



TIME MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES:

tips to increase your

PRODUCTIVITY & REDUCE STRESS

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BY ROB NIGHTINGALE



Time Management Strategies: Tips to increase your productivity and reduce stress

Written by Rob Nightingale

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Lesson 1 - It's Time to Master Time Management!

We're all constantly struggling to keep on top of our workload. We never have time for the things that matter. Yet we each like to think we have a legitimate reason why this is the case: a reason why we struggle to get through even a modest to-do list each day.

You might think you're busier than the average person. That your responsibilities naturally mean your task list is never ending. That your situation is *different* to others' so time management techniques just can't work for you.

Deep down though, you know these are nothing more than excuses.

We're *all* busy. We *all* have responsibilities. And *each* of our situations is unique.

Despite this, we each know those people who fit more into 24 hours than we can manage in a week. Without breaking a sweat and with time to spare, they accomplish this feat of productivity day in, day out.

This isn't due to some natural, inbuilt ability to manage time effectively. It isn't due to a secret well of energy that allows some people to get more done than others. The truth is *far* more exciting.

Time management is a skill *anyone* can learn, no matter what situation they're in.

That includes *you*.

It's a skill that could realistically help you carve out an extra 10 hours *each week*. That's the equivalent of **thirteen** full-time work weeks per year. *While reducing your stress.*

Just think about what that extra time would mean for you. How would your life look with so much less anxiety? What would you *do* with that time? How would you reinvest it?

You could:

- Spend more time with family and friends
- Start a side project
- Finally read those books
- Get in shape
- Learn a new skill
- Further your career
- *Actually Relax!* (remember what that felt like?)

Spend some time today figuring out how you'd invest that newly-found free time. Think about how much those extra 10 hours per week could improve your life.

Once you have some ideas, **create a vision board**. To do this, open up a new, blank document or a new **Trello** board. Fill this with images, links, and descriptions of things you'd love to do *if only you had the time*.



The aim is to have something exciting to refer to whenever you're tempted to slack during work, or put in extra hours over the weekend.

It's this document that will motivate you to manage your time wisely so you actually *have* time outside of work to pursue those things you've been putting off for too long.

It'll be the incentive for you to start using your time *well*, by implementing the strategies you're about to learn in this course.

The alternative is to simply carry on as you are.

What do you say?



Lesson 2 - Creating Your Master To-Do List

That stress-free, super-productive image of yourself looks pretty good, right? Perhaps even too good to be true...

Well, it's not. Getting there *is* possible. You might not save precisely 10 hours each week. It might be a little less. Maybe even a little more (we can hope!). But the time you're going to save *will* be enough to finally help you get on top of things.

That's because all of us — *including you* — unknowingly wastes a huge amount of time each week.

If you're doubtful, just think of those people who routinely accomplish more than you, with less stress, and without working themselves into the ground.

The only difference between you and them is that they organize their 24-hour days *a lot* more effectively than you. They don't have your bad habits. They spend less time on nonsense.

From the outside looking in, this kind of time-management skill looks like witchcraft. But it's actually pretty simple, and can be boiled down to a few simple but proven principles. Principles that you can easily apply to your own schedule to stop wasting so much time, crank up your productivity, and carve out some much needed extra hours, each day.

Throughout the next few lessons then, you'll be learning more about these ideas, and how *exactly* to leverage them for massive time-management gains.

This is going to work no matter how clogged up your to-do list is.

The first problem to solve, however, is the issue of having tons of items scattered all over the place, constantly vying for our attention. The anxiety, stress, and worry that comes with this is hard to exaggerate.

That's why it's impossible to efficiently tackle your tasks unless you know *exactly* what needs to be done. I'm talking *everything*.

Step 1: Create Your Own Master To-Do List

So, grab a couple sheets of paper or open a new blank document on your computer. **It's time for a mind dump.** Write down *every single thing* you have to do, organized by their respective projects — it's up to you whether you do this only for work related tasks, or for non-work tasks, too.

Making a dentist appointment might fit in the "personal" project section. Finishing that report might fit into one of many projects you're tackling at work. No matter what it is, write it down. If a task consists of sub-tasks, write those sub-tasks down underneath the parent task. If you have to repeat a task each day or each week, write those down, too!

Active Projects					
Project 1	Due Date	Project 2	Due Date	Project 3	Due Date
Task 1	Every Wed	Task 8	Every Mon	Task 12	Every Fri
Task 2	12 Jun	Task 9	Every Mon	Task 13	13 Jun
Task 3	14 Jun	Task 10	17 Jun	Task 14	17 Jun
Task 4	14 Jun	Task 11	17 Jun	Task 15	22 Jun
Task 5	15 Jun		20 Jun	Task 16	23 Jul
Task 6	20 Jun				
Task 7	21 Jun				

To do this thoroughly, go through each and every one of your inboxes (those places where all of your obligations gradually pile up).

- Email inboxes
- Paper to-do lists
- Notebooks
- Voicemails
- Text messages
- Slack channels
- Trello lists
- Social media accounts
- That cardboard box filled with utility bills and random household items you need to organize.
- All the stuff that's whirring around your mind.

Sobbing in a corner after seeing the real length of your to-to list is part of the process. Don't sweat it.

