate student commented that 80% of the time and energy involved in writing a dissertation goes to anxiety management. You can't wait until you are not afraid or not anxious to begin writing. You need to find ways to keep yourself company in your fear, to let the fear be there without letting it stop you from doing what you need to do. Writing about your fear or stuckness, working in fifteen-minute stretches, taking frequent breaks, getting regular exercise, meditating, using the So/And Even So exercise, and talking with people are all good ways of managing your anxiety.