

# *8,760 HOURS*

how to get the most out of next year

**Version 2**

[alexvermeer.com/8760hours](http://alexvermeer.com/8760hours)

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*This is version 2 of this guide.*

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“NEVER PUT  
OFF TILL  
TOMORROW  
WHAT YOU  
CAN DO THE  
DAY AFTER  
TOMORROW.”

MARK TWAIN

# INTRODUCTION

This is a guide for planning the next 8,760 hours—one full year—of your life. More importantly, it is about creating a detailed plan and optimizing for success, based on an understanding of what works.

For the last few years this system has worked very well for me. My hope is that you will find it useful as well.

Many of the ideas here are not original to me. This guide builds off many hours of reading many articles and blogs about productivity, goals, and the brain, which are attributed when possible.<sup>1</sup>

The end result is a system for keeping yourself constantly moving towards your goals over the next year, and constantly staying on track.

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<sup>1</sup> A big early influencers is Chris Guillebeau who has [written about his yearly planning process](#).

## WHY PLAN AT ALL?

Want to learn an instrument? Want to write a book? Want to beat every computer game ever designed? Want to cure cancer? Want to have a [positive impact on the world](#) and an [impactful career](#)? Do you have [something to protect](#), something that gets you out of bed in the morning?

Whatever your primary motivations are in life, you won’t get anywhere by waiting for something to happen. We plan because we have sh\*t we want to do with our lives.

Humans do not think strategically by default. Even when we know what our goals are—and we often don’t—we are still bad at asking things like:

- What exactly do I want to achieve?
- How will I measure success?
- Am I actively seeking out information about this?
- Can I break this down into more manageable parts?
- Is this really my goal? Am I constrained by fears or uncertainties?

Our brains are not optimized for achieving our larger goals in life. They are sculpted by evolution for *survival* and *reproductive abilities*, but not much else!

We need systems and processes in place to help us get around these evolutionary “abilities” so that we can get the most out of our lives.

## YOUR LIFE IN A NUTSHELL (“LIFE IS SHORT”)

If you live to be 80 years old, which is about the first-world average life expectancy, then you will experience about 30,000 days or 700,000 hours of life (if we take out sleeping time the number drops to more like 450,000 hours).<sup>2</sup>

The point is that we have limited time and we must choose how to spend it. Unfortunately, from personal experience, I rarely take the time to consciously do this.

The only way to decide what to work on is to *prioritize*. That’s why I take a big picture approach to life and break down the big picture into present year and day actions.

This is part of my motivation for calling this

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life\\_expectancy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_expectancy). I, for one, plan to live to be at least 1,000 years old, but that’s a story for a different guide.

guide “8,760 hours” rather than “one year.” Even if there is a sense that life is incredibly short, there are *still* 8,760 hours in a single year! That is a *lot* of time to get some real stuff done.

Given that our natural life-planning skills are... lacking, this guide hopes to help us overcome that limitation and get things done *anyway*.

We need specific goals and a concrete plan for obtaining them that is optimized for success. We need a clear picture of our lives and where our priorities lie. What better time to do some fresh planning than at the start of a new year?

## THE PROBLEM WITH NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS

We’ve all made them and we’ve all failed to achieve them. The number of times I’ve resolved to take up regular exercise or stop procrastinating—and failed miserably—is embarrassing.

New Year’s resolutions often have at least one of the following problems:

- They are vague, non-specific goals like “be fit,” “be nice to people,” or “read more books.”
- They are overly pessimistic and stem

from self-critical admonitions for still not doing That Thing you always wanted to do or felt you *ought* to do—“I’m such a slacker, but this year will be different.”

- They take on too much at once—“I’m committing to these ten big, vague, *life-changing* things and start them all on January 1st.”
- They are not really your highest priorities, and they inevitably fall to the wayside.

This guide outlines my process for avoiding all of these shortcomings and trying to make some *real* changes over the next year.

The start of a new year is useful. There tends to be a positive “change can happen!” atmosphere that explains why people make their new year’s resolutions in the first place. A new year. A clean slate. A time to make some changes. Let’s still do that, but let’s do it right.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

I’m going to illustrate what it is that I do, and I invite you to follow along.

First I do an initial overview of my life. This helps get the mind ready to do the whole process and starts me thinking about what

I'm doing with my life, where my priorities are, what I want—in general, and roughly over the next year.

Next I review, in detail, the state of all areas of my life, and specifically any major projects completed in the past year or still underway.

Then I spend some time thinking about the ideal future—how I *want* my life to look.

Finally I extract from my ideals what I want to focus on for the next 8,760 hours (1 year) of my life, and optimize those plans for success by taking advantage of several motivation and anti-procrastination tools and tricks.

