Discipline Absorbs Chaos. Try This Game-Changing & Simple Way to Manage Your Time.
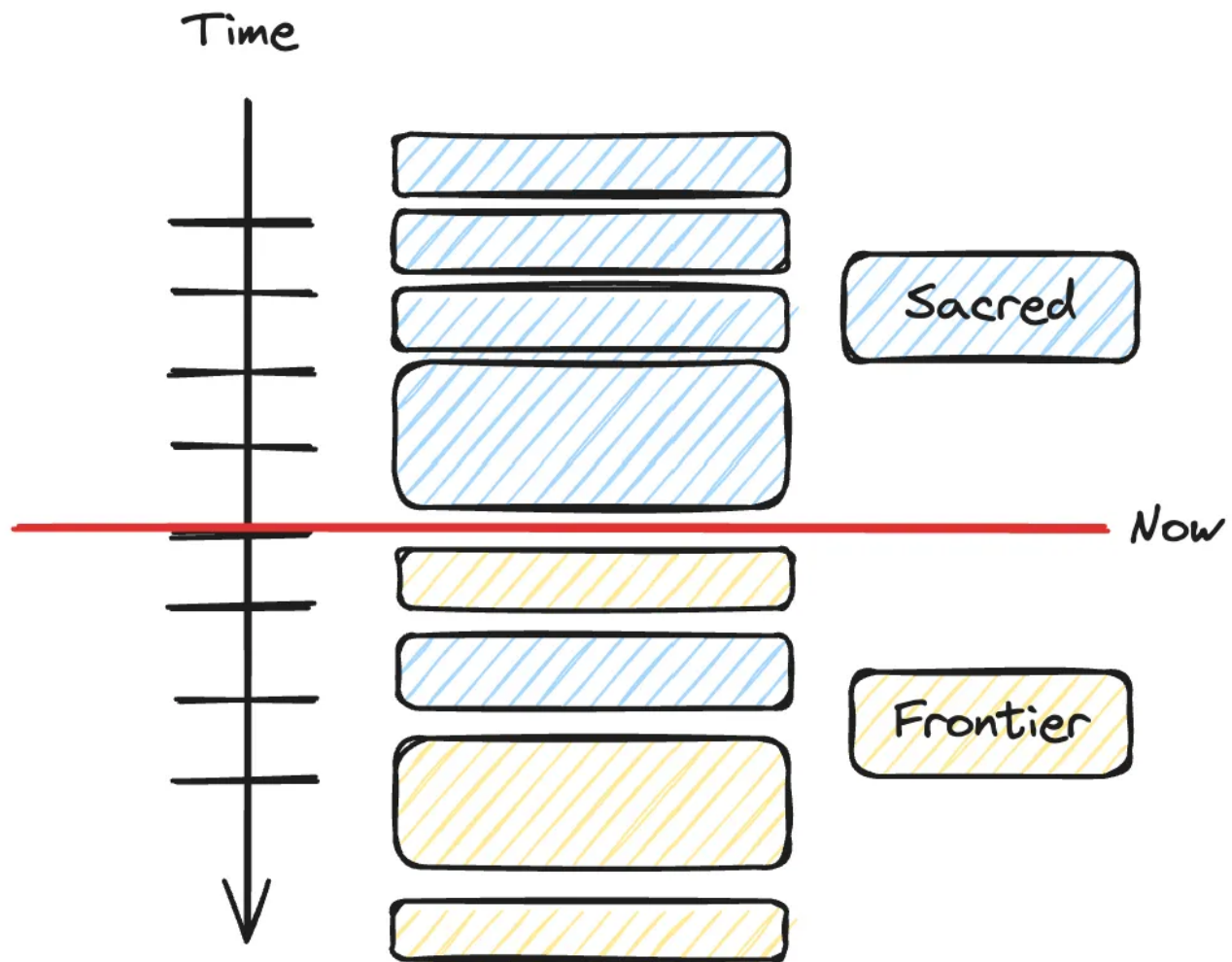
Geet Duggal • 13 mins   Jun 21st

You choose your favorite apps, papers & pens. The 'Frontier' time blocking method takes care of the rest.

