How to Actually Get Sh!t Done With a To-Do List

Between work (or homework), working out, hanging out with friends, and other real-life obligations, achieving our goals and making deadlines is almost always harder than it seems. Creating an efficient to-do list is a feat in itself, and that's where we come in. We've prepared 13 tips to help you organize your life into a manageable list, then cross off each entry one at a time.



To Do or Not To Do—The Need-to-Know

- [ ] List-making is a pretty personal thing. Some of us border on obsessive, organizing the bathroom can turn into a series of numbered bullet points. Others prefer to wing it, writing important telephone numbers on the backs of their hands. But even the most basic outline of must-do tasks can help us tackle our most important goals. For one thing, writing out a bunch of to-do's forces us to set concrete goals (take out the trash), which can be way more effective than just thinking about vague objectives (get cleaner) . Plus, making a written list can help us remember important information (meaning that trash won't sit waiting in the kitchen for weeks)

- [ ] The problem is that even those of us who believe fervently in the power of to-do lists might not know how to make a successful one. Luckily we're here to help, with a step-by-step guide to creating—and completing—an awesome list of stuff to get done.

Just To-Do It—Your Action Plan

1. Pick a medium.

- [ ] To-do lists come in all shapes and sizes, so it's all about what works for the individual. Some research suggests writing information by hand helps us remember it better, but if you last picked up a pen in 1995, fear not: There's a huge range of digital apps that help create personal to-do lists.

2. Make multiples.

- [ ] Create a few lists of stuff that needs to get done. One should be a master list, with every item you'd like to accomplish in the long-term: Clean out the closet, sign up for a language class, etc. Another can be a weekly project list, with everything that needs to take place in the next seven days. The third should be a HIT (that's high-impact tasks) list, with the tasks that need to get done today: Call Aunt Sue for her birthday, pick up the dry cleaning, finish that presentation for work. Every day, see which items from the master list and weekly project list should move to the HIT list.

3. Keep it simple.

- [ ] There's nothing more intimidating than a mile-long to-do list. And, realistically, it's impossible to get that much stuff done in 24 hours anyway. One trick for keeping a HIT list simple is to make a list of stuff you want to do today and slice it in half. There shouldn't be more than 10 items remaining; the rest can go on the weekly projects list or the master list.

4. Meet the MITs.

- [ ] That's "most important tasks." Start the list with at least two items that absolutely must get done today, so you don't end up vacuuming instead of finishing a project report due tomorrow. Even if the rest of the list stays untouched, the really meaningful stuff will get finished.

5. Start easy.

- [ ] Even before those MITs (see above), stick a few simple items on the list. "Fold clothes," "wash breakfast dishes," and "shower" are all good examples. Even crossing off silly stuff helps us start the day feeling super-productive.

6. Break it down.

- [ ] Goals such as "work on research paper" are much too vague and intimidating, meaning we'll be too afraid to actually start tackling them. One way to reduce the fear factor and make goals seem more manageable is to break projects into smaller tasks. Instead of "work on research paper," try something more specific, such as "write first half of chapter three" on Monday and "write second half of chapter three" on Tuesday.

7. Stay specific.

- [ ] All to-do's should have these qualities (among others) in common: They're physical actions; they can be finished in one sitting; and they're tasks that only the to-do-list writer can do. For general projects that require lots of time or other people's help, list specific steps you can take toward your goal. Instead of "save the animals," try "write cover letter for internship at World Wildlife Fund."

8. Include it all.

- [ ] For every task on the list, include as much information as possible so there's literally no excuse for not getting the job done. For example, if the task involves calling someone, include that person's phone number on the list so you won't waste time scrambling for it later.

9. Time it.

- [ ] Now that you've made the list (and checked it twice), go back and put a time estimate next to every item. It might even help to turn the to-do list into a kind of schedule with specific times and places. For example: laundry 4-6 p.m. at Suds & Stuff, clean out inbox 6-7 p.m. at Starbucks on 6th Ave. When time's up, it's up; there's no spending six hours at the Laundromat.

10. Don't stress.

- [ ] Every master list has a few tasks on it that we've been meaning to do for days, weeks, maybe even years—but haven't yet. Try to figure out why not in order to learn what steps are necessary for actually completing the task. Not calling Uncle Pat out of fear of getting stuck on the phone for the whole afternoon? Replace "Call Uncle Pat" with "figure out a way to get off the phone with Uncle Pat." This way the big task will seem easier, and eventually get done.

11. Make it public.

- [ ] Sometimes the best way to stay accountable is to have someone watching over us. Try sharing that to-do list, whether by posting it on the refrigerator or setting up a digital calendar that everyone on the work team can access.

12. Schedule scheduling.

- [ ] One of the trickiest aspects of the to-do list is actually sitting down to make one. Pick a time every day, whether it's the morning before everyone else wakes up, the hour right before going to bed, or lunchtime, when you can organize all your tasks and determine what still needs to be accomplished.

13. Go in with the old.

- [ ] One way to boost productivity is to remind ourselves how productive we were yesterday. So keep a written list of everything you accomplished the day before, even the small stuff.

14. Start fresh.

- [ ] Make a new list every day so the same old items don't clog up the agenda. It's also a useful way to make sure we actually get something done every 24 hours and don't just spend time decorating the paper with fancy highlighters.

15. Be flexible.

- [ ] Pro tip: Always leave about 15 minutes of "cushion time" in between items on the to-do list or calendar in case something pops up (say the washing machine overflows or the computer crashes). And if a crisis does strike, the most important thing is to remember to stop and breathe. You've probably already accomplished at least one MIT—you'll get the rest under control!

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