I try to spend at least a few days using this process at the end of every calendar year. The more time you spend on it the more value you will likely get out of it. Also, spreading it over several days gives the mind lots of time to process what it's thinking about, which I find useful.

Before we get started, I will mention what this guide is *not* for:

- Determining what your bigger goals in life *should* be—this is something I can't get into here, and something I highly recommend you spend some time thinking about if you haven't al-

ready.

- An excuse when things don't work out. “But I *tried*. I even used this guide!” You are responsible for your life; if things don't work out then figure out *why* and do something about it.

The number one way to use this guide wrong is to be dishonest with yourself, whether intentionally or accidentally. You need to be willing to face yourself, dirt and all. If you're not up for that, then file this guide away and continue on with life as you see fit.

## WHO THIS IS FOR

I'm very analytic, and this guide strongly reflects that. In the process of reviewing my past year and planning the upcoming year I break down my life into a bunch of areas, repeatedly mind map my goals and projects in great detail, develop ways to track my progress, and try to optimize my life for success.

The whole process is very analytical and systematic, and won't work for everybody. There is some risk with trying to optimize other peoples' lives, because we don't all work the same. People are complex. This process, which I enjoy, might be unpleasant

for you.

But even if you find specific parts of this guide useless, I believe you can still get some value out of it.

A large part of the reason this works for me is because I *enjoy* using it. If you don't like using your system then it will not survive for long. If at any point there is a part of the process that you do not want to do or would like to modify, then *please do*.

No matter what, *do what works for you*. The whole point of this process is to help you get the most out of the next year. As you follow or deviate from this process, don't forget the reason why you're reading this in the first place

## A QUICK PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

For the purposes of this guide it is sufficient to say that I enjoy reading and thinking about various topics ranging from understanding how our minds work, thinking clearly, improving productivity and organization, maximizing my positive impact on the world, learning cool things, resolving internal conflicts, and generally improving my life as much as possible.

Life is short, and I'll be damned if I don't at

least *try* to make the most of it.

Planning out my year and optimizing it for success are natural actions in the pursuit of my interests.

If you want to know more, the best place is on my website ([alexvermeer.com](http://alexvermeer.com)), which has a bunch of info on how I run my life, what major projects I'm working on, and what I'm currently reading, among other things.

# I THE TOOLS

## Before we go ahead and do any life planning we need some tools to help us out.

The process outlined in this guide is flexible. You can easily adapt it to use whatever tools you prefer. I always require the following:

- Pen and notebook
- Privacy
- Time
- Mind mapping software (optional)

If at any point in this guide you would rather use a different set of tools—such as paper and pen rather than mind mapping software—then do it!

## A NOTE ON MIND MAPPING

Mind mapping consists of starting with a central idea in the middle of the page and branching out ideas from there. For example, the following two figures are of an early pen and paper mind map I made when outlining this guide and my review mind map from last year, respectively.

For things like outlining, big picture thinking, and connecting ideas, mind mapping is vastly superior to linear note taking, whether it's with pen and paper or a software on your computer.

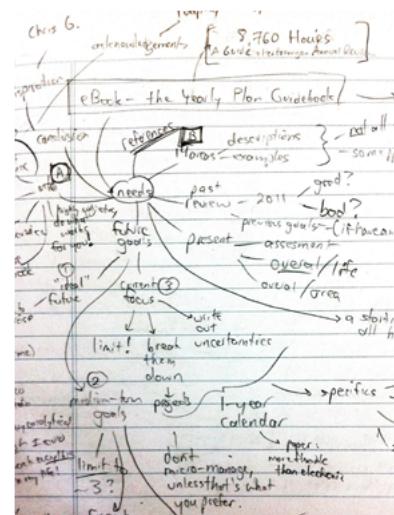


Figure 1: A sample paper & pen mind map

Paper has the benefits of flexibility and creativity, whereas software has the benefits of any electronic tool—mobility, copying and pasting, printing, resizing, easy scaling, etc.

Some mind mapping software options are:

- *Mindmanager* by *Mindjet*—expensive but powerful. (This is my current program of choice, though I have some reservations.<sup>3</sup>)
- *FreeMind*—open source and free.
- *MindMeister*—free and online.



Figure 2: A sample Mindmanager mind map

You must also be sure you will have enough time. As mentioned in the introduction, I

<sup>3</sup> Specifically, when I switched from Windows to OSX I discovered that the Mac version of Mindmanager is *not* as good as for Windows. Some key features I enjoyed using were missing, and it is all-around more buggy. Still powerful, but less good.

stretch out this process over at least a few days to get the most out of it.

## THE TWELVE LIFE AREAS

One last thing before we get to the core content of this guide.