How do you plan your day? Until I committed to the method described in this post, my planning for the day went like this.

Either:

- I see my day through the lens of previous social commitments. The interstitial time is filled *ad hoc* with tasks I'd like to get done or unpredicted tasks that need attention. (For example, consider a day with three one-hour work meetings. Unscheduled time can easily be filled by checking emails, responding to an unexpected message from a family member, and making progress on one important project.)

OR

- I create a thoughtful plan for the day including social commitments. (For example, I essentially allocate most hours of my working day with meetings and pre-plan time to process emails and work on projects that demand my attention.)

Either way, I am left unsatisfied and overwhelmed with the result. For the latter, I am lucky if even half of what was planned was accomplished. For the former, I lack a sense of agency: I feel my day has essentially been planned *for* me not *by* me.

This is the last post in a trilogy where I am addressing three areas I feel like I can always improve on (links below):

1. task management,
2. habit formation, and

3. event prioritization.

I saved this post for last since this is where it all ends. All the notes you capture, tasks you accomplish, projects you complete, and habits you build happen *at specified times.* Or not. You execute according to a plan. Or not.

The method described in this post is the simplest and most important technique in the trilogy. It presents a middle way that affords me the flexibility needed to accomodate interruptions from unpredicted events and allow space for pleasant surprises. At the same time, it combats anxiety resulting from not planning enough and leaves me with an incredibly positive sense of purpose and intent.

Time blocking

Timeblocking or *time blocking* (also known as *time chunking*[1]) is a productivity technique for personal time management where a period of time—typically a day or week—is divided into smaller segments or blocks for specific tasks or to-dos. It integrates the function of a calendar with that of a to-do list. It is a kind of scheduling.[1]

When done properly, timeblocking can help eliminate distractions and discourage unproductive multitasking.[1][2][3]

History [edit]

The practice of timeblocking is nearly as old as the use of calendars. Evidence suggests that calendars during the Bronze Age corresponded to a particular agricultural action. This enabled farmers to plant and harvest at the right times, reducing crop spoilage.

As the standard definition of a calendar gradually evolved to the Gregorian one that is widely used today and each unit of time became subdivided into smaller and smaller segments, timeblocking evolved to a more detailed scale.

While the first known user of timeblocking is unknown, Benjamin Franklin was known to be an early adopter. Franklin avidly detailed the activities he would undertake every hour of the day, including rest and chores. He blocked off hours at a time to engage in deep work and allocated two hours for lunch.[4]

Since the advent of personal digital assistants in the 1990s and later smartphones in the 2000s, timeblocking has transformed from a paper-and-pen format to a digital format in the form of calendaring software and time-tracking software. Digital calendars enable users to share meetings and send meeting invites, furthering collaboration. This has reduced the need for paper calendars, though users still remain.[5]

One of the early adopters of timeblocking was Benjamin Franklin

Benefits [edit]

Timeblocking aids in daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly planning. It is based on a single-tasking mindset, promoting devoting one's full attention to a task for a specified duration of time. The main benefit of timeblocking is that it helps users achieve more in the same amount of time. Cal Newport, author of *Deep Work* and assistant professor of computer science at Georgetown University has stated,

> Sometimes people ask why I bother with such a detailed level of planning. My answer is simple: it generates a massive amount of productivity. A 40-hour time-blocked work week, I estimate, produces the same amount of output as a 60+ hour work week pursued without structure."
>
> —Cal Newport[6]

Timeblocking can help users be more realistic about what can be accomplished in a day and help them structure their day more productively.[7] Additionally, timeblocking personal time such as breakfast in the morning or vacation time can help alleviate workplace-induced stress. Timeblocking encourages allocating deliberate time away from the desk, reducing the chance of employee burnout. This can help workers feel more rejuvenated and more productive when they are working.[8] Finally, timeblocking creates a sense of artificial urgency to get each task done in a predetermined amount of time which may help some users accomplish more in the same time period, with one study finding that professionals who timeblock accomplish 53% more tasks than otherwise.[9][10]