Once all that *stuff* is not spread so haphazardly around so many inboxes it'll no longer occupy so much of your thought, because you'll know it's all in one place.

Step 2: Remove the Unnecessary

Now it's time to go through that list one item at a time.

First, look out for tasks and projects that if you never got around to completing, would result in no negative consequences. If you come across any of these at all, ask yourself *why is this even on my to-do list?* You need to focus on *results*. It probably needs deleting.

Second, look out for tasks and projects that can feasibly be put on the back-burner. When you find any, now's the time to move them over to a new "Back-Burner" project. There will be plenty of time to revisit these items in the future, but for now, if they *can* wait, make them wait.

Deferred Tasks & Projects	
Back-Burner	Revisit On
Task 17	14 Aug
Task 18	14 Aug
Task 19	14 Aug
Task 20	20 Sep
Task 21	20 Sep
Project 4	20 Sep

How you choose to actually organize your master to-do list is entirely up to you. Different approaches suit different people. But if you're not sure where to start, we've got **a guide to to-do list management** that'll help.

Takeaways

Essentially, knowing how to properly manage your time largely boils down to understanding that:

1. You don't need to complete every task that comes your way, and
2. Not every task that needs completing needs tackling right now.



Lesson 3 - Say Goodbye to Working Overtime, For Good!

After writing each and every one of your to-do items out, you're probably dreading the thought of needing to work 15-hour days for a few weeks just to begin catching up.

Don't worry. Believe it or not, you're going to get everything done on a schedule that suits *you*.

Fixed Schedule Productivity & Parkinson's Law

Cal Newport is an MIT PostDoc, respected blogger, author, and all-round super-productive guy. He doesn't work weekends, and never works after 5:30pm. He's one of those people we spoke about who somehow gets more done in a day than most of us manage in a week.

This can largely be credited, he says, to **Fixed Schedule Productivity**: a productivity principle he first mentioned back in **2008**.

The idea of Fixed Schedule Productivity is to *pick an ideal (but realistic) structure, then work backward to make everything comfortably fit into that structure*.

A ton of people think this is impossible. Knowledge workers routinely work hours of overtime each day because they think they have no other choice. Entrepreneurs think they need to put in 15 hour days to stay successful.

But think about yourself for a minute.

How many times have you had a deadline of say, two weeks, for a project you're *convinced* will take two weeks. Ten days later you've barely made a dent. The pressure of getting so much work done in the remaining four days almost induces a panic attack.

Yet somehow, you crank out the work and get the project finished *on time*, to a high standard, but in a fraction of the time you thought it was going to take.

This is **Parkinson's Law** in action.

Parkinson's Law claims that "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion".

We all fall victim to its influence.

This means that if you secretly think it's acceptable to work one or two hours' overtime each day, your work *will* swell to fill that time. If you think it's ok to work Sunday mornings, or squeeze in a few emails during the evening, your work *will* grow to take up that time.

The solution is to *fix* your schedule. Make it non-negotiable. Refuse to let yourself slip-up. For Cal Newport, that fixed schedule is 8:30am to 5:30pm, Monday through Friday.

No work gets done outside of these hours.

Within this schedule he's managed to complete a PhD, write several books, regularly publish to his blog, and more.

Creating Your Own Fixed Schedule

Introducing Fixed Schedule Productivity to your own workdays will similarly help you to achieve more each day than you've managed before.

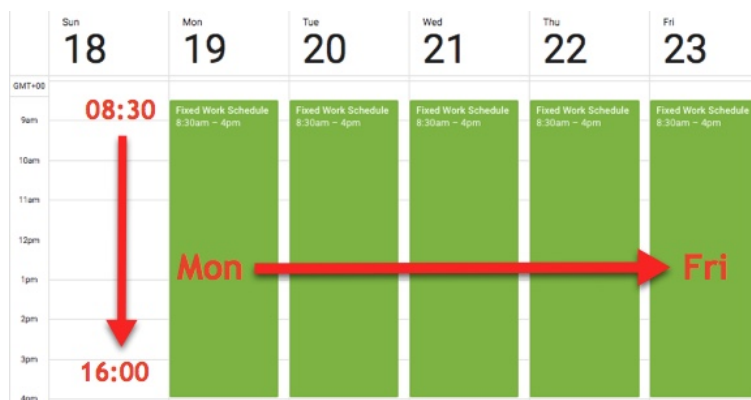
First of all, think back to a couple of lessons ago when you wrote down what you would do if you had around 10 hours of extra free time each week.

Let's figure out a fixed schedule that allows you to pursue those goals.

To do this, you need to set yourself work hours that work for you and your family. This "fixed schedule" should severely limit (and ideally *eliminate*) the amount of overtime you do. It should give you enough time outside of work to actually pursue those things you care about, while still getting the *important* stuff at work done to a standard you're proud of.

If you're a freelancer or entrepreneur, you might want to reduce your work week from 45 to 35 hours. You might have a 9-5 but find yourself doing too much overtime and working evenings and weekends.

Whatever your situation, mark out a new fixed schedule in which to get your work done. Once done, open up your calendar, and block out your new workweek. Make sure there's enough time outside of this fixed schedule to do everything else you want to do.



If you have other projects that keep seeping into your free time, block out some time for them, too. Treat those other projects like a second job that can't be tackled outside of those designated hours.