Just as an airplane has wings, engines, windows, controls, and landing gear, your life has various components. Ignoring some of them is like trying to fly without wings.

There are many ways to break down your life into different “buckets.” Over time I have collected and combined various methods and currently use twelve categories.<sup>4</sup>

### VALUES & PURPOSE

Your deeper, underlying, fundamental values and wants. Your philosophy of life. Your sense of purpose, vision, and meaning.

### CONTRIBUTION & IMPACT

How you give value to the world, make a difference, and have a positive impact.

### LOCATION & TANGIBLES

Your physical presence in the world. Where you are in the world. Your living situation. Your stuff. What you own and why. Your material sufficiency. Your mobility.

<sup>4</sup> I keep an up-to-date list of these categories at <https://alexvermeer.com/life-areas/>.

### MONEY & FINANCES

Your savings, investments, assets, and debt. How your money is organization and managed. Your inflows, budgets, and outflows.

### CAREER & WORK

Your work, job, career, and business. Your position, title, role, and responsibilities. Your source of income.

### HEALTH & FITNESS

Your eating habits, diet, exercise habits, and activity levels. How resilient you are to sickness. Your overall energy level. Your sleeping patterns and quality. Your major health issues and susceptibilities.

### EDUCATION & SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Your learning, education, and mental development. Your talents and skills. Your skill development, practicing, and training.

### SOCIAL LIFE & RELATIONSHIPS

The intimate relationship(s) you have or want to have. The quality of your relationships. Your home life and relationships with family members. Your friend circles and social experiences. Your club, organization, and community memberships.

### EMOTIONS & WELL-BEING

Your general feeling about life, optimism

or pessimism, positivity or negativity. Your emotional intelligence. Your subjective well-being, self-esteem, self-respect, and self-compassion.

### CHARACTER & IDENTITY

Your identity and model of yourself. Your strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices. Your intelligence, integrity, honesty, courage, compassion, honor, self-discipline, and so on.

### PRODUCTIVITY & ORGANIZATION

Your memorized solutions, daily routine, schedule, effectiveness, organization, and productivity. Your setup, systems, processes, tools, and techniques.

### ADVENTURE & CREATIVITY

Your hobbies, pastimes, and things you do for fun and adventure. Your creativity and its expression.



Yes, twelve is a lot of categories. Some of you may prefer a different breakdown.<sup>5</sup> Whatever categories you choose to use, the

<sup>5</sup> For example, Chris Guillebeau's [categories](#) or the ones Steve Pavlina [uses in his book](#): Habits & Daily Routine, Career & work, Money & finances, Health & fitness, Mental development and education, Social life & relationships, Home & family, Emotions, Character & integrity, Life purpose & contribution, Spiritual development.



rest of the guide should be easily adaptable to suit.

Note that certain aspects of your life will naturally overlap between the categories above. For example, rock climbing has elements of Social (it is quite communal), Character (facing fears), Fitness (makes you stronger), and Adventure (because it's fun!).

For me, I climb because of how much fun it is, but I think of climbing as *primarily* great for my mental and physical health, so I classify it under *Health & Fitness*. This overlap is perfectly okay.



Now that we have the tools we can begin the actual review and planning.

# *II A SNAPSHOT OF YOUR LIFE*

Now that we have the necessary tools in our toolbox, it's time to build a detailed picture of our life as it currently stands.

## THE INITIAL OVERVIEW

Pull out that pen and paper. To start, you want to get the brain thinking about this stuff by answering the following questions about *the past year*:

1. What went well?
2. What did not go well?
3. Where did you try hard?
4. Where did you not try hard enough?

You also want to ask the following questions about *right now*:

- What is the current situation here?
- How do things stand *right now*?
- How would I summarize to a friend the status of this area?

You don't need to get into thorough detail yet, as that comes later.

I spend at least a few minutes brainstorming (using mind maps) answers to each of these questions. Once I have around ten items I move on—they key here isn't to find 10 things, but to get all the “obvious” things out of your head, and quickly.

## GETTING SPECIFIC: YOUR PRESENT REALITY

Now it's time to dive deep. For each of the areas we will map out a complete “status report” that includes an assessment of that area and any relevant information or metrics.

For example, for *Career & Work* I assess my current career, my standing within the company, my options, and my passion for what I do.

To do this, I create a mind map with something like “Life Status – End of 20xx” in the center with all of the life areas branching out, and then add as much detail as possible about that area.

## GENERAL QUESTIONS & PROMPTS

- Detailed answers to each of the questions at the start of this section.
- A short paragraph summarizing your thoughts about that area of your life.
- Project status updates.
- Projects completed in the past year?
- Milestones from the past year?
- Important events from the past year?
- Accomplishments?
- Failures?

