Personal Productivity:
How to work effectively and calmly in the midst of chaos

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Introduction

This mini-book contains a series of essays on personal productivity.

Before setting the stage, I'll address the question that I imagine is at the top of your mind: why should you care about what a gynecologist says about this topic? Because I have had a lifelong challenge with activities, deadlines, clutter, and the stress caused thereby. For many years I collected self-books in the realm of time management. Then, in 1997 as I was reading one of them, something clicked. It was my teachable moment. I gradually implemented the system and life soon became more organized and less stressed (although no less busy). I was getting more done and, more often, done on time.

As others noticed, I accepted invitations to give talks and workshops, first at home and then nationally. In the last year and a half, my College has supported my offer to coach and consult, one-on-one with faculty and staff; over that time I have worked with more than 50 individuals, each for many hours. What I have learned, I would like to share with you.

Some preliminary issues:

First, you cannot "manage" time. You manage your activities and your use of time.

Second, the purpose of making changes is not to be able to cram more into your life, but rather to find ways to do what you want to do –and that may be more, less, or the same amount of stuff you are doing now.

Third, there are lots of systems out there. Today's "Amazon.com" hit count of books with the keyword time management is 8,357! Clearly no one system works for everyone.

Fourth, the system you use may take some time to get used to (i.e. there *will* be a learning curve, but then it should make life easier not harder).

Fifth, I have lots of strong opinions about various methods – but don't let me talk you into doing anything that does not really work for *you.*

Now, let's get started….

Chapter 1

"Code O:" How to recover from *Overwhelm*

"Overwhelm" is the new word-of the-day in the time management lexicon, as in, "I am dealing with overwhelm." This may seem a fair descriptor of the world we live in today: tasks coming at us from all sides, and expectations for our work and personal life that simply cannot be met. The consequences of severe, persistent overwhelm can be serious: depression, stalled career progress, interpersonal messes.

Note that in this usage, overwhelm is a noun, not a verb, implying that its origins are external to ourselves. I'm not going to argue about whose fault this state of affairs is - yours or theirs - but I will suggest here that you **do have control** over how you deal with "overwhelm."

In this first article in my new series on time management, I lay out a series of steps you should take when you find yourself in the midst of overwhelm, that is, when you are so riddled with guilt and anxiety that you find yourself paralyzed, unable to take any action at all. If you have never found yourself in quite this bad a shape, my plan also rescues people from lesser degrees of trouble.

The core principle for emerging from this state is to get you to engage in the moment. When we are in overwhelm, we are flying back and forth between the past (guilt) and future (fear) and passing right over the current moment – which is the only time over which we have any control.

Code O: The three steps to resuscitation:

Every code has a resuscitation phase, and in this one you are simply trying to get control of your emotions, and regain your ability to take action. The process will take anywhere from a few minutes to at most an hour to complete, and so you do not need to worry about getting further behind on your priorities.

Step One. Stop and take a deep breath

You need to bring your focus quickly back to this moment, and this is a time- honored and time-tested way to do it. If you have trouble with this, W. Timothy Gallwey recommends actually saying the word "STOP" aloud in order to get your own attention[1].

Step Two. Slow down.

This advice seems counter-intuitive. You are behind! You need to go faster! Help! Remember the opening lines of Simon and Garfunkel's *59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy)*?

>   *Slow down, you move too fast — you've got to make the morning last*[2i]

As the song says, slowing down actually leads to the feeling that you have *more* time. The key is to couple slow motion with attention to the moment. The effect is to block out everything and focus entirely on what you are doing in this moment. Perhaps this works because you are not "wasting" any time thinking about the past or future - so only 1/3 of the usual "stuff" is in your head.

Martha Ringer, productivity coach says, "I practice 'exaggerated slowness' anytime I start to feel that 'way out ahead of myself' place.[3]

You may doubt that this trick will help. When I recommended it to my then secretary several years ago, she looked at me as if I were crazy. The next day, however, she came back and said that it had been a miracle.

Step Three. Complete a task.

Randomly choose a task from your immediate environment and do it. Your priorities are not important in this step - in fact, an obsession with trying to find the very highest priority task to do may have precipitated the overwhelming episode in the first place!

The point here is to get traction on the moment, engage your mind in work, and feel the victory of completing something. This will work with any task *as long as it is something that needs to be done.*

After you have done a few tasks and are feeling calm and focused, try to move in one if these directions:

1. Turn toward a high ***priority task***   or

2. Begin to implement one of the stabilization methods ***described in the next section.***

{In the unlikely event you just can't move to either of these, keep doing random --but needed -- tasks and try to move on later.}

Assorted methods to stabilize:

This next set of activities can be done in any order, over several days or weeks. They are intended to get you back on your feet, and in a position to start putting together a long term plan for organization and time management. Even if you stay in this phase for months, you will still be ahead of where you are now.

Make a list of everything you have to do.

The subtext here is that stress is increased the more you try to keep things in your head[4]. Your brain was not designed to be a storage vault, it was designed to think.

Begin by taking a blank piece of lined paper (or type if you like) and spend about 15 minutes writing down everything you can think of that you have to do. Big, little; now, later; work, home – everything that is in your head. Your eventual goal is to create an inventory of all potential work, but in the beginning, even before the list is complete, this exercise will almost immediately convert your previous existential, free-floating anxiety into focused energy. Now you can see before you, in black and white, the actual challenge you face. Now you have the chance to make better decisions about what to do next, as well as what you should not do at all. And you get the pleasure - and energy boost - of crossing off the tasks you complete.

Jeffrey Mayer's method is the one I like best for this approach[5]. Use a legal pad, date the top of the first page, and write one item on each line. Keep adding to this list as things come up. When a thing is done, cross if off by drawing a line all the way through. When a page is about 50 to 70% crossed out, tear off the page and copy the undone items on a new page, and continue adding new items as they come up.

Note that this is a "master" list, *not* a daily list. You should select no more than three critical tasks that you must do each day. Eventually you may want to work with a more sophisticated list system (the subject of future columns), but this simple running list will do for now.

Clear your work space.

The goal at this stage is not organization, but focus. Thus, it is OK for the short run if you simply put everything from your desk on the floor. This gives you a clear space in which to do each task, without your eye (and mind) being drawn off-task by seeing the other work you need to do. As a simple next step, make a file folder for every project you are working on, and put these folders in one place. Then you can see all of your big tasks together, again giving you a concrete picture of your work load.

Find a 10% solution.

Stephanie Winston, the "mother" of modern time management, describes this method in her book "Getting Out from Under[6]." She advises that when you are in crisis, it is better to make small adjustments so that you can get back in control. To apply this method, think of activities in your daily life that seem to take too much time, or that specifically add to your sense of overwhelm. Select one, and break it down into steps. Look at each step separately, and see if there is a way it can be done more quickly or efficiently, delegated to someone else, or eliminated all together.

For example, suppose you find yourself spending too much time doing laundry. The steps are collecting the dirty clothes, washing, drying, ironing, and distributing back to the owners. As a 10% solution, you could delegate the collecting and distributing to your children, and stop ironing the sheets!

Face up to the AWOL syndrome.

Mary McKinney, a psychologist who advises graduate students and faculty on achieving academic success, recently described this syndrome in her monthly newsletter. If you are like me, you will recognize this immediately. You have promised to have a chapter ready in June. August rolls around, and you have not even started -- and you begin to fantasize that the chapter is a hallucination. Then in September you receive a politely worded e-mail asking for a progress report. You ignore it. Thereafter come more e-mails, followed by telephone calls at increasing frequency. You ignore them, all the while building up a store of guilt and fear. McKinley calls this going "AWOL." (Read her original article at http://www.successfulacademic.com/ezines/feb232006.htm and while you are there, sign up for her free newsletter via the link on her home page http://www.successfulacademic.com/)

The solution sounds painful – but it almost never is. Simply call or e-mail (the latter is usually easier unless you are very brave indeed) and say: "I am sorry I am late. Here is when I think I can get it done. Please let me know if that will work for you. Sincerely…." There is no need for going on and on about the late part – the recipient already knows you are late, and probably suspects that you are sorry. The only things that the recipient really wants to know are that you are alive, and that you will re-negotiate a new deadline. I have experienced this syndrome many times in my career, and to date, not one bad thing has happened to me as a result of owning up.

"Overwhelm" may be inevitable, but by quickly recognizing it and performing a "Code O", you can minimize the time you spend there. The stabilization techniques will get you back on track, and in a position to eventually make changes that will prevent serious overwhelm in the future – and those changes will be the topics of subsequent columns.