You now have **no option** but complete all of your tasks within this new schedule. Your time has all of a sudden become a lot more valuable, and any time outside of this schedule has to be guarded tightly!

Given the length of your current to-do list, though, you probably think your new fixed schedule gives you nowhere *near* enough time to get everything done.

Don't despair!

We're going to make this work. But in order to do that, you need to become ruthless with your time.

Note: If your time management has gotten so out of control that you absolutely must work some overtime to catch up, mark a (very) limited number of additional Time Blocks for this overtime. But understand, these are only temporary, and should be removed within a few weeks!

Lesson 4 - Time Blocking 80/20

By now, you should have three things.

1. A complete list of tasks you need to get done
2. A group of tasks you've moved to the back-burner
3. A new schedule that, if successful, will give you the ideal work-life balance.

The next step in this time management puzzle is divide your schedule to maximize the results you're squeezing out of each and every day.

Introducing the Pareto Principle

The Pareto Principle is the idea that 80% of results derive from just 20% of effort (also known as the 80/20 rule).



This is a rule that's shown to be true in a ton of cases.

- Investors often see 80% of profits come from 20% of investments.
- Most people wear 20% of their clothes 80% of the time.
- 80% of complaints come from 20% of customers.

The examples go on.

It's likely that this rule applies to your work-life, too. For most people, just a small number of tasks routinely do (or will) bring in disproportionate results.

The problem, however, is that you also have a massive amount of other stuff to do. And since you've already removed the inconsequential stuff from your to-do list, the tasks that remain on your list *need* completing. Even though most of that stuff won't really move the needle toward any meaningful results!

All these tasks do is help you to maintain your current situation.

These maintenance tasks are, to an extent, unavoidable. But Parkinson's Law — the one that says tasks expand to fill the amount of time given to them — generally leads to us spending way more time on these maintenance tasks than we need to. Let's put a stop to that.

Instead, we should be structuring our days so that **as much of our fixed schedule as possible is spent on the small number of tasks that actually make a difference**. The other tasks should come second.

Step 1: Identify Important Tasks

The first step toward spending more time on important tasks is to know *which* of those tasks are those that are most likely to bring in the big results. These are the tasks that will:

- Make everything else easier.
- Clear up bottlenecks.
- Reduce your anxiety.

So, go through your to-do list again. Work your way through each and every project, and figure out which of them are the important ones. Highlight them. Move them to the top of the list. Tag them in your to-do list app. It's up to you.

Active Projects					
Project 1	Due Date	Project 2	Due Date	Project 3	Due Date
**Task 1	<u>Every Wed</u>	Task 8	Every Mon	Task 12	Every Fri
Task 2	12 Jun	**Task 9	<u>Every Mon</u>	Task 13	13 Jun
Task 3	14 Jun	Task 10	17 Jun	**Task 14	<u>17 Jun</u>
**Task 4	<u>14 Jun</u>	Task 11	17 Jun	Task 15	22 Jun
Task 5	15 Jun		20 Jun	Task 16	23 Jul
Task 6	20 Jun				
Task 7	21 Jun				

The idea is to make it clear *at a glance* which tasks are those you should really be spending more time on.

Step 2: Think About Your Current Workday

Next, think about your current workday and calculate what *percentage* of your day on average is actually spent on these important tasks, and what percentage is spent on less important “busy work”.

If you need to track your time for a day to figure this out, *do it!*

Write it out — this is important. If you're not sure how to work out accurate percentages, this [percentage calculator](#) is easy to use.

You're almost guaranteed to be shocked at how little time you spend on important tasks, and how much of your day is taken up with “busy work”.

For most people, 70–80% of time is spent on busy work, procrastination, etc. In a full-time job, that's 24–32 hours spent on less-important tasks! That leaves only 20–30% of the workday for more important stuff. That's just 8–12 hours in a full-time job.

This is far from ideal.

Step 3: Pick a More Ideal Ratio

Whatever your own results are, let's try and tip the scales so that an even larger portion of your time is spent on the important stuff.

How much you're able to tip these scales is ultimately down to you to judge, but for most people, a shift of 20% is usually achievable, with the right focus. Over a week, month, or year, this is enough to make a *big* difference.

Here's an example.



If your current ratio of important to non-important tasks is 30:70 (where 30% of time is spent on important work, and 70% on non-important work), shifting this 20% would take you to 50:50. Half of your work-week is a *very* respectable amount of time to spend on important tasks, and a *lot* better than the 30% that was previously managed!

In this case, assuming your new fixed schedule (which you blocked out yesterday) covers 30 hours per week, you'll be aiming to spend 15 of those hours on important tasks, and the other 15 hours on less-important tasks.

Let's Get Down to Business!

At first, the important to non-important ratio you've just picked is going to be a challenge. Especially when you're trying to fit all of your work into a new fixed schedule, which leaves little to no room for overtime.

But you *are* going to succeed at this. And when you're finally spending an extra 20+% of your time on genuinely important tasks, while working a schedule that gives you time to pursue your interests, just imagine what a difference that's going to make.

Next you'll spend a little more time prepping your schedule, and then you'll learn exactly how to put this schedule into practice, how to avoid distractions, and how to stay on top of everything.



Lesson 5: Time Blocking: The Secret to Productive Days

By now, you would have chosen how you would ideally like to spend your workdays. This new ratio of important to non-important work will play a key role in helping you to keep on top of all the important stuff that comes your way.