Criticisms [edit]

David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done*, once espoused a no-frills approach to calendar organization, advocating for only putting deadlines on calendars.[11] However, in recent years, he has expressed doubts about his previous approach to calendar management, reneging on his previous ideology. In an interview in 2014, he has supported timeblocking by stating, "yesterday I blocked my calendar for two different time slots to work on a project."[12][13]
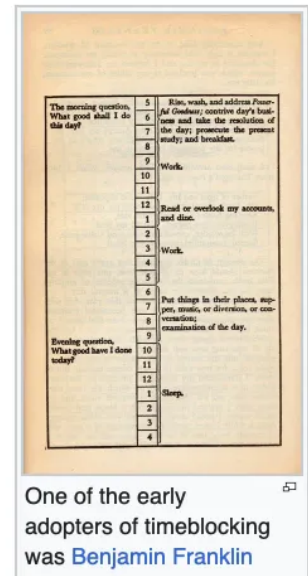
Screenshot from Wikipedia page on time blocking

The method I describe in this post is a form of time blocking. The idea is very simple but surprisingly powerful: you simply block off portions of your day to perform specific tasks. That's it.

For posterity, I have included a screenshot of the post on Wikipedia for time blocking above. A few key points:

- Time blocking has a rich history probably beginning around the time humans started using calendars. Benjamin Franklin illustrates how he blocked off his typical day in his autobiography (the other two posts in this series literally show images of time blocking in his autobiography)

- These days, time blocking is typically associated with integrating a calendar of social events (eg. work meetings, doctors appointments, visits with friends) with times allocated to perform personal tasks.

- Key benefits: derive a realistic picture of what you can do with your time, use your time with intent, increase focus when working on a task, increase chance of task completion due to urgency of a deadline.

I've linked to some nice resources on time blocking at the end of the post. None of them quite capture the principle behind a variant of it I use. I have tested my variant (the 'Frontier method' for the purposes of this post) on-and-off for over a decade now and have converged on the following principle for time blocking. Simply put, when I use it, I feel clear-headed and as if I'm living with intent. When I don't, I don't.

Discipline absorbs chaos

The way I look at it, the calendar should be sacred territory. If you write something there, it must get done that day or not at all.

— David Allen, Getting Things Done

When you schedule a doctors appointment, an important work meeting, or job interview, the chance of you attending that event is extremely high. It is easy to overlook the importance of what I just said. "The chance of you attending that event is extremely high." Barring some sort of unforeseen event, this part of your future is essentially set in stone. You may not be able to predict every single detail what *exactly* will happen, but you can anticipate a surprising amount of what will come to pass. In a very real way, you are literally predicting the future by scheduling this event.

For example, if you schedule a doctor's appointment at 1 PM on a Monday, you first need to make sure that it doesn't conflict with any other social obligations. You also need to be sure you have enough time to get to and from that location to be available for your next commitment. Those time constraints may affect the route you take to the doctors office and even your mood going into and out of the visit. All the details aren't known, but you have a surprisingly predictable picture of your future just due to that one event.

Imagine that you can experience the same level of predictability for the completion of personal tasks as you do for the completion of social events.

The problem with time blocking is that it is easy to become overly optimistic with what you think you can do. Your day can end up being planned in such a rigid way that you will inevitably be dissapointed. By

over-planning you have relinquished your power of predictability—a sense of certainty of what will happen, why it is happening, and impact to the rest of your day. Consciously or not, you don't trust your own system.

The 'treat your calendar as sacred territory' sentiment from David Allen quoted above has been contrasted with time blocking. It could even be considered as critical of time blocking (see the Wikipedia article screenshot for example). I argue that the sacred territory sentiment is the linchpin of effective time blocking.