References:

1.   Gallwey WT. *The Inner Game of Work: Focus, Learning, Pleasure, and Mobility in the Workplace*. Paperback ed. New York: Random House; 2001.
2.   Simon, P & Garfunkel,A.*The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy.* From the album "Parsley, Sage Rosemary and Thyme". 1966.
3.   Ringer M. Martha Treats - Newsletter # 57 at http://www.martharinger.com/Productivity ; Martha Ringer & Associates. 2006.
4.   Allen D. *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*. New York: Viking; 2001.
5.   Mayer JL. *If you haven't got the time to do it right, when will you find the time to do it over?* New York: A Fireside Book; 1990.
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Chapter 2

The Basics of Organizing your Work and Time

If you are like most academic physicians, you have too much to do and you feel over-busy. Although it may not be possible to eliminate the increasing external demands on your time or to stop the reduction in resources many of us are experiencing, you can improve your productivity by making the most of the time under your control.

I will describe five principles for organizing your work and time that will help you maximize productivity and minimize stress. These approaches are only one piece of the puzzle. Having **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant and **T**ime-bound – a.k.a. "SMART" -- goals is another; see Bickel, AP&S for more on goals. The third piece is maintaining a high energy level. "How" is no secret: get enough sleep, eat right, exercise, take breaks, stay in the moment, and maintain an optimistic and upbeat attitude (see Loehr and Schwartz, 2003).

Here are the five principles, along with concrete advice as to how to begin to implement each one.

1. Do it now. A common characteristic of highly productive people is the habit of dealing with tasks immediately (Gleeson, 1998). The typical response to this advice is to point out that it is impossible to do *everything* "now." True enough – but about 80% of what comes across your desk each day *can* be done now. To develop this habit, handle all 2-minute mail, e-mail, and phone messages immediately (Allen, 2001). The key is to look at these tasks *only* when you have time to deal with them. Eliminate the practice of opening and closing messages without responding. Wait until you have a small block of time (say, at least 10 minutes or so), and go through, one by one, *without skipping,* each piece of paper, message, or call slip, and finish each before moving on to the next.

What about the advice to organize tasks by priorities? Some experts recommend that tasks should be assigned a priority– and then you should only work on the "A's" until those are done. Priorities are important -- but to deal with 2-minute items that pour in everyday. Large backlogs of these "little" tasks sap your energy, take up space, and reduce your overall efficiency. Dealing with them right away will actually allow more time for high priority projects.

2. **Work from a clear space.** Start by clearing off your desk. Many academics seem to take perverse pride in a messy workspace. If mess is so common, why clean up? Working at a clear desk improves focus, which in turn improves efficiency and the quality of work. A clear desk declares that you have made a commitment to change. As you de-clutter the entire office, you will feel less overwhelmed, and you will waste less time looking for things.

Some academics who are highly productive appear to thrive in the midst of chaos – however, they are often more stressed than they need to be. For anyone with administrative

responsibilities (as head of a lab, division, department, committee, course, or other administrative endeavor), an organized workspace is critical.

The rule: nothing on your desk except a telephone, computer, an in/out basket, a coffee cup AND the one task / project you are working on at that moment. Banish pencils, pens, the tape dispenser and stapler, post it notes, reference books, to drawers or a credenza.

How to start when you don't have time? Take everything (except the aforementioned items) and *put them on the floor*. Your desk is now clear! The long-term solution is to find a home for everything, but for now, just clear off your desk. See how much better you feel about the work you doing, how much calmer you feel walking in to your office and seeing a clear space. Every night when it is time to go home, make sure everything is again off the desktop.

3. Keep track of *all* your work commitments.

"List aversion" is common, and for good reason. Lists scattered about (stuck on the computer monitor, tucked in your pocket, taped on the bookshelf above your desk) are more disorienting than helpful. Long lists of tasks for the day are usually destined to fail, because the list is long, and, the day never goes as planned.

Here is simple two-part system, which fulfills the cardinal rule of lists: "remember nothing." Part one: Keep a single list of every task that you cannot complete immediately (Mayer, 1991). Include phone calls, voice mail, verbal requests, actions items that come out of meetings, thoughts that come into your head – everything except new e-mails, which may stay in your inbox. A legal pad works well. When you finish a task, cross it off. When 2/3 of the items on the page are crossed off, tear off the page, re-record all the undone items onto the new page, and keep adding. This is a running list, not a daily list – it never ends, and everything you need to do is on it. Part two: make a folder for every project – that is, anything you are doing that has several steps, and accumulates paper. Put all the folders in the same drawer. For example, make one folder for each manuscript, committee, new lecture, trip etc.   A more sophisticated system can improve your effectiveness even more (Allen,2002).

4. Use a single master calendar.

This critical rule is too often ignored. Some people have an electronic calendar on their desktop computer, a paper-based calendar in their pocket, and a calendar at home, and, each calendar has different events listed. This is a sure fire way to miss deadlines, forget meetings, "double book," and generally feel disorganized. Pick one calendar as your master, and make sure every appointment is listed. Then you may have secondary calendars with subsets of events – for example, while there is every reason to have your home-related commitments on the master calendar there is probably no reason to have your complete work schedule on the family calendar at home.

5. Plan by the week.

Time management experts agree that planning for the week is best (Gleeson, Allen, Covey). Daily planning leads to frustration, because no day ever goes as planned; trying to plan for more

than a week is unrealistic because the landscape changes too quickly. The principles of weekly planning are to stay flexible (don't assign exact times to every task), and to not over-schedule (about half your "free" time will get eaten up with emergent work).

Here is how to get started: First, estimate how much time will be unscheduled each day. In addition to clinic, teaching sessions, committee meetings, etc., don't forget to block out time for eating, commuting, taking the kids to soccer, routine chores like emptying your in basket and e-mail, etc. Second, read through your entire master list of tasks, and look at each of your project folders. Make sure these are up to date, and, note the things you would like to do in the coming week, using your goals and priorities as a filter. Do not assign small tasks to specific times – just get to them when you can. For a task that will involve 30 or more minutes at a time, pencil into a time slot – but remember that you may need to move it elsewhere as the week progresses. That's it. The secret to this system is having a complete list of all your work, and reviewing the entire list each week.

Any time and work management system, integrated into your daily life, can improve your productivity. These five principles are a good place to start. In fact, if you implement even one of these suggestions you will become more productive. Later, read one or more of the referenced books. Get going. Good luck!

<div align="center">Books</div>

Kerry Gleeson. Personal Efficiency Program: How to get organized to do more work in less time, 2nd edition. Wiley & Sons, New York, 1998

David Allen. Getting Things Done: the Art of Stress Free Productivity.
Viking Pr, New York, 2001

Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, Rebecca R. Merrill**.** First Things First. Simon & Schuster, New York 1994

Jeffrey Mayer. If You Haven't Got Time to Do It the First Time, How Will You Find Time to Do It Again? Fireside, 1991

Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz. The Power of Full Engagement: managing energy, not time, is the key to high performance and personal renewal. Free Press, New York, 2003

Chapter 3

Priorities: how to decide what to do, and when.

Deciding what to do and when to do it is among the most challenge aspects of improving your personal productivity. Clearing your workspace, filing, even emptying your e-mail inbox is simple by comparison. Why? "How to decide what to do when" cannot be reduced to an algorithm. Days never turn out as predicted, so even advance planning does not insure successful completion of today's list. What you need is a framework and flexibility. I'll provide a framework, and you will need to provide the flexibility. In my next essay (yes, this is a teaser), I'll *execution* i.e. how to get done what you have decided needs to be done.

What to do: Develop an inventory of current projects

"The affairs of life embrace a multitude of interests, and he who reasons in any one of them, without consulting the rest, is a visionary unsuited to control the business of the world." – James Fenimore Cooper

When faculty talk about "priorities" they are usually referring to the achievement of a goal, such as a promotion, a research breakthrough, or a leadership position; and students are thinking of a degree, or a job. But you can't "do" promotion, scientific discovery, leadership, or a degree. Instead, you reach these goals by achieving a series of specific outcomes, which I am going to refer to as "projects" (Allen, 2001). Examples of projects are writing a paper, submitting a grant, preparing a lecture, planning a trip, buying new lab equipment, attending a leadership course, taking a course, writing a dissertation, and so on.

Step 1: Start with a full deck.