Remember, important work is work that will hopefully lead to results. It'll help to reduce stress, unlock bottlenecks, or make everything else easier. Less-important work is work that you *have* to do as part of your job, but which won't actually contribute to the big goals you're working toward.

But it's not enough to simply say to yourself, "*I'm going to spend 50% of my time on these important tasks*". Emails will arrive that derail your plans. Meetings will overrun. Unimportant tasks will take longer than expected.

That's where Time Blocking comes in.

Introducing "Time Blocking"

Time blocking is a time management technique where you reserve dedicated blocks of time for specific types of tasks.

This is useful because, as per Parkinson's Law, if we don't set strict limits on when a task (or tasks) is to be completed by, then those tasks will naturally swell to fill up far more time than they should.

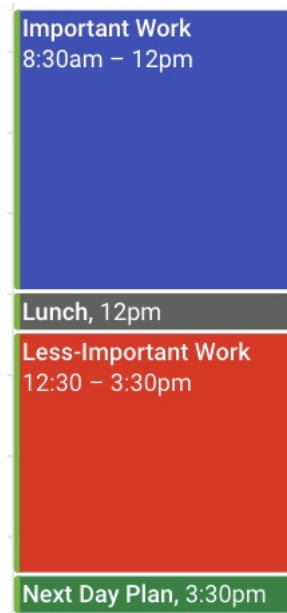
Each "time block" is essentially a "fixed schedule" for that task, or that *type* of task. And if you rigorously stick to each individual time block, you'll also stick to the fixed schedule you planned out a couple of lessons ago. To learn more, [this article on Time Blocking is a great primer](#).

Let's get to it.

Creating Your Own Time Blocks

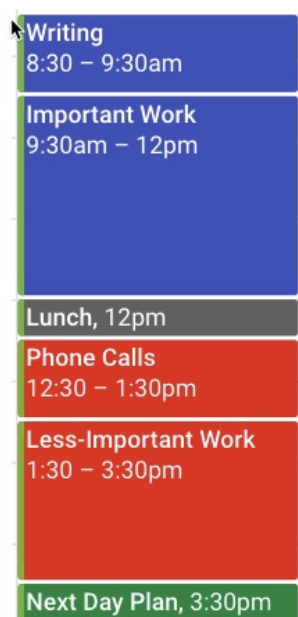
First of all, pull up the fixed schedule you marked out in your calendar recently. It's time to insert time blocks into that schedule so that — if you follow it closely — you'll *know* you're hitting those target percentages of important and less-important work you set yourself yesterday.

At the very *minimum*, you'll want time blocks for important tasks, non-important tasks, and for daily planning (more on this in an upcoming lesson!). If your aim is to spend 50% of your time on important tasks, and 50% on less-important tasks, this basic schedule could work:



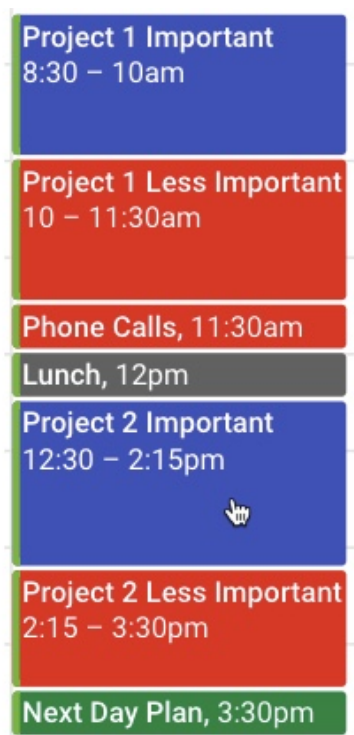
But it's also sensible to block out dedicated periods for similar tasks, such as phone calls or meetings, and for planning out tomorrow. Giving these tasks a dedicated period of time is more efficient than tackling those tasks sporadically.

Assuming meetings and phone-calls are classed as “less important tasks”, here's how that could look (note that 50% of your time is still being spent on important tasks):



And even more effective, is scheduling two time blocks for *each* project you're working on. One for important tasks, one for less important tasks.

This approach makes it super-easy to know which kinds of tasks you should be focusing on at a specific time each day.



The Choice Is Yours

How you decide to block out the time within your fixed schedule will be unique to you. If you don't *need* to tackle your less-important tasks in the morning, it might be best to leave them until the end of the day.

Just remember, this structure is not set in stone.

As you try the schedule out, you'll naturally want to move things around, spend a bit more time on this, and a bit less time on that.

You may find that squeezing in some less-important tasks during your lunch break, on your commute, or while you're waiting between meetings means you can dedicate even more time to your important tasks.

Adjusting your time blocks to accommodate all of this is absolutely fine, and it's part of the process.

When you start basing your day around this schedule, tweak the structure until you find something that works for you. Just be sure to keep an eye on that important work to less important work ratio. It's vital that you know where your time is being spent so that you can manage your time better in the future, and so you don't slip back toward spending far too much time on less-important tasks, like before.



Why Is This So Important?

The point of this schedule is to give yourself a structure that doesn't allow you to indefinitely extend the time it takes to complete tasks.