'Discipline absorbs chaos' means that you are committing to a personal task on your calendar *as if it were an important social event*. This means that you must be very careful with what you commit to, have the discipline to stick to it, and be honest with yourself about the chaos that you will encounter during your day. These are often considerations when we plan social events, so why not give the same consideration to important personal tasks?

The primary power behind the effectiveness and predictability of social events is social accountability. So much so, that there is a growing community and cottage industry of services that are based almost solely on harnessing this power. Think group exercise classes, "study with me" sessions, and productivity clubs (eg. flow.club). People are actually willing to pay large sums of money for basic social accountability.

'Discipline absorbs chaos' is the uber *self accountability* principle. The time you have blocked as 'sacred' is the time you hold yourself accountable to. Stick to that discipline, one small sacred time block at a time. You can become as reliable to yourself as you are to others. You are now a superhero with the superpower to better predict your own time while

leaving space for serendipity.

How do you choose what tasks to personally commit to, and at what time? Part of the reason that this post is the bookend of a three-part series is that the first two posts help to answer that question. In short, capture all of your thoughts in one place, identify the most important projects by (re)discovering what truly resonates, and be mindful of your own human needs as you choose difficult tasks to conquer and new habits to build.

If that paragraph is too much of a mouthful, a much simpler approach works in a pinch.

> *Time block specific and constructive tasks that — after sincere reflection — address issues you are most anxious about.*

Anxiety doesn't need to be treated as a negative feeling. It can often be a useful signal. A signal that we should be paying attention to something that it is indeed important. Treat your anxiety like a problem a good friend is experiencing and face it with curiosity.

As a simple personal example, I recently had a fleeting thought about an upcoming potluck lunch that gave me a sudden wave of anxiety. I could have exposed myself to a range of unhelpful responses to this emotion. Anything from frustration at needing to attend this social event in the first place to avoiding the emotion altogether and distracting myself.

Instead, I chose to spend *just a little time* and realize the true source of my anxiety. I was worried that another important task wouldn't get done and that I wouldn't have time to prepare food for the potluck. Upon

reflection, all I had to do was *commit* to approximately one one-hour chunk of time and one two-hour chunk of time for each task respectively to address the anxiety.

Like magic, after I committed to this, any subsequent arrival of the fleeting anxiety while going through the chaos of the day was just that: fleeting. I was able to swiftly dismiss it beacause I knew I had a plan and, crucially, the discipline to see it through. Without the latter, I would be back where I started all over again.

It is in this way that the discipline of committing to personal tasks as you would your social events *absorbs* the chaos of everyday life. Rather than allow the anxiety of things you need to do contribute to the chaos of your day, free your mind to gracefully weather unexpected storms and embrace the kind of chaos that makes life worth living: new discoveries and pleasant surprises.

The Frontier time blocking method
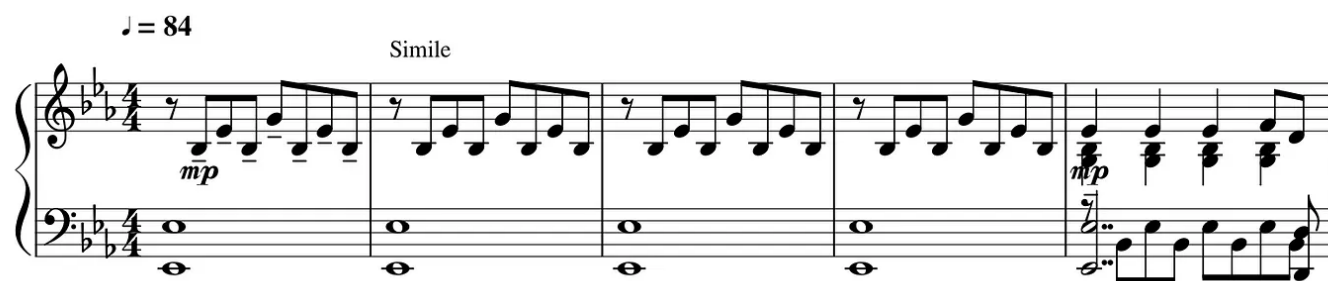
The Frontier time blocking method adds one simple step beyond committing to 'sacred' time as described above. Encoded in the method is the acknowledgment that while the past is fixed, the future is a kind of fron-

tier: you have an idea where you want to head, but it is not fixed in time yet. As time inevitably moves forward, one second per second, some *thing* happens: either something you've commited to or something you haven't.