If I asked you to list your projects, the odds are you would respond with a short list of projects that support your major goals. But you have a large number of other projects to which you have committed to complete over the next few days, weeks or months: your son's birthday party, a new home computer purchase, next week's new student lecture, tomorrow's conference call preparation, and so on. Most people try to keep a "list" of their high priority projects in their head, and don't keep track of other projects at all – except when a deadline looms. Here is the recommendation (Allen, 2001): *keep a written list of all your projects.*

You may object that you can remember everything. I doubt it - most people have between 30 and 70 current projects, and the brain is not the safest storage medium. You may also object that the "high" priority and "low" priority projects don't belong on the same list.   But if you have committed to complete a project, no matter how small, the work required has to be considered when you are planning your time. For the same reason, you must include on the list your projects from "home" as well as "work." A third common objection is this: "…but the list will be so *long!"* Exactly. If you are really over-committed, the only way out is to face the facts, which leads us to Step 2.

Step 2: Remove the jokers from the deck.

Your project list should include *only* projects to which you are committed (over the next few days, weeks or months), and nothing else. Project lists tend to attract "jokers" – projects you hope you can do, or wish you could do, but which really could be deferred. The identification of jokers is not always easy, but the benefits are enormous. Here are two: first, your focus on completion will improve when your brain knows that every project on the list must be done; and second, if the final list appears to be undoable, you are in a better position to negotiate a reduction in your load.

Occasionally, a project should obviously be deferred (e.g. Climb Mt. Everest This Month). Sometimes, it is not at all obvious (e.g. responding to an RFP at the same time you are preparing an R01 submission). Your challenge is to differentiate "wants" from "needs." The latter have to be done, while the former could be done now, later or never.

In order to clarify the status of each project on your list, I suggest assigning each to one of these categories:

> 1) Required (e.g. getting board certified, changing the oil in my car)
> 2) Promised (to someone else)
> 3) Important for advancement in my career/life
> 4) Important for my career/life, but could be postponed
> 5) I'm just interested

Categories 1 and 2. Your only choices with these projects are to do them, delegate them, or negotiate a different agreement with your boss or the person to whom you made a promise. Again, ignoring these projects is not an option. Thus, you must understand the requirements of your job, and think carefully before you make a promise, no matter how small.

Category 3. Watch out! Danger lurks here. Many of us have a poorly defined idea of what is required for promotion or advancement. The common error is to believe that projects *you* think are interesting are required, when the people responsible for the advancement decisions do not. Especially when promotion is at stake, you must get feedback from experienced senior colleagues, and then take that advice seriously.

Categories 4 and 5. These categories represent your chance to reduce your work load. Decide which of these projects should be pruned from your active projects list. Don't delete them, but move them to a "someday" list. This list can be reviewed regularly, and you can promote projects to the active list when the time is right.

I've created (Step 1) a sample list modified from my own current project list (of 84 total projects), and edited it (Step2). Your list can be formatted however you like – note that I have divided the list into functional areas, and the projects are in alphabetical order, with "hard" due dates included in the project name. I've also used some sub-categories (paper, manuscript reviews) so that like items sort together.   You can store your list on paper, in a spreadsheet or other electronic document, or in a list program (e.g. Outlook Tasks).

The items marked by an asterisk (*) are the result of promises – and although I have to do them, I may not want to accept more discretionary assignments for now. I took 3 items off the list: the bone RFA was interesting but outside my core area (category 5), Smith is in no hurry for the consultation (either 4 or 5), and my spices will last a bit longer (a 4, because I care about my cooking!).

Scholarship/Research
Bone grant RFA decision
*Paper – PMS chapter **DUE May 1**
*Paper – Essay to AP&S **DUE Aug 15**
SWAN study: May agenda plan

Teaching & Clinical service
*Hot flash lecture for CME conference in April
*Jones dissertation committee
Patient Lab follow up

Service
*Manuscript review – ACOG Précis chapter
*Manuscript review – FSMB journal **DUE March 23**
NBME meeting panel prep **DUE March 27**
Search committee – review nominations
Smith – time management consultation

Personal
China trip vaccinations
FASA completion
High school graduation party plan
Insurance policy decision
Spice replacement (kitchen)
Taxes 2006 submission

When to do: Develop a weekly and a daily plan.

"It is surprising how much I can get done when I take enough time for planning, and it is perfectly amazing how little I get done without it." -- Frank Bettger

Regular planning is a must. I recommend the method described in *Goldilocks & the Three Bears*: not too much, not too little, but *just right*.

The week.
A weekly review of your work is recommended by most experts (Allen, 2001; Covey et al, 1994). The weekly review is a classic example of an activity that is easy to do, but is not easy to make habitual. The simplest form review includes reading through your project list and your calendar entries for at least the next month. For each, add and delete entries as appropriate. As you review, identify projects for focus on this week (and the specific tasks needed to move each

along), and any preparations needed for events on your calendar. Put these on a separate task list, and keep it in front of you during the week.

The day.

Many people believe they are supposed to spend most of their time doing high priority work. This belief is untrue, and would be impossible to carry out even if it were. Think for a moment about your personal life. Let's assume that your highest priority is spending time with family or friends. But if you spent all your personal time doing just that, the dishes and mail would pile up (and the bills never paid), your teeth would go unbrushed, and so on.

At work, the same is true (Allen, 2001). In addition to high priority projects, you have the other project to which you have committed, along with **new input** (mail, e-mail), **routine work** (going to clinic or class, taking call, signing forms); and **emergent work** that must be done right away (the call from your boss or the emergency room, the experiment that needs unexpected attention). In order for your life to work, you have to learn to juggle all three types.

The trick is to intentionally move between these categories over the course of the day. Here are some suggestions:

1) Identify a *short* list (no more than 5) of tasks that must be done before you go home that day – *at least* 1 should be related to a high priority project.

2) Complete at least one key task *before* you look at your email (Morgenstern, 2004).

3) Set time limits for e-mail and other routine work.

4) Alternate between high priority projects related work and the other categories.

Summary

These methods lead to more intentional approach to your work and your life. The up front work has huge payoffs: fewer missed deadlines, elimination of the stress of "what did I forget," and the knowledge that you know what really needs to be done.

References

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Bettger, Frank. (1947). *How I Raised Myself from Failure to Success in Selling*. New York, Fireside.

Covey, Stephen R, Merrill, Roger A, Merrill Rebecca R. (1994). *First Things First*. New York, Simon & Schuster.

Morgenstern, Julie. (2004). *Making Work Work.* New York, Fireside

Chapter 4

Execution: getting your work *done*

"Work, not *contemplating* work, is what brings satisfaction. – Atchity

In past columns, I've described several methods that support improved personal work productivity: among them, decluttering the work space, setting priorities, organizing work into projects, keeping lists, planning the week, , and so on. These methods are valuable, but none of them result in any actual work getting done.

Work is done when action is taken, and getting yourself to do so is the biggest productivity challenge of all.

Barrier to taking action include perfectionism, indecision, lack of information or tools, and of course, "not enough time." In this article I'll present guidelines for how to think about taking action, how to analyze your own procrastination, and some tricks for getting started.

Before I do that, I need to mention a belief that adds to the overwhelmed feeling many of us live with – and that itself makes taking action more difficult. This belief says that you should be able to finish your work. In fact, you cannot; work never ends. Thus, you must immediately give up the idea that you can "get caught up." be "on top of things," or be "in control."

<u>Principles</u>

1. Use *next action* thinking. The next action is the very next physical action you will take to move toward a desired outcome – call, e-mail, buy, talk to, write, read, search, dictate etc.. The outcome can be big or small – setting up transportation for an upcoming trip, putting on a bar mitzvah, or submitting an R01. In a nutshell, the next action is the next thing to do.

To demonstrate the power of the next action, here are three pairs of items –as you read them, decide which of the pair you would be drawn to do first.

      A. Plan trip for Hawaii meeting
      B. Search American Air web site for flight (business class) to Honolulu departing September 22 and returning October 1.

      A. Plan Bar Mitzvah
      B. Call ABC Caterers (123-222-9876) re: availability on October 15

      A. R01
      B. Write a first draft of specific aim 1

I'll assume that you chose "B" for each; so let's analyze why this was so. First, I hope you deduced that for each pair, "A" represented the desired outcome, and "B" was an action needed to achieve that outcome. Occasionally looking at the outcome on a list will lead you take action (for example, if the R01 is due next week!), but under most circumstances it is more likely to lead to feeling overwhelmed, and your brain – which prefers taking the path of least resistance – will prefer to do "call John for a lunch date."
The trick is to take your projects and identify the next small thing that needs to be done so that your brain will be attracted rather than repelled.

This concept is simple, but can take practice to get it right. The key is to define the next action at the right level of "granularity." Putting an almost-the-next-action on your list is almost as action stopping as using the outcome itself. Take the previous example of "call the caterer." If you don't know which caterer you want, or what the phone number is if you do, or the date of the event, your brain is more likely to avoid that item *because, as written, it cannot be done*. A real next action is something you can do without doing something else first, and as written, it should include enough detail so that when you look at it you don't have to think, or look elsewhere for information, but you can simply act.