If you know you *have* to finish all your calls by midday, they'll be less likely to overrun. If you know you only have 90 minutes to finish that report, you'll somehow wrap it up on time.

The secret is to take your fixed schedule, and your time blocks, *seriously*. When a time block ends, you should be aiming to move on from it as if you had a flight to catch.

Getting Some Work Done

Before getting to the next lesson, then, be sure to divide your fixed schedule into time blocks that are likely to work for you, and that reflect the amount of important work you're aiming to do.

Once done, it's time finally to actually start getting some work done!

Lesson 6 - Knowing Which Tasks to Work On

Your schedule's all blocked out. You know when you're going to be tackling your important and less-important tasks, and for how long. Now you need to get down to work.

The first thing you need to do is figure out exactly which tasks need your attention next. The best time to do this is during the last 15–20 minutes of each work day (which is why yesterday, we recommended setting “Daily Planning” Time Blocks on your calendar).

There are three reasons for this:

1. Everything is still fresh in your mind, including outstanding tasks.
2. Having tomorrow planned out means you'll find it easier to rest *tonight*.
3. You know exactly what you need to be doing as soon as you start work tomorrow.

Planning out which tasks to work on is as simple as pulling up both your master to-do list *and* your fixed schedule. Then, while referring to the time blocks you set out yesterday, select one or more tasks to tackle during each Time Block.

You'll need to judge how long each task should take, being careful not to assign too much work to any individual time block. At first, it's common to overestimate how much you can get done in each time block. This is part of the learning process. But over time you'll become more adept at estimating how long each task will take.

So, those time blocks you assigned to the important 20% of tasks? They should *only* include your most valuable tasks. If you followed the course so far, these should be easily identifiable on your master to-do list.

And the time blocks you assigned the other 80% of tasks? They should *only* include less-important busy-work.

With this daily plan laid out, your sole job is to work through this task-list, strictly keeping to your schedule. Set a timer if needed, so when your time block for certain work is over, you know you *must* stop, and move on to the next time block. If you didn't manage to finish a task, make sure it makes it onto your to-do list tomorrow!

Working Through Your Tasks

It's all too easy to plough through tasks without actually thinking about *how* they should be done. So, before you start any task, ask yourself these four questions (print them out if needed):

1. Does this task actually *need* completing?
2. Can this task be delegated?
3. Can I simplify or automate this task?
4. Can the deadline be extended?

This is the point where you assess each and every task so that you're not needlessly wasting time by approaching the task in an inefficient way.

1. Do You Actually *Need* to Complete This Task?

At the start of this course, you went through your task list and removed any tasks that, if not completed, wouldn't lead to any negative consequences. That cleansed your list to an extent. But be sure to ask this question again, just in case anything slipped through the cracks.

If a task will never **genuinely** need completing, your time should probably be spent elsewhere. In these cases, consider removing the task from your to-do list, or at least move it to the “Back-Burner” project to tackle when you have the time.

2. Can You Delegate This Task?

Is it really *you* who needs to complete this task, or is there someone else who's capable of completing it to the required standard?

If you are able to realistically delegate a task, you probably should. This will free up more of your time to concentrate on those tasks that *only you* can perform to the required standard, therefore putting your skills to much better use.

If delegation is an option open to you, read our guide on **using delegation to reduce your workload**. It's a skill all productive leaders need to master, as it'll save you a **ton** of time!

3. Can You Simplify or Automate This Task?

Often, tasks are needlessly complicated, so before making a start, think about how you could make each task simpler. This could include anything from **using macros to automate spreadsheets**, to writing out checklists to help you go plough through tasks more efficiently.

This is a never-ending process, but when your tasks gradually start to become simpler, easier, and partly-automated, it becomes pretty addictive!

This is especially useful for tasks that you have to routinely perform. Just saving a few seconds now will add up in the long-term. By optimizing all of your repeat tasks, you could easily save a good few hours each month by eliminating a few inefficiencies.

4. Can the Deadline Be Extended?

If there's a task that's causing you undue stress, or that's taking up time that really needs to be spent on other work, try getting the deadline extended.

Once a deadline is extended, you're able to spend less time *per day* on that task, while still getting it finished. This leaves you with more time each day for those other tasks you should be working on, while still knowing you're making progress on that big task.

This is a much-underused way to keep on top of your workload without overloading yourself.

Crossing Tasks Off the List

By asking yourself this set of questions before making a start on each task, you're forced to figure out the best way to make the most of your time.

To summarize:

- If the task doesn't need completing, remove it from your list.
- If it can be delegated, draw up documents and instructions to make sure it's completed to the required standard.
- If you can simplify or automate the task, spend some extra time on that.
- If you can extend the deadline, do so. Buy yourself some extra breathing room.

Once that's all been addressed, get to work on your tasks.

Cross them off your list.

Rinse and repeat.

But keep a close eye on the time! Whatever you do, *do not* work on tasks outside of their designated time blocks unless you know for sure that you have spare time in those other time blocks.

If you keep getting to the end of each time block with tons left to-do, then you're overestimating what you're capable of achieving in a day. Take this lesson over to tomorrow and try not to overload yourself again.

And when your fixed schedule ends, *stop working*.

Give it a try. Try to develop a habit of approaching your work in this way. The constraints of using time blocks like this will force you to shun procrastination, and prioritize only the things that are valuable.