frontier | frənˈtir |
noun
a line or border separating two countries: *international crime knows no frontiers | France's frontier with Belgium | figurative : the frontier between thought and reality is confused | [as modifier] : an end to frontier controls.*
• the extreme limit of settled land beyond which lies wilderness, especially referring to the western US before Pacific settlement: *his novel of the American frontier.*
• the extreme limit of understanding or achievement in a particular area: *the success of science in extending the frontiers of knowledge.*

The Frontier is a space where you can imagine possible futures. Events here are events that you will likely complete at some point, but you haven't necessarily committed to them. As time progresses you have the freedom to play and make these decisions.

By adding this one (and only one) step, the Frontier method strikes a good balance between your calendar being a place only for sacred events and your calendar being an overcommitted wish list. You give your time structure while allowing room to play with it.

> *Keep two calendars. One is sacred: personal or social obligations that that you commit to. The other is your frontier: uncommitted events that have already happened, and those that may even may come to pass.*

The rest of the method consists of details left up to you. The beauty of this method is that you can also see how you planned your time versus how it got used at a glance. It is therefore a good way to manage your

time moving forward and reflect on how you used your time in retrospect.

Personally, the retrospective view on the order of a few days has been particularly valuable. The retrospective view is a ledger of events that have actually happened: those planned and committed to (sacred), and those that were either unexpected or not explicitly committed to (frontier).

The most important piece of information I get from this view is whether or not I've planned my time in a balanced way. On days where I am over-committed (too many sacred events), I'm forced to confront this fact and see if there's anything I can subsequently do on similar days to give myself more breathing room. And on days that I'm under-committed (tackling many events in the frontier), I am naturally motivated to plan my upcoming time thoughtfully and with more personal commitments.

Tools

The beauty of the Frontier time blocking method is that it is simple and you can use any combination of a variety of tools to help you as you come to appreciate the basic principles described above.

- **Working memory**. This is an easily overlooked but often unconsciously used time blocking tool by most of us. Many times your working memory is all you need for short-term planning. For example, you are going on a walk and know you want to visit the park and the grocery store. These two events are sacred and you already might have an idea as to the time or order you want them to occur.

As you are walking, you may decide you want to explore a different route or drop by another store that piques your interest. These are events that are now on your frontier. They may or may not happen, but they help you distinguish better between what needs to happen and what is purely for fun and exploration. This example is basic, but I use to to illustrate that there is a surprising amount of psychological benefit to partitioning what is sacred from what is on the frontier. In an example as simple as this, you may decide to frontload the sacred events so they are not weighing on your mind for the rest of the walk. The 'Satisfy the Beast' post in this series (linked below) covers the topic of working memory in a lot more detail.

- **Alarms**. In the Frontier time blocking method, sacred events need to happen. However, it is easy to become distracted and miss a commitment you have made to yourself. Calendar notifications, email reminders, etc. tend to be too noisy and too dismissable in my experience. It is unlikely that anyone relies on calendar reminders to wake up in the morning, but they do rely on alarms. I find it useful to stick to one-ish alarm device that alerts you to the sacred. For me, it's my Apple Watch. It's always on my wrist and easy to set alarms. For those willing to use a slightly more niche piece of software, I have even created an [iOS shortcut that will set alarms on my iOS device based on calendar events](). This allows me to simultaneously enjoy the advantages of alarms while having a record of events on my calendar (discussed below).