Next actions should begin with an appropriate action verb. Poor choices include "think," "plan," and "decide." While these may be the things you need to do on a particular project, none is an *action*. Instead, figure out the next action you will take to achieve thinking, planning, or deciding. For example, before you can decide, you need to talk to your partner, or check the date of the next event, or estimate your cash flow for the next few months. In order to plan, you may need to write a list of pros and cons, or talk to someone, or get information from the web.

To test if you have identified a real next action, ask yourself: "Could I do this *right now* if I had the time."

2. Use – don't lose –short unscheduled bits of time. Many of us think that important work requires large amounts of uninterrupted time. Once you have gotten the hang of defining next actions, you will see that many of them can be completed in a matter of minutes – or even seconds. Stephanie Winston, in her field study of top level business executives, found that these CEOs commonly think of the day in 10 minutes segments) – and the aim is to get as much done in each segment as possible . If *you* start the day with a list of next actions that reflect your current work, you too will be able to fit actions into every opening in your day, no matter how small.

Remember that this approach applies to writing as well – even 15 minutes of writing, done every day, will lead to more productivity that "waiting until the time is right."

3. "Begin before you are ready."

Robert Boice observed in his work with academic faculty that they often put off writing, or preparing for teaching, because the "weren't ready." – that is, they didn't yet know what they were going to write, or how the class should be focused, or it was too far from the event, and so on. The advice to "begin anyway" is based on the idea that it is the act of working that allows you to discover what you think. This model, the basis of an effective method of teaching

writing, recommends that you start a writing project by *writing*, not "thinking." You can write anything that comes to mind, and as you see your thoughts develop on paper, you will see the inconsistencies, the gaps, the best organization, and then be able to edit to a final product. None of this is possible while the thoughts are still swirling around in your head.

The same approach works for other projects as well. Once you have an idea of what you want to accomplish, you will usually be better off by starting to take actions in that direction, rather than spending a lot of time planning the whole project in detail. Taking early action – before you are ready -- leads to a timelier, more nuanced plan, and helps you identify roadblocks and problems much earlier, so they can be handled without affecting the final deadline.

Tricks to Jump Start When You have Ground to a Halt

"A body in motion remains in motion." – Newton's first law of motion

Perhaps you have had the experience of feeling so overwhelmed at how much you have to do that you are unable to do anything. Here are some "tricks" to help get you started. Most of the time Newton's law will take over, and propel you forward.

- Set a timer for 5 minutes, and promise yourself you will work until then, but that you can stop if you like.

- Choose a task at random, and complete it.

- Keep a "reverse" list as you work: start with a blank sheet, and record each task that you complete.

- Put the materials for the task on your desk, and look through them.

- Maybe you need a break: get out of your office for 10 minutes or so and take a walk.\

Procrastination

What about tasks, or even whole projects, that you simply can't seem to face? Many books have been written on procrastination, and its psychological underpinnings. If you have this problem as a long standing pervasive problem that affects a large part of your life, you should consider professional evaluation - that is too serious to ignore. But if you tend to put off only certain kinds of tasks, but not most you can probably address the issue yourself.

Here are three questions you should ask when you seem to be putting it off a particular task:

1. **Is this task really the *very* next action?** If its not, remember you really can't do it yet. Sometimes the fix will be simple. Look up the phone number and you can make the call. Ask Bob for the updated draft, and you can finish the manuscript. Download the software upgrade, and the calculations can be done. Sometimes the answer is more complicated, as when you realize you don't actually know *how* to do the task. But, once you have faced this

fact, you can step back and make a plan to figure it out - which will lead to a new next action.

2. **Does this task (or project) really need to be done at all?** Answer "no" to this one, and you get to cross something off without doing anything! How could this happen? The project that that task is attached to is no longer relevant, or needs to be postponed. There is a simpler way to do the work, and this task is not needed. You have changed your mind about the task or project. Or, perhaps you already did the task and just forgot to cross it off . When I review my own action/task list, I find that at least 10% of the items can usually be deleted for one of these reasons.

3. **Am I experiencing an emotional block?** Perhaps you feel anxious about the prospect of calling a person on your list, or the bigger project to which the action is attached is overwhelming, or, you really dislike doing that task. There is no quick fix for these emotional blocks, but admitting to your self that this is problem often allows you to move forward.

Consistent execution is the key to achieving your priorities, and it remains the most challenging aspect of personal productivity. It becomes easier when you have defined all your desired outcomes, and have identified the next action for each. Having this list of predetermined actions allows you take advantage of small windows of opportunity during the day – a few minutes here, a half an hour there. Each successfully completed task increases your energy, making the next one even easier. You're on your way!

Chapter 5

Getting E-mail under Control

In my conversations and work with people about the stresses of work, complaints about e-mail often top the list. The reasons seem obvious: e-mails arrive in your inbox in an unending stream; the "you've got mail" type announcements that interrupt your work; more than "junk" – or worse; and in the midst of this large volume are important, and worse, URGENT! messages demanding your immediate attention. It is no surprise that many of us become overwhelmed, and let our inboxes grow to hundreds, or even thousands, of messages.

This is not a pretty picture – but it doesn't need to be this way. In this article I will discuss ways you can get your e-mail under control, and even come to view it as the valuable assistant it really is. We'll discuss your e-mail "environment" and how to make it less stressful, e-mail composing habits that you can use and perhaps pass on to the people who write to you most often, a filing system that helps keep your inbox thinner and your work better organized, and a method for processing new messages that gets things done and increases your energy.

The Environment

Here are four ideas to improve the environment. Get instructions specific to your e-mail program from the help section, or your friendly IT staffer.

First, turn off the notification sound announcing each e-mail. You do not need to know about messages the instant they arrive – the noise takes your focus off what you are doing, and leads to a scatterbrained feeling. Somewhere in your system there most likely is a toggle box that allows you to turn it off. If your work involves frequent urgent messages, check your inbox every half hour or so – but at a time of your choice, not the machines. If you get complaints about response time, ask that person to call you the next time an immediate response is required.

Second, create an automatic signature block. Nothing is more annoying that needing to contact by phone someone who has only e-mailed you, and having no easy way to get their number. When you create a new message, this block automatically is inserted, saving you countless keystrokes. It should contain at least your full name, phone number, fax number, and e-mail address. You can also include a mailing address, title, and anything else you like. One of my colleagues, for example, includes a rotating set of motivational quotations that always brighten up my day.

Third, learn the keyboard commands for the most common actions you use, including how to open, reply to, delete, and move your messages to another folder. This is ergonomically sound advice, and it will make your e-mail experience physically less stressful.

Fourth, if your e-mail is part of an institutional exchange server (i.e. your message are stored centrally on a network drive), you probably have limited cyberspace available for your messages. When that space becomes full, you may be prohibited from receiving or sending messages until you clear some space, or at least the system will slow down – and who wants to wait more than a second for the computer to respond to your keystroke! You prevent these events by keeping your primary network folders as small. Two folders that often don't get emptied regularly are "deleted" items and "sent" items. Empty them daily, and your system will run more smoothly.

Composition

E-mail is best used to provide either **factual information** ("The June 22nd molecular genetics journal club meeting will be held in Room 101 of the Smith Research Building"), or **to ask a straightforward question** ("When is the next molecular genetics journal club?"). E-mail is the wrong medium with which to express negative emotions, or to raise personally or politically sensitive issues. Institutional e-mail is discoverable, and more importantly, your tone is easily misjudged. Deliver these kinds of messages in person, or by telephone.

E-mail messages should be brief, almost never more than one screen in length. This medium does not lend itself to comfortable reading of long messages.

Make the subject line informative. A blank subject line, or one that says "hi" wastes the recipients time. Instead say: <Details of the June 22nd journal club enclosed>; or <Today's pizza lunch is cancelled>. This kind of subject line allows the recipient to make an informed decision about when to read (for the first example), or whether to open at all (for the second).

Think carefully before copying others. Much of your own inbox is filled with messages copied to you that you don't need to see.

Filing

To keep your inbox empty, you need folders to store messages you need to save. Here are three folders that most people will find useful.

"Waiting for" is a folder used to store messages that you have sent OTHER people, and for which you are awaiting a reply. This folder should be a top level folder, on the same level as your inbox. Here is how to use: You send a message to Jane, asking for the date and time of the next molecular biology journal club. After you send the "send" button, go to the sent items folder, "grab" the message, and drag it to the Waiting for folder. Now you don't need to rummage through dozens of sent items to know who you am waiting to hear from; instead, you have a simple list to review periodically.