Lesson 7 - 9 Ways to Avoid Distractions at Work

Before tackling this lesson, you've hopefully had a chance to try out your new fixed schedule as it's been described over the past few chapters.

If you have, then you probably noticed yourself regularly being tempted by distractions. A notification alerts you about a new email. Your phone rings. You remember something you need to do.

Distractions are everywhere.

But when it comes to effective time management, you must rise above these distractions in order to stay focused on your tasks. Remember, we've already set a tight fixed schedule in which to get your work done. And we've set strict time blocks in which to focus on specific tasks. There's just no time in this routine to allow distractions to take hold. If they do, you'll again find yourself drowning in a backlog of tasks.

To help with this, here are nine tips to help you overcome distractions so you can finish your work on time.

1. Plan Your Day in Advance

We discussed this in a previous lesson, but it's worth mentioning again. At the end of each day, plan out exactly what you need to do tomorrow, without overloading yourself. Make sure there's a time block in your daily schedule for this, and take it seriously.

This is a habit that clears your mind for the evening ahead, and means you can quickly get to work tomorrow, rather than arriving at work distracted and stressed, not knowing where to start.

2. Keep Everything Organized

One of the first things you did as part of this course was to write out all of your outstanding tasks, and organize them by project. However you choose to manage this list, *keep it organized and up-to-date*. When something lands in one of your inboxes, add it to your list!

You should also be keeping your documents, notes, and paperwork organized, too. By knowing where everything is, and what needs to be done, you remove the friction of **just getting started**. This will make you far less prone to being tempted by another YouTube video or another 10 minutes scrolling through Reddit.

3. Avoid Time-Sucking Sites

Speaking of YouTube, Reddit, and other attention-sucking sites, install a browser extension such as **StayFocusd**. This is an extension that limits the amount of time you can spend on certain websites, giving you no option but to get on with something more productive.

4. Control Your Browser

One of the main distractions we regularly face is a browser full of open tabs promising us ever-more interesting content. Don't become victim to this.

Instead, save interesting content to apps like **Pocket** or **Instapaper** so you can read them at a more convenient time (maybe over your morning coffee?). Another great option is to install **OneTab** – a browser extension that converts all of your open tabs into a list so you can restore them at a later date. Keep that browser clear so you can concentrate on the task at hand.

5. Stay Out of Your Inbox

If you constantly check your inbox for no good reason, you need to set yourself some strict inbox rules. Add some new time blocks to your schedule that permit you to check and reply to emails just once or twice per day, for 10–15 minutes at a time. Outside of these time blocks you should *not* be checking emails!

You will be shown how to always keep on top of your inbox in an upcoming lesson!

6. Disable Notifications

If you've got things set up so you're constantly being notified about new emails, messages, tweets, Facebook activity, and more, you're never going to master time management. This is because you're always going to be in a reactive state, never fully engaged in the work you're doing.

So spend some time disabling as many notifications as you can. You need to be in control of your own time and attention, rather than allowing these apps to dictate where your attention goes.

To help with this, read our guide on **removing distractions from your computer**. Much of this can be applied to your smartphone, too.

7. Declutter Your Workspace

Most people find it extremely difficult to fully focus when they're surrounded by clutter. At the end of each day then, clear your desk. Put everything back in its place. Empty the trash. Close unneeded documents. Clean-up your desktop. Become a minimalist.

Then, when you next start working, your mind will be a little clearer, and a little less distracted. **Here are some more tips for this.**

8. Become Unavailable

If you receive regular phone calls, turn your phone onto Do Not Disturb mode so people have to leave a voicemail instead. Disconnect from the internet if you need to.

And when you're working on something important, close the door, or wear headphones. This tells people "*I'm not to be disturbed right now*", leaving you free to get on with your tasks.

9. Learn to Say No

When you feel obliged to say *Yes* to everything that comes your way, you're guaranteed to be distracted from your most valuable tasks and priorities. This is why you *must* become comfortable with saying *No* to more things that come your way.

Some people will have roles that make this easier than others. But where possible, explain that although you appreciate the opportunity, this new task just can't be a priority right now, so you'll have to decline. It feels uncomfortable at first, but it'll soon become second-nature.

Enjoy Laser-Like Focus

Before the day is over, put some of these tips into action. Disable your notifications. Turn down a project you've been mulling over. Create time blocks for checking your inbox.

Do what's needed to minimize distractions so that — at least during your fixed schedule — you're focused exclusively on those tasks you've assigned yourself for the day.

The less time wasted on distractions, the better.

Lesson 8 - 6 Ways to Crush Procrastination

In the previous chapter we shared some tips on avoiding distractions. These are useful for helping you stay on task when you're in the midst of work. But what about those times when you just can't get the motivation to even *start*.

Procrastination is something we all suffer from. We all cave in to it from time to time. But it's vital that you don't let procrastination become a chronic problem that routinely stands in your way of getting things done.

To help with this, here are seven tips to help you crush procrastination.

1. Just Do 10 minutes

The idea of starting on a big project or a tough task is daunting. It's something we often delay, which only causes further anxiety. Instead, commit yourself to that task for just ten minutes. *Ten minutes is easy.*

If you complete the ten minutes and it's still not happening, it might be worth working on something less daunting for now. But more often than not, ten minutes is all it takes to get you into the flow, and to show you that this task isn't as daunting as you first thought.