- **Pen & paper.** While I don't use pen & paper myself to time block my day, it is my runner up tool of choice. There's nothing like having a piece of paper, index card, a generic journal, a bullet journal, or even a dedicated time blocking journal to organize your day. Like

having a dedicated device for an alarm, it is a special place you have to manage your most precious resource: time. This analog approach tends to be physically rewarding in the sense that it forces you to slow down and apperciate the act of putting a pen to paper, drawing out your time blocks, and paging through previous days to reflect on your activity. (The power of physical rewards are discussed more in the 'Satisfy the Beast' post linked below.)

- **Text files**. Text files are like pen and paper, but in digital form. They are simple, always with you, and more malleable than their physical counterparts. I therefore think that just using text files can be a very effective way to time block your day. In two other short posts (linked below), I define a timestamp-prefixed markdown item in a text file as a 'tick item'. Tick items can, for example, be used to track your sacred events and those on the frontier without a fancy calendar app. There are a variety of tools that help visualize your time blocks using this format and in those posts, I illustrate examples in Obsidian.

- **Calendar apps**. This is my preferred approach. I literally just keep two Google calendars: my personal calendar that has events I share with other people and have committed to (the sacred set of events), and a calendar called 'Frontier' that is dedicated to playing with events that may or may not come to pass. I like this approach because it is easy to add tasks I'd like to get done in the near future and even at multiple scales (eg. weekly or monthly using 'all day events'). Because events in the frontier aren't committed to, I can play with them in a very flexible way. Calendar apps make it very easy to drag these events around and see them in the context of time. If I decide a task on the frontier is important enough to com-

mit to, I simply reassign it to my sacred calendar.
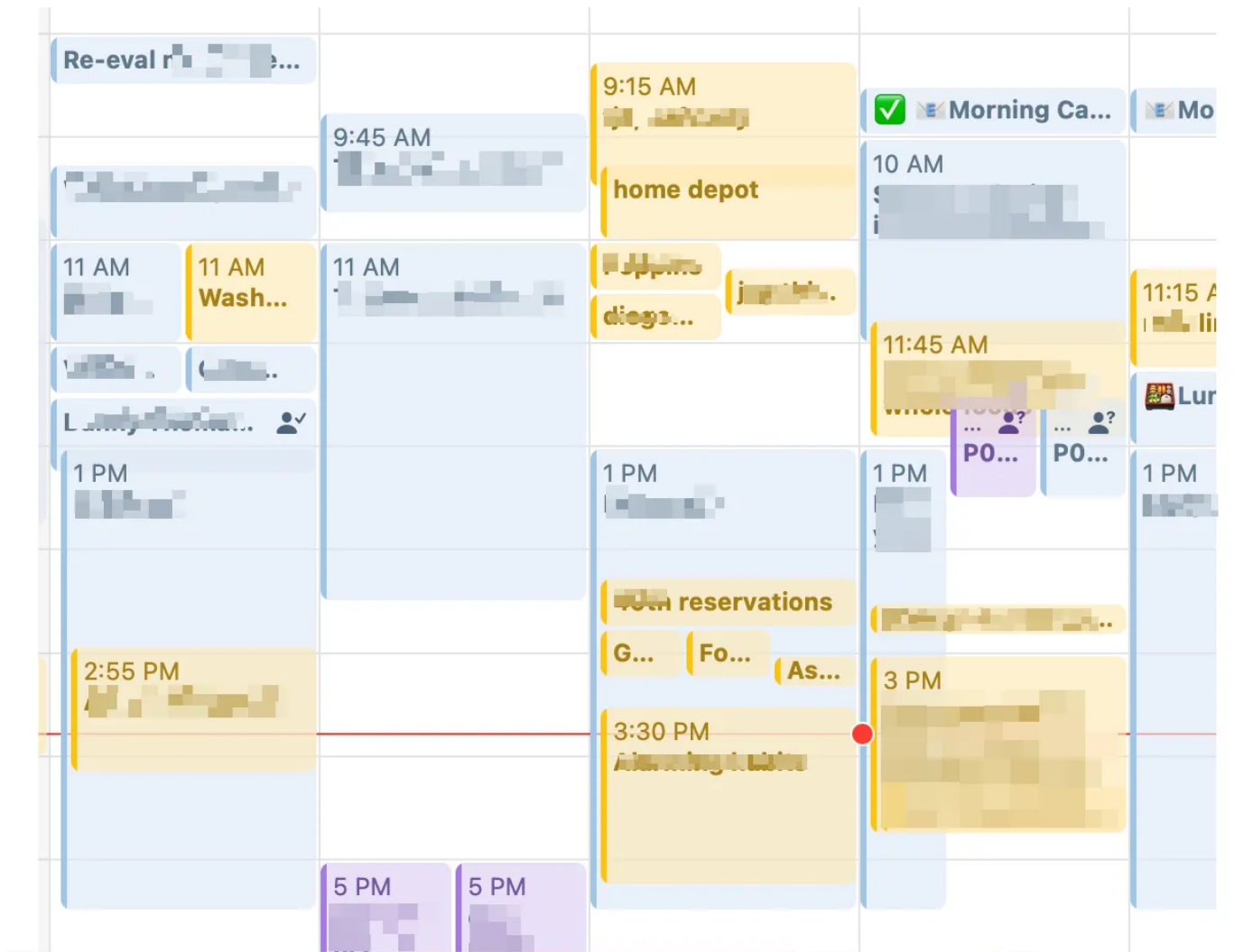
TIme periods in blue are sacred that I am commited to something and times in yellow are those on the frontier: either I haven't commited to them or they happened already but were unplanned. It is easy to use a calendar view like this to drag and drop events across time and at different scales.