"Projects" is a main line folder kept in the part of your system that is separate from the main inbox server space. In Outlook, this section is called Personal Folders, stored either on the hard drive, or on a separate, larger server space. The Projects folder is a place to create subfolders in which to store email associated with individual work projects.

Here is an example:

        -Projects
                - Journal club meeting plan
                - Lab assistant hire
                - Lecture preparation for May 20
                - R01 due JUNE 1

Note that the names of the work activities ("projects") are in alphabetical order, so the name must be meaningful, always starting with a key noun. Use this same organizational approach to paper files and virtual documents associated with these same projects. Paper folders for each project are stored together in alphabetical order in a single file drawer, and virtual project folders are subfolders of a Project folder (for example, in MyDocuments). Name each folder (e-mail, paper, virtual) with the *same project* name – and you will never misplace project materials again.

"Reference" is a third mainline folder for messages that you want to keep, but that are *not* part of any active project work. The internal organization of this folder can be organized by topical subfolders, or not. Desktop search engines (Google, Copernicus, etc) are now so fast that you can find most needed old e-mails quickly, allowing you to "dump" these messages in to a single file.

Work style

Here is where the rubber meets the road: how to get through that inbox quickly and with minimal stress.

Rule one. Complete at least one important task each day *before* you look at e-mail. For example, edit the abstract for the poster submission that is due next week, or call your mentor to arrange a meeting to discuss your dissertation, or review your notes for the lecture you are giving later in the day. I was skeptical of this trick when I first heard it, but having used it for several months I guarantee that it changes the way you think about both your e-mail and your day.

Rule two. Set a limit for the amount time you will spend on e-mail at a session – 10 minutes, 30 minutes, two hours. The amount of time depends on your day and needs; the crucial thing is to not get caught up in a never-ending session. Use a kitchen time to help you to stop when you plan to. This method not only preserves your sanity, and prevents your day from being consumed with e-mail, but it also improves your efficiency in getting e-mail done - your mind responds to the time limit by working faster in order to meet the deadline.

Rule three. Work through your messages one at a time, starting with either the most recent or the oldest– and NO SKIPPING! At first this sounds painful, as you will be forced to confront issues and tasks that you would prefer to put off. However, the psychological effect is just the

opposite. By the very act of dealing with these unpleasantries, you eliminate the anxiety that builds when you ignore them. Your energy and mood actually *increase* as you plug away, one at a time.

Rule four. For each message, do one of the following: delete, file (reference or a project file), respond / do the requested task, or defer to a later time. The last option causes the most problems. Try to minimize the number of deferred messages. Work really hard at figuring out a way to respond immediately. If you must defer, decide exactly what you need to do next in order to be able to respond, and put the e-mail in a place where you will not forget it. In Outlook, some options are to create a "Action needed" folder, convert the e-mail into a task, or "flag" the message" and leave it in the inbox.

Getting started if your inbox is REALLY full.

The goal of this system is to deal with today's e-mails *today*, and to get your inbox as close to empty as possible by the time you stop working. If you have hundreds of messages in your inbox now, that may seem like a distant goal.

Here is how to make this goal a reality now. Create a second inbox folder, titled: INBOX messages prior to <specific date>. Use a date of no more than two weeks before today. Move all earlier messages into the new folder. Set aside an hour or two to process the messages from the last two weeks that remain in the real Inbox. Starting the next day, finish everything that arrives that day.

In order to deal with the backlog in the other Inbox, spend 10 to 20 minutes per day dealing with the old messages, one at a time, beginning with the most recent. In my experience, the vast majority of messages that are more than 6 weeks old are "dead" and do not require responses.

Conclusion:
E-mail, despite its bad reputation, has for the most part made our work easier. If we did not have it, we would spend more time playing telephone tag, walking to our fax machines, and waiting impatiently for information from others. If you implement all or some of the habits and techniques I have described, I believe you will come to appreciate the value of this medium once again.

Chapter 6

Becoming a productive academic writer.

Academic success is greatly dependent on high quality, high quantity writing. The *quality* of your writing depends on having good and important ideas, properly designing, carrying and analyzing studies (for data based work), learning to write clearly and concisely, and getting your work published in high quality places. This article is *not* about these issues.

Rather, it tackles the issue of the *quantity* of writing. Too many times, faculty members do high quality work that never sees the light of day. They get all the way through the data analysis stage for data based work, or the literature review and thinking stage for reviews and chapters, but the final manuscript is never produced.

The common name for this problem is "writer's block." Having writer's block is a cause of anxiety and depression at best, and is career threatening at worst. Fortunately, there are effective methods to fix this problem. Here are a few of them.

Write to think.

A common cause of writer's block is the feeling that nothing can be written until the ideas are perfected. This is utter nonsense – the exact opposite is the case. Most experts in the "how" of writing agree that you don't really know exactly what you think until you write down your first thoughts, look them over, revise, and revise again.

Conceptually, you must separate the act of generating ideas (and words) from the act of editing[1-3]. This business of just writing down all you ideas about a project, in no particular order will seem "messy" and non linear, and may seem out of place in the world of science where linearly and logic are idealized.   But for writing it is the best way to start.

Here is a formula you can use to get this first part, the generational process started. Most medical and scientific writing has as its purpose trying to answer a question. To get started on your piece, write down all your ideas about what the problem is, what you think about the answer, and why you think it. For example, the question might be "what is the best way to manage herpes simplex infection during labor." Your may think, as you start, that the best approach is to always perform a cesarean section, and you think this based on a review of the literature (if you are writing a review article), or the results of the randomized trial you just completed (for a data driven paper), or based on your experience (for an editorial). Once you have written down all the ideas you can come up with for these three components (the question, the answer, and the evidence), you can take all the copy, put it in the right order, check for logic, completeness and consistency; and finally for grammar and style.

Establish a comfortable, well-lit place to do most of your writing.

Experienced, productive academics know that time on a plane is more productive than time in the office. Sadly, it would be a prohibitively expensive proposition to fly several times a week, just for the purpose getting more writing done. (Although you can talk to your chairperson…)

Instead, my recommendation is that you try to simulate the conditions found on an airplane trip:

- Minimize distractions (forward phone to voice mail or a secretary, and shut the door)
- All the tools you need at hand
- Physically comfortable chair and writing surface
- Refreshments!

You should consider the merits of doing most of your writing somewhere other than your office. With a tablet or a laptop, you can really go anywhere. To make this a real commitment (and to fool others) put an appointment on your calendar for a meeting with "Dr. M.S." (myself…) and leave at the appointed time.

Engage in *regular brief* writing sessions; the corollary, avoid "binge writing."

"Regular" means at least 4 to five times per week, up to daily – the same schedule as for aerobic exercise! The criterion for "brief" depends on the role of writing in your career, and what else you need to do every day. For most academic faculty members, who have work in the clinic, lab, and classroom, 30 to 90 minutes per day is about right. (In contrast, if you make your living as a novelist, you had better spend at least 4 hours a day).

Most people are incredulous when hearing about this approach because of the widely held belief that in order to write productively one must have long blocks of uninterrupted time, and, the seeming unassailability of the idea that writing should be of the highest priority.
What is the evidence for this approach?

Robert Boice, an academic psychologist who specialized in faculty development, was particularly interested in the issue of faculty writing productivity .[4] He observed that while faculty members understood that publishing was a critical element of the promotion decision, most spend almost no time at all writing in the first three years of their appointment. He determined to study this problem, and to find a method of "treatment."

He began his work by interviewing a large number of professional writers. He learned that the near universal habit among this group was to establish the habit of writing for a set period of time each day, and, to avoid exceeding that length of time when possible.

Based on that "expert" evidence, Boice conducted a series of small intervention studies, in which faculty members with writing blocks were assigned to an experimental program, which

involved writing to meet a goal of 3 pages per day, five days a week, or to follow their usual writing approach[5]. The result of each of the trials was the same. Almost every person, when in the experimental condition, produced the expected amount of writing, and in the control condition, they did not.

Boice also conducted a prospective observational study among new tenure track faculty members at his university, by assessing their writing style, attitudes, and output for the first year of their appointment[6]. The participants who used a "binge writing" approach -- that is, waiting for long blocks of time before trying to write -- were usually *not* productive. Faculty members who used this approach also usually rated writing as a "high priority" task. In spite of this view; this group was unproductive based on prospective monitoring for one year. In contrast, the small group of faculty members who spontaneously used the regular brief session approach was highly productive during the year, and, this group generally rated writing as a "moderate priority."

In response to the criticism that the writing produced during short "forced" writing sessions would be devoid of creativity and good ideas; he designed a study to test whether that was true. In this study he found that in fact, the treatment group produced twice as many ideas per session as the spontaneous group.