- Key life metrics such as income, quality of relationships, amount of donations, etc.?
- Your overall rating for this area
- Strengths in this area? Weaknesses?

For many of these, such as the overall area rating and many of the key metrics, I like using a seven-level [Likert Scale](#) from 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good).<sup>6</sup>

### HAMMING QUESTIONS

[Richard Hamming](#) used to ask his co-workers over lunch, “What are the important problems of your field?” and then a while later ask “What problems are you working on?” and then a while later ask “Why aren’t you working on the important problems?” He soon found himself unwelcome at many lunch tables!<sup>7</sup>

The general theme here is that we often know what problems in our lives are more important, yet we don’t work on them! Here are some additional questions to ask of yourself, both for each life area, and also

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<sup>6</sup> The full scale goes (1) very bad, (2) bad, (3) somewhat bad, (4) neither bad nor good, (5) somewhat good, (6) good, and (7) very good. If you want to keep things even simpler, consider using the five-level scale: very bad, bad, neutral, good, and very good.

<sup>7</sup> Hamming mentions this in his talk “[You and Your Research](#).” H/t to [CFAR](#) for driving home how useful and important these questions are.

your life as a whole:

- What is the most important problem here?
- What is my biggest bottleneck?
- What is most holding me back from achieving my full potential?
- What single thing, if successfully performed, would have the biggest impact here?

An example might be “solve my bad sleep problems.” If you have reasons to think you are not sleeping well—sleep apnea, bad mattress, intermittent noise, etc.—it seems *really important* to tackle this head-on as quickly as possible. Poor sleep has a significant effect on your quality of life and your ability to *do* anything with your life.

### A NOTE ABOUT JUDGEMENTS

It is important in this part of the process to be *objective and descriptive* about the world, *without judgement*. Don’t *ignore* internal judgements when they pop up—they inevitably will—but write them down separately for the next step of this process. I.e., get it out of your head, but then refocus on painting the descriptive picture of your life.

For example, ideas and future plans often pop into my head while doing this. Same with thoughts like “ugh, I really wish this

part was better.” I quickly jot these ideas down on a *separate* piece of paper, for later reference, and then continue on with the current task.



As you brainstorm for each of the life areas, review the descriptions outlined earlier. Also, feel free to use the following questions and metrics that I use in my review mind map.

### VALUES & PURPOSE

- Do I have a sense of purpose and direction in life?
- What do I want out of life?
- How do I want the world to be different?
- What is my philosophy of life?
- What are my fundamental values?
- What do I truly value?

### CONTRIBUTION & IMPACT

- How am I giving value to the world? How much value?
- How much money did I give away in the past year (assuming it made sense to do so)? Who did it go to? Did it have the most possible impact?
- Am I taking responsibility for, and re-

- ducing, my environmental impact on the world?
- Am I making a difference?
- Am I contributing to important and worthy causes that I care about?
- How much impact does my existence have (environmentally, socially, cognitively)?

## LOCATION & TANGIBLES

- Do I have material sufficiency?
- Where do I live? Where is my home? Where in the world am I?
- What is my living situation like?
- Am I tied to one location? Am I readily mobile (if desired)?
- How much stuff do I own? Do I have too many things?
- Is my life cluttered?

## MONEY & FINANCES

- Do I have savings? How much? Where are they?
- Do I have an emergency fund? How much? Where is it?
- What is the status of my assets and investments?
- Do I know where my money goes?
- Do I budget? What is my budget?

- Am I aware of how I spend my money?
- How do I want to be spending my money?
- Are my finances organized?
- Do I have any (unwanted) debt?

## CAREER & WORK

- How do I make my money?
- What do I do? What is my position? What is my role? Where do I work?
- Am I so good they can't ignore me?
- Does my career give me mastery, control, and purpose?
- Am I engaged?
- Am I well-positioned and networked within my industry?
- How stressful is my career/work?

## HEALTH & FITNESS

- What do I typically eat? What is my current diet?
- Do I regularly eat fast food or make healthy home-cooked meals?
- Am I generally tired or alert?
- How often do I get sick?
- Do you exercise? What form? How often?

- How much do I sleep on average? Am I getting good quality sleep?
- How much do I weigh?
- What is my resting heart rate?
- Are there any health risks that run in my family? Am I taking adequate steps to address these?