- **Modern productivity apps**. Apps like Amplenote and Reclaim are great examples of apps that allow you to adopt the basic principles of a frontier approach. I will use this space as a living bullet point to mention any other applications I'm particularly impressed with. I won't cover them in detail here but you may want to try them

out yourself in this context. For example, one thing I really like about Reclaim is that it will not only help you schedule particular kinds of tasks and habits on your calendar, but allow ranges for flexibilty and it helps automatically move events around for you. You can specify what calendars are associated with events it manages. For personal tasks, I find it particularly useful for Reclaim to help me manage events on my Frontier and then I can decide whether to reassign them to sacred myself.

The small differences in a person's brain state that correlate with different bodily actions typically have negligible correlations with the past state of the universe, but they can be correlated with substantially different future evolutions. That's why our best human-sized conception of the world treats the past and future so differently. We remember the past, and our choices affect the future.

— Sean Carroll, The Big Picture

Commit your time wisely.

The Final Frontier, Enterprise D (Source: Deviant Art)

My related posts

- Capture to do. The first post in the trilogy. Capture all of your thoughts in one place, Identify the most important projects by (re)discovering what truly resonates

- Satisfy the beast. The second post in the trilogy. Be mindful of your own human needs as you choose difficult tasks to conquer and new habits to build.

- Interstitial journaling. The basis of a simple way to manage Frontier time blocking purely in plain text

- It was love at first site with this Obsidian plugin. The power of Obsidian for visualizing plain text events as if they were on a social feed (Thino) and calendar app (Day Planner).

Related links (external)

- [Cal Newport (possibly originalish) blog post](#) on time blocking which is further discussed in his book *Deep Work*

- [Todoist blog post](#) on time blocking: nice discussion of time blocking with respect to task batching and day theming.

- [Cal Newport and Ryan Holiday podcast](#) on time blocking: great for an overall motivation and history.

- [Ali Abdaal video segment on time blocking](#): a good, quick illustration of how time blocking works and addressing a common argument against it: "where is the freedom / joy?"

- [A dediated physical journal for time blocking](#)

- [Time blocking and Bullet Journaling](#)