This approach is also advocated by Bolker[2], and Fiore[7], in their books aimed at graduate students trying to write a dissertation – I recommend each of these as practical references that are useful for all writers.

Here are some "tricks" to help you integrate writing into a busy academic day:

- o Start with 15 minutes a day, then increase in 15 minutes increments up as you become more comfortable.
- o Write for 15 - 30 minutes first thing in the morning, before doing anything else at work. Then, you have been successful no matter what else happens.
- o Carry paper and with you at all times, so that you can take advantage of spare moments

Do not exceed 2 hours per session (except in the case of an emergency deadline).

Boice observed in several settings that when faculty members greatly exceeded their daily planned time, they tended to "rest," i.e. avoid writing somewhat in proportion to the overage. Sometimes longer is unavoidable, but usually it is not. Also, some people tolerate longer sessions; if your limit is 4 hours, go for it. But, pay attention to be sure you can really sustain than amount of daily writing regularly.

Monitor your output.

Monitoring provides a visual record of your success, and that helps to motivate continued performance [8]. It's the same principle used by parents and grade school teachers everywhere –giving a child a star on a chart posted on the refrigerator for every day she makes her bed improves the odds the behavior will recur.

Here's how to do it:

- Decide on a daily goal, either in time or page output. Be conservative. It is better to start with, for example, either a 30-minute, or a 2 pages, goal to begin.
- Record the daily result in a format you like.
- Post the results in your workspace.
- Monitoring can be made even more effective by showing your record to a colleague or coach on a regular basis.

Make writing a moderate, not a high priority.

This final advice sounds counter-intuitive, but recall the evidence from Boice's observational study. It seems that when we make any activity a "high" priority, the odds that we will actually do it decrease. The most obvious examples are resolutions to lose weight, begin an exercise program, or pay off credit card debt – each an outcome that is highly desirable, but which is rarely achieved.

Here is the dynamic set in motion when we make writing a high priority: we go on to imagine that it must be done perfectly, and this is quickly followed by the need to have a long period of uninterrupted time in which to do the writing. This is a set up for failure, since the big block of time rarely materializes. In contrast, if writing is not so important, then it need not be done so perfectly, and throwing down some words quickly for half an hour a day seems reasonable.

Boice suggests saying to yourself: "*[I will treat writing] as the nuisance it often is … as something that should be done, albeit grudgingly, in brief session amidst more important daily tasks.[4]*"

Summary

I am imagining a reader saying to herself at this point, "I bet she doesn't do all these things all the time…" He would be correct, and, a realist rather than a cynic. No method of organization or technique for using your time will create perfect world. The goal is to do your best, and know how to get back on track quickly when you fall off.   Try just one of these approaches, and see if it helps you approach writing more calmly, and more regularly.

1. Elbow P. *Writing with power : techniques for mastering the writing process*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press; 1998.
2. Bolker J. *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day.* New York: Henry Holt and Company; 1998.
3. Howard VA, Barton JH. *Thinking on Paper*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc; 1986.
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7. Fiore NA. *The NOW Habit: a strategic program for overcoming procrastination and enjoying guilt-free play.* New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putman; 1989.
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Chapter 7

A Plan for Professional Reading

… the student-practitioner requires at least three things with which to stimulate and maintain his education, a notebook, a library, and a quinquennial braindusting.

–Sir William Osler, 1905[1]

Frustrated with the task of "keeping up" with the literature? You are not alone - this is a universal concern among faculty and trainees with whom I work. While there is no magical solution to this problem, here some observations and a framework to get you started. Please note that although most of the literature addresses the information needs of clinicians, this plan is relevant for scientists as well.

SOME OBSERVATIONS

First, the good news: as physicians and scientists, we are intensely curious about almost everything. The bad news: we cannot read every article of interest. A recent analysis found that a primary care practitioner would need to spend almost 630 hours per month to "keep up" with the relevant published literature[2]. We need to develop realistic expectations about the amount of reading we can do.

Second, let's conceptualize "reading" as "knowledge acquisition" in whatever format it is available. This includes traditional journals, monographs, and textbooks; virtual versions of the same; and summary /reviews, like Up-To-Date.

Third, "reading" is not a homogenous activity. We read for a variety of reasons: to get information regarding a specific patient, to address a specific teaching or research problem; to maintain our fund of knowledge in our area of expertise; or to learn a new subject. Each involves a different approach.

Fourth –please read this aloud three times -- receiving a journal does not obligate you to read it. We accumulate many journals along the way: some we have carefully chosen (and pay for); some are included with memberships in professional organizations; and some are sent to us free -- just because!   Planning to read them all would be analogous to planning to watch every program that comes into your home courtesy of your cable TV provider. As my colleague Mark Wilson, M.D. puts it, *"don't let the postman determine what you will read."*

Fifth, if something earth-shattering is discovered in your field, you will most likely read about it in the newspaper the next day. Enough said.

A FRAMEWORK

Our challenge is to define our individual needs, efficiently filter the daily tidal wave of information, review the resulting information at the appropriate level of detail, and retain what we need to in a simple system that allows rapid retrieval.

The first step, defining your needs, is critical, since all else flows from this decision[3]. The following is one way of thinking about your information needs.

"Just in time"

This is information you need to solve an immediate problem, and in the clinical arena these problems are referred to as "clinical questions" – that is, specific questions that arise in the care of a specific patient. This concept can be extended to the research and teaching setting as well.

Record these questions immediately as they arise – so carry a small notebook or index card or PDA in your pocket. Just in time learning should be done as soon as possible – preferably the same day. I recommend doing this even if you have many other important things on your plate. Answers to most specific questions can be found fairly quickly – or at least you can get started quickly, and you will derive enormous satisfaction in dealing with them right away. You must resist the feeling that all possible relevant information should be reviewed- in other words, perfection is not helpful.

Identify sources that you will routinely use, and learn effective ways to search them. On-line sources offer speed and comprehensiveness – as a place to start, Alper has collected a large number of useful links for clinicians at http://www.myhq.com/public/a/l/alper/.

Ely et al describe a system for organizing clinical questions and their answers using an Excel spreadsheet, which allows him to search, sort and summarize the information he has gathered[4].

"Refurbishing"

In addition to keeping up with new information as it appears, consider doing periodic (e.g. at least once a quarter) in-depth reviews of a segment of your current knowledge base[5]. As a personal example, I was recently asked to give a talk on postmenopausal bleeding. This is a "bread and butter" topic for a practicing gynecologist, and I was tempted to base the talk on my prior knowledge and experience. Instead, I (thankfully) decided to review the recent literature. Although the basic principles had not changed, the review reminded me of details I had forgotten, and, as a bonus, I found some new studies that not only made the talk better, but also improved the care I provide to my patients.

Select topics for refurbishing based on an objective method; otherwise, you are likely to select only topics that are of interest, and you may fail to include the ones you see most often. For example, ask your billing office to send you a list of your top 10 CPT code diagnoses; or, for a couple of weeks keep a list of daily diagnoses and procedures.

"Someday, Maybe:"

This is information that interests you, but it not directly related to any current research, teaching topic or area of clinical practice.

Usually: Resist thorough reading. Scan abstracts only. File quickly in a separate file labeled: "things I might be interested in pursuing someday" – or something like that. On a Post-It™ jot down the reason the article caught your eye, and stick to the front. Periodically, look through this file – purge or elevate to a new learning project. .

But sometimes: reading outside your field of interest can be enormously valuable – in fact, incorporation of ideas from other fields is a common way that new advances are made. The trick is to be parsimonious.

"Keeping up"

Getting the new information you need to stay current in your field is the type of reading that can quickly pile up (literally) if not actively managed[3]. First, you should filter your reading for this purpose to high quality articles as defined by the principles of evidence based medicine. Then, don't read (most of) these articles in detail. Instead, skim the abstract so that you are aware of the general drift of the article, then either (for most) file in a system that allows rapid retrieval later when you need it, or, (for the few you want to read in detail) add to a "grab and go" folder that available to take with you to activities that are likely to involve waiting time (the dentist's office, an airplane trip, etc.)

To find the information you need to keep up, you will naturally begin with the journals that regularly show up in your office. Increasingly, many journals also now include a limited number of abstracts of relevant high quality articles found in other journals. Rather than relying solely on the journals you personally receive, consider using one or more online "push" services. There are three approaches.

The first is to sign up to receive the table of contents of individual journals. You may want to choose from among both subscription based journals (like the Lancet) and free offerings such as the CDC on-line journal Emerging Infectious Diseases (http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/eid/index.htm).