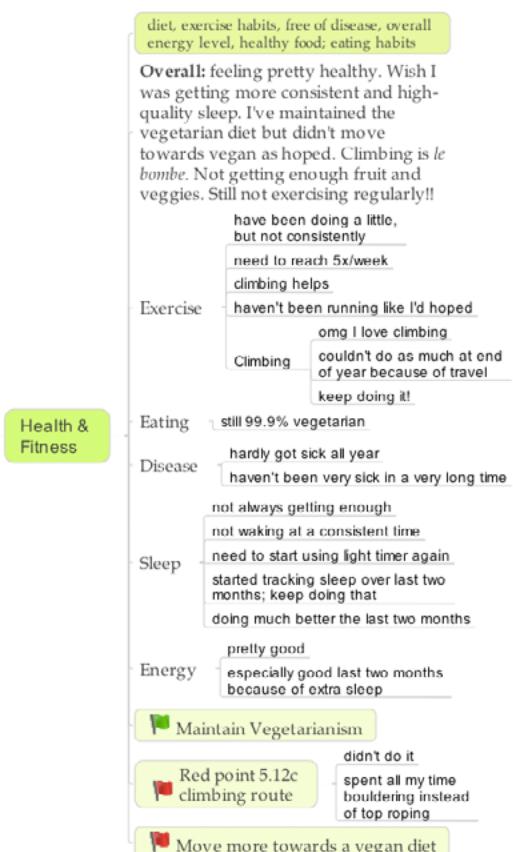


Figure 3: My Health & Fitness review.

## EDUCATION & SKILL DEVELOPMENT

- What is my current education status? What do I know?
- Am I spending time learning new things and developing my mind?
- What are my talents and skills?
- How much have I read in the past year?
- What talents and skills have I recently developed, or plan to develop?

## SOCIAL LIFE & RELATIONSHIPS

- How is my home life?
- How is my relationship with the members of my immediate and extended family?
- Am I a good friend?
- How many core friends do I have? How large are my social circles?

- Am I cared for, loved, and valued by others?
- Are my partner and I aware of each other's needs and desires?
- What clubs, organizations, and communities am I a member of?
- Do I have influence and status in my social circles? In society?

## EMOTIONS & WELL-BEING

- How do I feel about my life?
- Am I enjoying life?
- Am I generally optimistic or pessimistic?
- Am I generally positive or negative?
- Am I easily aware of my current emotional state?
- Am I quick to notice how my emotions are influencing my thoughts, ac-

- tions, and decisions?

- Do I have a regular mindfulness practice?
- Do I practice self-compassion?

## CHARACTER & INTEGRITY

- What identity do I have?
- Is my identity small? <http://www.paulgraham.com/identity.html>
- What are my key strengths and weaknesses?
- What are my greatest virtues and vices?
- How do I rate my compassion, integrity, empathy, honor, self-discipline, self-awareness, responsibility, courage, focus, authenticity, confidence, persistence, effectiveness, etc.?

## PRODUCTIVITY & ORGANIZATION

- What productivity systems and tools do I use?
- Am I organized? What are my systems?
- What are my routines and rituals?
- Is there too much complexity in my life? Do I need to simplify?
- Am I doing any deep work?
- Am I busy due to a lack of priorities?
- Do I have a good workspace environment and setup?

## ADVENTURE & CREATIVITY

- Am I experiencing what I want to experience in life?
- What fun things have I done lately? In general?
- What creative things have I done lately? In general?
- What are my hobbies? What do I do for fun?

This whole process can *easily* take several hours. Once I've gone through every area I do a second pass to catch the things I inevitably missed on the first pass.

The end result is a massive mind map with a complete picture of the current status of your life. The following figure gives my *Health & Fitness* review from last year as an example.

When you are satisfied with your awareness of the present state of your life, you are ready to move on to planning.

# *III THE NEXT 8,760 HOURS*

Now that you have a good assessment of your present state of existence it is time to begin planning for the future as a whole, and specifically the next year.

## YOUR IDEAL FUTURE

The first thing to do is to know what ideals you are aiming for.

I go through all areas of my life and review how I would want them to look in a perfectly ideal world. What kind of career would I have? How much money would I make? What would my social circles look like? How much positive impact would I have on the world? What important problems would I have solved?

I put all of this in a new mind map called Future Vision and Goals.<sup>8</sup>

Since I have already done this for several years, nowadays I tend to review my existing mind map and make any changes as needed. Though, it is important to view information from previous years with fresh eyes, and keep only what is compelling and meaningful right now.

Don't fill up a mind map with things you would *like*, that would be *nice*. For example don't put "Make \$1,000,000,000 per year"—unless that *really is* a goal you're striving to reach.

The point isn't to think, "Well, I *might as well* set my ideal as having 1,000 cars."

Rather, seriously ask yourself what you want your life to look like! When you're done you should have a good sense of what the ideal you looks like. It should be full of big lofty goals and coolness, as well as small nudges and tweaks.

Some questions to help you think about each life area:

- What do I want this to be like?
- What would be awesome?