2. Be Prepared

So many people avoid tasks because gathering everything that's needed to start is enough of an excuse to delay starting. Look at how many people avoid going to the gym because they can't find their trainers, or how many people fail to eat healthy because they didn't plan their meals out in advance.

Before starting a task then, get everything you need within easy reach. Do the research in advance. Open all the documents you're going to need. Write out the process you're going to follow. Make it as easy as possible to start, because starting is the hardest part.

3. Break the Project Down Further

If your "next task" is something that you know is going to take a ton of effort, it'll be easy for you to think "*oh, I don't have time for that today*". This is usually because you haven't broken the project down into small enough chunks.

If you ever feel like this, think about the **smallest step** you can take *right now* to make even a tiny bit of progress on that project, then do it.

That small task might only take you a few minutes, but that's often enough to get you into the groove to continue working on that same project.

4. Set Rewards and Punishments

Rewards and punishments are a fantastic motivator for human beings. Take advantage of this. Reward yourself for completing all your designated tasks in a time block: allow yourself to watch a YouTube video. Eat that chocolate bar. Go for a walk. Use the promise of this reward as a motivator to get things done!



If rewards don't work for you, punish yourself for *not* doing what you set out to do. Make a bet with your colleagues. Tell your partner you'll wash the dishes if you didn't get everything done today.

Use these proven psychological triggers to stay on track with your time management goals.

5. Use Temptation Bundling

Sometimes we put off tackling something because it's just too boring and mundane. But with "Temptation Bundling", you can make some tasks more bearable — perhaps even *enjoyable* — by performing them at the same time as you perform a task you love.

To do this, think of tasks that you repeatedly procrastinate on, and other things you actually enjoy. Then see if you could bundle any of these together. For instance, you could listen to podcasts while you're at the gym. Listen to that new album while you're doing data entry. Make phone-calls while on a walk.

Succumbing to procrastination will be far less likely, when those less-enjoyable tasks are bundled together with something that you truly enjoy!

6. Embrace Productive Procrastination

If you're ever at a point where you just can't beat procrastination (we've all been there), don't let that procrastination degrade to scrolling mindlessly through Facebook. Turn to your to-do list, and pick *something* to do. You might need to sort through your Evernote account. Sharpen some pencils. Hang a picture.

No matter how small or insignificant this task seems, at least you're tackling something on your to-do list, rather than resigning yourself to something *entirely* pointless.

Say Goodbye to Procrastination

It's unlikely you'll ever **eliminate procrastination** entirely. That's why tips like these are so useful.

With them, you'll know that when procrastination rears its head, you have an arsenal of tools at your disposal to help you get back to work sooner, rather than later.

Lesson 9 - How to Efficiently Manage Your Inbox

It's easy to misunderstand time spent in your inbox as time well spent. It feels like you're making progress. That you're getting things done. That you're successfully keeping everyone "in the loop".

In reality though, email inboxes are one of the biggest time-sucks we face.

The back-and-forth nature of email is highly inefficient. Expecting ourselves to reply quickly means we're constantly distracted from important work in order to send rapid-fire messages of no real consequence.

Instead, we should be limiting the time we spend in our inbox. And when we're there, we should be processing those emails *efficiently*.

Schedule When to Check Email

If you find email to be a major source of procrastination, you're not alone. Feeling like you need to "just check" your inbox to see if any fires need putting out is a bad habit that you — and so many others — *need* to break. All it's doing is taking your attention away from those tasks you should have assigned yourself for the day.

One solution is to schedule just a few Time Blocks throughout the day in which to check and process your inbox. You *cannot* permit yourself to check your emails outside of these blocks.

Or if you don't want to add any more Time Blocks to your schedule, add "check email" as a to-do item for one of the existing Time Blocks in your schedule. Set a strict limit on the amount of time you can spend on this task to ensure it doesn't swell to fill more time than it needs to.

Automate Your Inbox

Most email clients have filter and labelling tools to help you automate aspects of your inbox. You'd be wise to use them to automatically process emails that you know you'll never need to act on.

You could set up a rule so that:

- Any newsletters you subscribe to skip the inbox and are labelled "Newsletters".
- Any comments you receive on your website skip the inbox and are labelled "Comments".
- Emails received from certain addresses which offer you discounts and coupons skip the inbox and are labelled "Discounts".

The aim is to reduce the amount of time spent processing emails, so if your email client can do some of the heavy lifting, take advantage.

When you're finally ready to check those newsletters, or reply to those comments, just search for the relevant label, and work through the unopened emails.



If you want to learn more about automating parts of your Gmail inbox, read our article on getting to Inbox Zero in Gmail. And if you're an Outlook user, learn [how to manage your inbox here](#).

Unsubscribe!

If you keep receiving email newsletters and updates from companies you have no interest in, the unsubscribe button is your best friend. Legally, this has to be included on all emails of this kind, and you can usually find it right at the bottom of the message.

If you can't find the button, or if those emails still keep landing in your inbox, mark them as spam.

Working Through Your Messages

If you receive a lot of emails, trying to get to *Inbox Zero* could take hours if you commit to replying to everything right *now*.

Instead, the aim of processing your inbox should be to understand what needs to be done next. You can then add this task to your to-do list and archive the email (so you can find it later). This way, you can work your way through a ton of emails in a very short space of time.