Second, you can subscribe to a service that sends you citations based on specific key words you have submitted. A link to the on-line abstract will be provided, and from the linked page you can usually directly download the citation into your reference manager programs (Endnote, Reference Manager, etc). If available, a link to the full text may be included. Free key word based services are offered by JAMA (http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/alerts) and Science (http://www.sciencemag.org/help/citetrack/).   This kind of "push" is best for relatively narrow areas of interest. For example, I currently use this type of "push" for two areas I write about: menopausal hormone therapy, for which I use the keyword phrase "women's health initiative;" and PMDD or PMS, using those terms directly.

Third, a more comprehensive type of "push" surveillance is illustrated by two free services aimed at generalist clinicians, *bmjupdates*[+] , from a partnership of the Cochrane Collaboration and McMaster University (http://bmjupdates.mcmaster.ca/index.asp) and InfoPOEMS

(http://www.infopoems.com/). Each reviews are large number of journals, and "pushes" summaries of highly rated articles to subscribers.

Friedland et al describe a similar approach to finding evidence based information on the Internet at http://books.mcgraw-hill.com/medical/lange/ebmbook/ch06.html .

FINDING TIME TO READ

In a previous article (AP&S Dec 2004 p2-3) I describe a method of writing productivity, supported by experimental evidence, which involves working in regular brief sessions rather than occasional long sessions ("binges"). The same approach should work for reading to keep up and to refurbish, and so I recommend reading in several 15 to 30 minute sessions over the course of the week. To repeat, "just in time" questions should be answered (briefly) in *real* time.

Occasionally you may spend an entire day – or more – just reading. In fact, this may be the best way to become immersed in a new research problem or clinical topic, or to get up to date on an old topic. Just don't think of this approach as your only option.

*Sir William Osler, **A farewell address to American and Canadian medical students, 1905. source: Aequanimitas and Other Addresses** Third Edition, February 1932*
 (accessed on line 12/20/2004 /das/stat/view/39857546-2/union?nid=143903&sid=0&pos=new)

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Chapter 8

Time mapping: learning to "tell time"

Many of us who have trouble getting things done have a problem "telling time." Consider these examples. Have you ever said to yourself "I'll get that done over the weekend - I have lots of time then." But when the weekend comes, you discover that in fact, the weekend is already full. Or, you have been asked to write a chapter; you look ahead to the weeks near the deadline and see "nothing scheduled," and you cheerfully agree. Of course, as the deadline approaches, you find that you are (predictably) swamped. Finally, have you looked at what appears to be a fully scheduled week, and thought to your self, panic rising, "I don't have time to get *anything* done!" In this essay, I will describe techniques that will help you learn to tell time so that you can get big projects (writing, grants, budgets, etc) done in the midst of all the other urgent, important thinks you must do every day.

The basic time grid / map

The basic technique was first described by Neil Fiore in *The Now Habit*. We'll start with this original method, and then add other ways that it can be used.

1. Create a grid of the week, or print a week view from your electronic calendar. The days should be divided into 30 or 60 time slots.   The grid should include seven days, and all the hours you will be awake (Figure).

2. Using a pencil or neutral colored marker, mark out the time you need for the following:

> Time committed to meet with others (meetings, conference calls, class, clinic, operating room, etc.
> Time committed to eating/cooking, exercising, commuting, taking the kids to school or soccer practice - all the time you spend in routine daily activities that is not available for anything else.

3. Add in buffers between activities. A couple of years ago I started a new position which required me to meet with people all over campus. In the first month I came to work on a Monday morning, and discovered I had 3 back to back meetings in buildings that were one mile away from each other. It didn't work very well! Ever since, I have made a point of blocking off 30 minutes on either side of meetings outside my building. I don't always need that much time, but it ensures that there will be time to travel

without rushing. Avoiding back to back meetings anytime, even if in the same room, gives you time to breath.

4. Depending on your life, some portion of that "free" time will be needed for emergent work that shows up during the day. The emergency room calls you to come and see a patient, the boss drops in and asks for a report by the end of the day, you receive many more phone calls that usual, and so on. Although none of these specific things are expected, it turns out that most people have approximately the same average amount of unexpected events per day - thus the amount of time is *not* unexpected. Thus, depending on your job, you should block off between 25% and 75% of this "free time" in anticipation that it will be used. (And, there is nothing more wonderful that the gift of extra time - so if the emergencies don't materialize, that's great.)

You don't need to write on this grid *what* you will be doing during these blocked off times, although you may. The end result of this grid is the identification of all the time that is not committed, and that is potentially available for either work or play.

You can benefit even if you stop at this point: just being aware of where the openings are in the week will lead to improved focus during those times.

Time blocking – basic grid

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
6:00	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
7:00	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
8:00					■	■	■
9:00	■		■		■		
10:00			■	■			
11:00			■				
12:00	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
1:00						■	■
2:00			■	■	■		
3:00	■		■		■	■	
4:00	■		■	■	■	■	
5:00	■		■				
6:00	■	■	■	■	■		
7:00	■	■	■	■		■	■
8:00						■	■
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							

<u>Technique #1: Add personal time</u>

Fiore's major contribution to time blocking methodology is to require the addition, at this point, of non-work personal, recreational, and social activities. He worked with graduate students who were unable to complete their dissertation. He observed that these students spent a large part of their day worrying about writing, and not only did they *not* write, they did not do anything else. The result was constant worry, no relaxation, and eventual burnout. His first brilliant idea was to have these students to put rejuvenating activities on the calendar at the beginning of the week, *before* thinking about when they might write.

This technique is one of the ways you can create balance in your life. Time for family, and especially time for ourselves, often ends up at the bottom of the priority list. This method puts these activities at the top.

Time blocking – add personal time

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
6:00	meditate						
7:00							
8:00						work out	work out
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
1:00	work out	work out					
2:00							
3:00							
4:00							
5:00							
6:00							dinner
7:00				art			with
8:00	movie			exhibit			friends
9:00							
10:00							
11:00	Reading	for	pleasure				

<u>Technique #2: Set a time to go home.</u>

This time take a *thick permanent marker,* and draw a line at the time you will stop work for the day. Aim to stop when the time comes on most days. Yes, occasionally you will need to go over, but make sure you do it for essential tasks, not merely because there is more you could do.

Parkinson's Law states that "work expands to fill the time allotted." If you set no end time, your work will simply go on, another cause of burnout.

Technique # 3: "unschedule"

Fiore's second contribution is the idea of "unscheduling;" that is, recording, rather than planning, the time actually spent in desirable activities. He asked students not to schedule writing time, but rather to record on the grid any time they did 30 minutes or more of writing. This method helps reduce resistance to writing, and, instead makes a game of it.

This monitoring technique can be used for any habit you are trying to establish. For this purpose, use your favorite bright color so that these times jump out from the time map. In addition to doing more writing, you might monitor e-mail use in order to spend less time. Exercise, professional reading, and planning /thinking time are all worthy candidates for this method.

Technique #4: Target open blocks for specific work

First, identify between one and three major projects you want to work on for the week. Then, look at your weekly map. Find the openings of 60 minutes or more, and pencil in (really – you need to use pencil so that you can erase and make changes during the week) – the name of each project into one of these slots. Because your week may not go the way it is planned (!), you may end up moving to another time, or even to another week.

You can also target other blocks of open time to do high priority tasks. Circle the time, and write in a short list of tasks to complete in that block. Setting the goal of completing the entire list in that block increases the odds that you will finish.

The point with this method is not that you will always do the work when planned, but that you have looked ahead of time to see if there is time for each of the major projects you have planned. Having the project penciled in also increases the odds that you will work on it if that time stays available.

Don't make the mistake of putting a recurrent appointment on your calendar for project work, and then ignoring it most days. On the other hand, if you find that there is a day with open time in most weeks, and if you are religious about keeping that appointment with your self, give it a try.

Technique #5: Keep a time log

With a pencil or pen, jot down the main thing you did in each 15 or 30 minutes time slot

for the day. Keep for the whole week, and include the evenings and week end.

You may think you know how you spend your time, but if you have not done this exercise, you probably underestimate the time you waste. I don't mean time that you spend thinking, or planning, developing valuable relationships with your co-workers, playing with your kids, or relaxing. I mean time spend surfing the web, reading the newspaper, cleaning out a drawer when you had not planned to do it, or watching TV you don't even like.