- What would this look like if it was perfect?
- What is something I've always wanted to do here?
- What would my ideal life look like?
- Are there any specific projects to finish or goals to accomplish in this area?
- if I were to die in a year, what would I do?
- if I were to die in 10 years, what would I do?
- For the metrics in each area, what do I ideally want them to be?
- If this area were improved, what would that *look like*? I.e., make it *visually concrete*.

## THE NEXT 8,760 HOURS

Now it's time to start extracting what to do over the next year from your highest ideals and largest gaps.

What will you do with the next 8,760 hours of your life? Not the next twenty years, not the next five years, but this coming year.

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<sup>8</sup> If you've already done this before, now is a good time to review and update your "ideal future," but there may be no need to go through the entire exercise again.

## YEARLY THEME

It may help to start off with a theme in mind for the upcoming year. This next year can be your “Year of \_\_\_\_\_.” This could be a specific accomplishment (*finish school, run a marathon*) or a general goal (*learn about cognitive psychology*).

For example, my 2011 theme of the year was “independence” because I wanted to take a break from my job, do some backpacking in South America, become “lighter” (sell or get rid of most of my possessions) and free myself from all debt.<sup>9</sup>

Having the theme helped remind me what I wanted the main thrust of my year to be.

If your life is in a state of flux or uncertainty then this may not be useful. In the first few years of doing this, my yearly theme ended up having no bearing on my projects and actions; life was constantly changing, as were my interests and goals. If you expect that to happen to you, consider doing quarterly or monthly themes, or dropping this altogether.

## SETTING A FOCUS

There are a lot of different aspects of your life. Any breakdown of life areas could be broken down further if we wanted to, but then it may get unwieldy.

We have only a limited amount of time, so we need to decide what we will focus on for the upcoming year.

Now you should take some time to figure out what the most important areas of your life you want to focus on in the next year.

I like to rate each category out of seven in terms of importance.

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<sup>9</sup> It was a resounding success!

This should help give an idea of what parts you think are less ideal than others.

Also, don’t forget about the [Hamming Questions](#) mentioned earlier, which can be very useful for identifying priorities and important focus areas.

## YOUR MAJOR GOALS

Do you have any specific 1–2 year goals? Both a benefit and a flaw from picturing your ideal life is that it tends to lack concreteness. Goals tend to resemble new year’s resolutions in that they are vague, non-specific, and hard to measure: “regularly exercise,” for example.

Go through your mind map of your ideal life and extract some specific important goals from it. List some key things that you want to do in the next year. Can they be organized into projects? Are they specific and measurable?

## WHAT ABOUT LONGER-TERM GOALS?

At least for the present, I am done with specific long-term goals. My life is in too much flux to realistically plan what I’ll be doing in next twenty years or even five years. My interests are too diverse to know how I will want to be spending my time five years from now. That said, I *do* still have some pretty specific medium-term goals for the next year or two that I want to focus on.

If you have long-term goals that’s fine, but you may want to break them up into smaller major goals that can be completed in 1–2 years.

Now that you have an idea of what you want to focus on next year, what are your *most important* major goals? Try to limit it to 3–5



things. Remember, if you end up accomplishing those over the next year then you can always add more, but do not bite off more than you can chew.

Now create a new mind map called Current Major Goals and add your most important goals to it.

Some examples of my major goals from previous years:

*Travel*—Get off this continent and experience another culture; expand my knowledge and awareness of humanity; live out of my backpack; meet cool people; have fun. [Success! I backpacked through the highlands of Ecuador for seven weeks at the end of 2011.]

*Write 100,000 words*—Get some practice writing; complete [NaNoWriMo](#); write regular blog posts. [Partial success: I wrote over 100,000 words and completed NaNoWriMo, but did not write nearly as many blog posts as planned.]

*Red point a 5.12c climbing route*—Lead climb a 5.12c difficulty climbing route, using as many attempts as needed. [Failed: spent all my time bouldering (shorter problems, no rope) rather than lead climbing. In this case I dropped the goal half-way through the year because my interests changed.]

*Eliminate ALL financial debt*—Student loans, money owed parents, money owed others; avoid all credit card debt. [Success!]

Spend the time to really think about this! What are the most important things you want to do over the next year?

#### A NOTE ABOUT META-SKILLS

Meta-skills are those that help you achieve *all of* your goals. For example, exercise is overwhelmingly shown to improve many areas of your health and overall life. This better enables you to do *everything* else that you want to do.

Likewise, taking the time to learn about human motivation and procrastination has more than doubled my productivity.

Every time I set my major goals for the year I try to have at least one meta-skill goal. A previous year it was to consciously work on fighting my procrastination tendencies (which resulted in my [procrastination poster](#) and a bunch of permanent improvements to my overall productivity).