As you're working through your emails then, try to stick to these rules:

- If you can act on the email in less than three minutes, do it now. Whether that's sending a quick reply, unsubscribing from a newsletter, or setting up a new filter, get the email dealt with. If there's a "Next item" you need to keep track of, add this to your to-do list.
- If it'll take more than a few minutes to act on, decide what needs to be done next, and add this to your to-do list.
- When you add a new task to your to do list, include any relevant information you'll need. This includes identifying the task as important or less-important (so you know which Time Block to assign it to), a deadline where necessary, and a link back to the original email.
- When an email has been dealt with, label it if necessary, then archive it. In Gmail, there's an Archive folder by default. In Outlook, simply create a folder called "Archive", and throw all of your processed emails in there for future reference.
- If you feel like a sender will be expecting a reply from you, but the email is going to take a while to reply to, just send a quick response. Let them know when to realistically expect a *full* reply. This lets them know that you've read the email, and that you'll be taking action soon.

By following these rules, you'll be able to plough through a huge number of emails *quickly*.

Yes, your to-do list will end up a little longer. But with all the other techniques you've developed over the past week, you should feel confident that those tasks *will* get completed on time, provided you assign them to the right Time Blocks.

Lesson 10 - Bringing It All Together

If you're sticking to your fixed schedule, you should be enjoying some of that newly carved out leisure time. Ideally, you'll be filling these hours with all those things you said you'd love to do if you found 10 hours of extra free time each week.

And if you're sticking to the Time Blocks within your fixed schedule, you should be seeing real gains in the amount of important, results-oriented work you're completing.

But what next?

If Things Are Going Well...

Fantastic! But don't stop there.

Keep improving. Carry on simplifying, automating, deferring, and delegating tasks so you can spend your time more wisely. As you start to get on top of your tasks, you should find the time to tackle some of those items that have been sat on back-burner.

If possible, you might want to adjust the ratio of important to less-important work you're doing, so that even *more* time is spent on important tasks, and less on unimportant work (don't forget to adjust your Time Blocks to reflect this).

Or, perhaps you could reduce the number of hours you're working, so you can spend more time on activities outside of the day-job.

If Things Aren't Going So Well...

If you feel like you're still struggling to manage your time, even after implementing what you've learned in this course, the following advice may help.

1. Treat Your To-Do List as a Second Brain

Part of the reason you're still struggling with time management may be that you're still feeling as if your tasks are too scattered. This unavoidably makes you feel as if things are out of your control. This usually happens because you're not relying on your to-do list enough!

You should be aiming for your to-do list to become the place you *naturally* store your outstanding items, and the *default* place you visit to find out what needs to be done. Stop relying so much on your memory!

Once you get into the habit of using your to-do list like this, your confidence in it will grow. You'll feel far more in control of your time, and you'll be able to more easily see what needs to be done (and when) helping you to better plan out your days.

2. Don't Rush Through the Pre-Task Questions

If it feels like you've got a ton to do on a particular day, it can be all too easy to rush through those four pre-task questions:

1. Do you actually need to complete this task?
2. Can you delegate this task?

3. Can you simplify or automate this task?
4. Can the deadline be extended?

Slow down. Take these questions seriously. Just assuming, “*yes, I need to complete this task, and no, I can’t simplify it*”, will only leave you struggling for time. Instead, think about what you can do now to make life easier in the future. Otherwise, you risk *always* feeling inundated.

3. Utilize “Overtime” Time Blocks

We briefly mentioned earlier in the course that if there was absolutely no way you could complete your current task list in your new Fixed Schedule, then you may have to introduce a few “Overtime” Time Blocks to tide you over.

Seems one of your main aims should be to *eliminate* overtime, these Time Blocks should only ever be temporary. They should only be used if you’ve completely fallen behind with your tasks, and there’s no other option in sight.

If, however, you feel like there’s no time in the future where you could see yourself *not* using overtime Time Blocks, even if you’re working a reasonable Fixed Schedule, that’s a sure sign you’ve taken on too much. It’s time to start saying *no* to things, else you *will* burn out.

4. Re-Calculate Your Ratios

When you recalculated your ratios so you could spend more time on important work, you naturally reduced the amount of time you’re able to spend on unimportant work.

Get the ratios right, and this prompts you to be more efficient with your time when tackling those tasks. But if you move the ratios too far, then you can leave yourself short of time, unable to complete all the tasks you need to.

In these cases, adjust your ratios slightly. Give yourself an extra 30–90 minutes of time for less-important tasks a few times per week. This will help you clear up that backlog. Find the right ratio for you, and you’ll be sailing through your task list!

Keep Going!

The strategies you’ve learned in this course lay the foundations for managing your time well. But what you’ve implemented so far will always need the occasional tweaking. We’re all on different schedules, after all.

Some months, a big project will land on your desk, and you have to dedicate more time to that. Other months, you’ll find yourself with extra free time.

The point is to know how to structure your time so you can feel less stressed, and more in control. This will allow you to get more done than you’ve managed previously, while saving time to pursue those things you’ve always felt like you didn’t have time to pursue.

This is what time management is all about, and we hope you have picked up some valuable strategies, techniques, and tools to use to help you make better use of *your* time.