– identity / target "free" time;   – record writing 30+,

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
6:00	meditate						
7:00							
8:00		abstract		editing		work out	work out
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
1:00	work out	work out					
2:00						pay bills	
3:00							
4:00							
5:00							
6:00							dinner
7:00				art			with
8:00	movie	Call Mom	lecture prep	exhibit			friends
9:00							
10:00							
11:00	Reading	for	pleasure				

(handwritten: "NO WORK" above Sun column)

A warning: be prepared to find that some days – or in the entire week – you may have little or no open time. Don't let this knowledge lead to paralysis. Instead, realize that knowing in advance when your chances are to get at least a little work done can lead to focus and efficiency. Also, on this kind of day, look carefully at your scheduled activities (from step 2), and see if there is something you can shorten, delete or defer to another time. For example, maybe there is a routine meeting that does not really require your attendance this week, or, you could take a shorter lunch one day.

Begin mapping your weeks, and try these techniques one at a time. Use the ones that work for you, and see if you don't find an increased sense of calm and control.

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Fiore, Neil. *The Now Habit, 3rd edition.*

Chapter 9

Interruptions

If you have never interrupted anyone, please raise your hand. Even though I can't see you, I am confident that there are no hands being raised. We all interrupt, even though most academic folks would say that interruptions are one of the most productivity-robbing events they face. Let's start our analysis of how to deal with interruptions by considering them from the point of view of the interrupter, then the interrupted.

Think about the reasons you choose to interrupt others. I'm guessing that these include: You believe the matter is critically important to the other person, or, to you; you are under a deadline, and need the other person's input; you just want to get something done, and interrupting is the quickest way to get the information you need; and occasionally you may just feel in the mood to chat. Perhaps you try to avoid interrupting, but when the door to the office of the person you need something from is open, it seems all right to do it.

Now think of the reasons why you don't like being interrupted: The interruption breaks your concentration, and you either forget what you are doing, or you make extra mistakes; you are under deadline, and the interruptions eats up precious time; the interruption was really not urgent for either you or the interrupter; or the interruption is a social interaction that occurs too often, or goes on too long. Sometimes, however, the biggest problem with an interruption is the emotional reactions it engenders. You are annoyed, irritated, furious—and recovering from that state takes time.

I hope you can see that interruptions are a complex business, and one or two "tricks" will not address the problem. Before we talk about different types, and some ways to deal with each, here are three underlying assumptions: (1) Most interruptions are just new work coming to you at a time you didn't plan. You need to figure out a way to minimize distraction, but still get the work; (2) most of your work can be successfully done in and among interruptions; long stretches of uninterrupted time are needed only for certain kinds of work; and (3) unless you are the only transplant surgeon—or family doctor—in town, you don't need to make yourself available 24/7/365.

The Interruption Log

If interruptions are a major problem, consider keeping an interruption log for a day or two. Simply keep a running list of the time, person, and reason for the

interruption for the day. Later, you can analyze each into the categories below, and figure out which strategies you need to work on first.

Interruption by E-mail

E-mail can be a bigger source of interruptions these days than people are, but luckily, you have control over the solutions to this problem. First, automatic notification of incoming e-mails (by a sound, or change in cursor, or pop-up box) should be turned off. Consult the help section of your e-mail program, or ask your local IT person for instructions. Second, except when you are working on e-mail, do not have the inbox open on your screen. Better choices are your calendar, your task list ((if it is electronic), a picture of your family or pets—or turn off the screen.

Insidious ("intended to entrap") describes the approach most of us use: looking at e-mail first thing in the morning. Have you ever found yourself looking up at the clock and realizing that you are still "doing" e-mail three hours later? Instead, start the day by finishing one important task, and only then look at your e-mail. You will feel productive from completing the task, and the addictive quality of e-mail will diminish. Finally, do e-mail in short batches throughout the day, and don't look at it in between. Set a timer, and stop when the bell rings.

Interruption by Important, but Non-Urgent, Matters

The goal with these interruptions is to minimize them by making agreements with the people you work with to contact you in noninterrupting ways. Set up regular meetings with support staff, lab members, writing collaborators, and others. Agree that any items that aren't urgent will be brought to this meeting, and arrange the frequency to match the need—for example, daily with a secretary, and weekly with the lab group. Set a regular time for taking calls from these people for the things that can't wait for the regular meeting.

Ask your colleagues to send you e-mails instead of dropping by, and then follow through by getting through all your e-mail every day. Productivity expert David Allen and his wife e-mail each other with all family "business" matters—even if the two are working side by side in the same room—and save time together for leisure and other activities. Finally, remember that these interruptions are just "more work," and try to eliminate the negative emotions that they raise.

Interruption by Important, Urgent Matters

The most important step in dealing with this type of interruption is determining if it really is urgent. Assess it and then decide what to do. The trickiest part is to

stop any rising negative emotion in its tracks so you can focus all your energy on the work.

Then, before you move to take action on the thing that interrupted you, make a note of what you will do next when you come back to the job that was interrupted. Put that work in the center of your desk, or the top of your "pending work" tray so that it does not leave your mind.

Do the other things. Then reasses the priorities. If appropriate, go back to the previously interrupted work.

Interruption by Unimportant, Non-Urgent Matters

Casual conversation is the most common example of this category. Good social interactions with colleague and staff are critical to your success and happiness in the workplace. The trick is to avoid spending an inappropriate amount of time at this activity. Most of us instinctively know when a conversation is too long—but not everyone does. Your challenge is to know how to elegantly cut the conversation short, without damaging the relationship. "Tricks" that may help are to stand and meet the person at your doorway—usually this shortens the conversation—or, offer to stop by the other person's office later—you can then control your departure more easily.

An Algorithm

When you are interrupted by someone else, you don't have any way of knowing immediately to which category the interruption should be assigned. Here is an approach:

- Describe your current availability in a friendly, but clear way.
- Ask what you are being asked to do.
- Assess the urgency and importance—this will usually be obvious if you listen to your internal voice.
- Decide whether to stop and deal with the issue now, or tell the person when he or she can expect you to do so.

An example:

Tom: "Bob, I need to talk to you right away."
You: "Tom, my dictation for today's clinic needs to be finished in an hour, so I have less than five minutes available right now. What do you need—is five minutes enough time?
Tom: "I need your input on one part of my personal statement for promotion—it will probably take 15 minutes."

You: "Great—let's find a time later this afternoon to get together."

Interruption by Yourself

You probably interrupt yourself dozens, or even hundreds, of times a day. As you are working on your R01 application, you remember that you need to pick up milk on the way home from work tonight, or a great idea for the second R01 pops up. You are performing a focused literature search on migraine headache, the topic of your upcoming lecture, but when an article in the search results on chronic hypertension piques your interest, you click on that instead. You have made a short, prioritized list of tasks for the day, but someone pops by your office with a simple, quick, but not urgent, task and you go do that instead. Or you are distracted by anxiety, or feeling overwhelmed, or some other emotional state.

As always, recognition of what is going on is the first step. Keep a pad next to your current work, and write down any idea or "to-do" that comes up; then go back to your work. Ask yourself "Is this the best/most important thing for me to be doing at this moment?" before you pick any "to-do." Be aware of your emotions, and if they are bothersome, take a moment to breathe and settle down.

When You Really Need Uninterrupted Time

The culture of most of the academic instituions I know encourages constant availability, and many academics have an internal need to be available regardless of the culture. It does not need to be that way. With very few exceptions, most of us can seclude ourselves for some time nearly every day. The straightforward method is to close the door and put your phone on voice mail. If that makes you feel nervous, use one or more of these tips and tricks.

Tell your colleagues and other employees that you are going to be doing this, and state the conditions under which they are free to interrupt. Put a sign on your door, with a note about when you will be available again. Put a meeting appointment on your calendar with "Dr. M.S." (My Self) so that your secretary and other think someone else is with you. If staying in your office seems untenable, find another place you can go to work: a nearby coffee shop, the library, an empty office, and so on.

If your job really requires that you be constantly "on" when you are at work, you may need to find this time before or after official hours. The bad news is that too much working outside of regular work hours can be bad for you. The good news

is that even one hour of uninterrupted time per day can vastly increase your productivity.

Resources
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Stephen R. Covey:
> *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 1989.
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> *With* A. Roger Merrill, Rebecca R. Merrill**.** *First Things First*. Simon & Schuster, New York 1994

Stephanie Winston. *Getting out from under: redefining your priorities in an overwhelming world*. Perseus Books, Reading, Massachusetts, 1999 and her other earlier books on organizing for work and home

Writing and other academic issues:

Mary McKinney – *The Successful Academic* website and newsletter
http://www.successfulacademic.com/

Joan Bolker. (1998). *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day*. New York, Henry Holt and Company.
> Bolker is the cofounder of the Harvard Writing Center – this is a great book for anyone wanting to establish a writing habit.

Neil Fiore. *The NOW Habit*. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, 1989
- Fiore is a psychologist who specializes in working with doctoral students with writer's block. Inventor of the "unschedule" technique, which is valuable for anyone who has trouble understanding how much time they do and don't have.