Now that we have a good awareness of our present reality and our important major goals, we are ready to set ourselves up for success over the next 8,760 hours.

# IV OPTIMIZING FOR SUCCESS

This may be the most important part of the whole process outlined in this guide. Reviewing our lives and outlining major goals for the upcoming year is great, but it is far from the most we can do.

The internet is *full* of life-hacking and optimization tips and tricks, and I can't possibly cover them all, so here are just a few of my favorites.

## THE PROCRASTINATION EQUATION

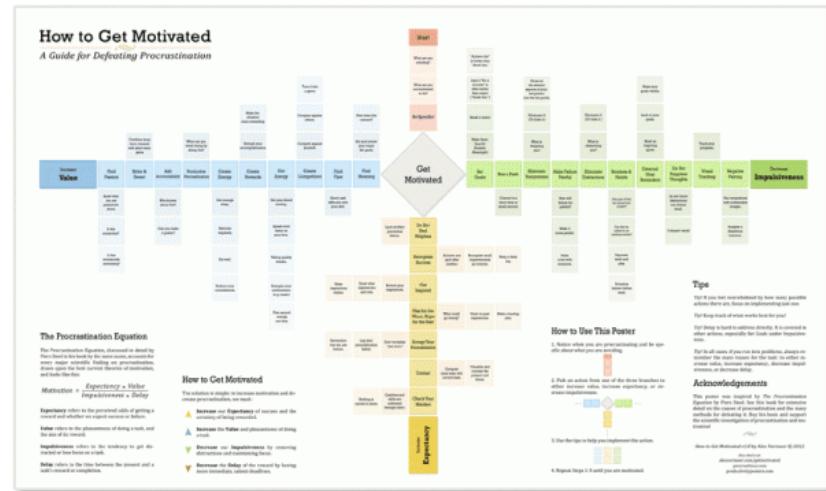
The procrastination equation is a way of illustrating how our motivations work. This equation accounts for every major finding on procrastination

$$Motivation = \frac{Expectancy \times Value}{Impulsiveness \times Delay}$$

What this shows is that we are more motivated (less likely to procrastinate) when either our expectancy of success or how much we value a task are higher. Likewise, if we can decrease our impulsiveness (in short: our inability to focus on one thing) and decrease the delay until we are rewarded or a task is accomplished, we will be more motivated.

This comes from [The Procrastination Equation](#) by Piers Steel, avail-

able from any bookstore. For my own take on summarizing the core ideas in this book, take a look at the [free poster I made](#):



## BUILDING ON THE MAJOR GOALS

For each of your major goals (and as many sub-goals or sub-projects as you see fit) address all of the following things.

### “SUCCESS,” DETAILS, AND METRICS

For each specific goal or project try to answer the following:

- What *exactly* is the project or goal?
- What will success look like? How will the world be *different* if this succeeds?
- How can I measure it?

- What sort of metrics (measurements) can I use to track progress and success?

## ADDRESSING UNCERTAINTIES

What are the uncertainties involved? If a major goal is to begin writing full-time, an uncertainty may be, "My writing won't be good enough."

These constantly creep up in the back of my mind, and having already addressed them at the start of a project is very helpful.

For each uncertainty, write out the following:

1. What you think could happen—*I'll be a terrible writer.*
  2. Your reasons for thinking this—*I'm not a pro; I don't have much experience; there are lots of better writers out there.*
  3. The “worst case” scenario—*I won't become a full-time writer, and I'll have to revert to flipping burgers.*
  4. The reality—*Come on, I've made it this far, my writing can't be that bad; everyone has to start somewhere.*
  5. Your action plan for dealing with it—*Practice, practice, practice; get feedback; read good writers and examine how they write; write 1,000 words per day.*

## CREATING SUB-PROJECTS

Major goals are often exactly that: major. Meaning, they can probably be broken down into smaller, more manageable goals and projects. Review your major goals and break them down if possible.

## YEARLY CALENDAR

I use a compact single-page year calendar from David Seah, available at <http://david-seah.com/compact-calendar/>. This holds my “big-picture” for the upcoming year. On it I place things like:

- Major project milestones.
  - Specific events and important dates.
  - Monthly habits to focus on and develop.
  - Anything else you want to see, such as metrics, quotes, or major goals.
  - Yearly (quarterly, monthly) theme.

Somewhere on the page I also write a very short summary of my major goals for the year. This helps me keep the big picture in mind; I keep it on hand at all times. It is the only form of paper organization I use—everything else is digital. The following figure shows my layout from a previous year:

Another option, on the opposite extreme, is

to buy a huge one-year calendar poster to hang on your wall. I've used the [NeuYear.net Large Wall Calendar](#) with great success. The general theme here is that you can *see the big picture at a glance.*

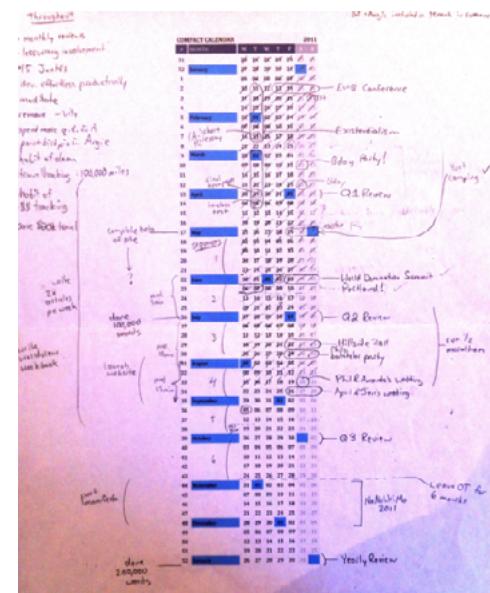


Figure 4: A sample compact calendar.

## ONGOING REVIEWS

## MONTHLY AND QUARTERLY REVIEWS

Every month I spend at least a few hours to do a big picture review of all my projects and progress for the last month. Plan *now* to do them by scheduling them on your yearly calendar, because they are very important.

At the end of every third month—every quarter—I do the above monthly review but in greater detail, spending an entire day on it if possible.

These reviews primarily consist of answering the following questions:

- What is the status of my goals and projects?
- What's going well? What's going poorly?
- Am I on track?
- Are my major goals still my most important goals?

#### SOME THOUGHTS ON WEEKLY REVIEWS

I don't really do weekly reviews, but you may prefer to do them. Many times I've planned to do them and tried to schedule

them in, but they just never happen because I can never find the time to sit down and properly do them. I'll stick with the monthly reviews for now. Do what works for you.

#### PRIORITIZING

One of the most important ideas to take away from this guide and this chapter in particular is the value of *prioritizing*. We have limited time, and many things we want to do with it, so we *must* prioritize. If you're finding yourself too busy or stressed, then *reduce your commitments and goals*. Generally speaking, busyness (the stressful kind) is a choice, and I choose to avoid it.



That's far from everything I could say on this topic, but it's a start! If you went

through this entire process and made the mind maps or notes, you should have:

- A first-pass review of your life.
- A detailed review of the current state of your life and the last year.
- A review of your “ideal you,” your ideal future, your major goals and desires in life.
- An overview of all your goals and projects for this coming year.
- Your major goals, with concrete details and plans for achieving success.
- A compact calendar outlining your major milestones and events for the next year.

I hope you find the process of reviewing your life as useful as I have. Here's to the next 8,760 hours!

8,760 HOURS | **21**

“BUSYNESS IS A  
LACK OF PRIORITIES.”

TIM FERRISS

# RESOURCES AND THANKS

## IF YOU FOUND THIS USEFUL...

Share this guide with anyone else you think might find it useful. It's completely free. Hopefully it will help some people get more from life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Chris Guillebeau is a big inspiration for writing this guide, and my life review and planning process primarily came about from reading about [his yearly review process](#).

Special thanks to Jimmy Rintjema for creating the new and improved formatting for this guide and making it more readable and shareable.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

I'm a big fan of much of [Cal Newport](#)'s writings, many of which are relevant to the topic of this guide, including his books [So Good They Can't Ignore You](#) and [Deep Work](#).

I recommend the series of articles called [The Science of Winning at Life](#) by Luke Muehlhauser.

The [Compact Calendar](#) comes from [David Seah](#) is available on his site.

[Focus](#), by Leo Babauta, is a great free guide to simplifying your life and creating more focus, a good meta-skill.

[How to Get Motivated: A Guide for Defeating Procrastination](#) is a free poster I made, based on [The Procrastination Equation](#) by Piers Steel.

I'm having a lot of success with the [Pomodoro Technique](#) for managing and tracking my productivity, time, and successes. Read more about it at [the original site](#) or on my site at [My Pomodoro Project](#) and [One Year of Pomodoros](#).

## VERSION 2

This is the second version of this guide, updated from the original I wrote back in 2012. The main changes are as follows:

- An overhaul of the life areas, categories, breakdowns, prompting questions, and metrics.
- Several added subsections.
- A bunch of minor typo-corrections, general fixes, and re-writes.

## FEEDBACK

Any and all feedback is always welcome. Was this guide useful? Did you have to heavily adapt it for your own uses? Let me know at [alex@alexvermeer.com](mailto:alex@alexvermeer.com).