

## INTRODUCTION

# The Power of Time Blocking

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**T**he *Time-Block Planner* implements a personal productivity system that I've perfected over the past fifteen years. During this period, it helped me earn a PhD in computer science at MIT and then go on to achieve tenure as a professor at Georgetown University, while simultaneously publishing six books for general audiences, including multiple bestsellers. Most importantly—and one of the aspects that I believe sets my system apart from any other—I did all of this while rarely working past 5:30 p.m. I need my evenings free to wrangle my three young kids. My productivity system made all this possible, and the planner you're currently holding will enable you to implement it in your own professional life.

As you'll learn in the detailed instructions that follow, the core of my system is a simple but powerful strategy called *time blocking*. Most people approach their workday by trying to cross things off a task list in the small slivers of time that remain between attending meetings and reacting to emails and instant messages. Time blocking, by contrast, requires you to figure out in advance how you want to spend every minute of your day. Instead of trying to generally "be productive," you partition your time into blocks and assign specific work to them. This critical shift from managing tasks to managing time can *massively* increase the amount of useful work you accomplish. It also provides an anxiety-reducing sense of control over your schedule.

I didn't invent time blocking. As soon as people began thinking seriously about personal productivity, they began preaching the benefits of this strategy. In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin explains, "Every part of my business should have its allotted time." He then provides a sample time-block schedule that divides up his waking hours into blocks, each dedicated to a different productive activity. In his 1967 classic, *The Effective Executive*, one of the first professional productivity books ever written, Peter Drucker echoes Franklin's commitment to managing time instead of tasks. "Effective executives, in my observation, do not start with their tasks," he writes. "They start with their time." A more recent article, appearing on a popular career website, reports that both Bill Gates and Elon Musk deploy variations of time blocking to help fuel their "freakish" levels of accomplishments.

This technique, in other words, is one that serious productivity aficionados have been deploying with great success for many years. This planner will help you follow their lead by providing you the tools needed to design and execute your own effective time-block schedules. What you won't find in this planner is a substitute for your calendar. I assume you already manage your meetings

and appointments elsewhere, such as in the shared digital calendars that more and more organizations require their employees to use. Though you will copy events from your calendar into your daily time-block schedules, the planner is not their long-term home.

This planner also doesn't provide room for you to permanently store all of the various tasks and obligations for which you're currently responsible. The modern knowledge worker is burdened with many hundreds of these responsibilities at any given time; it's simply not practical to keep track of them in a paper notebook that's replaced multiple times a year. When using this planner, you will copy selected tasks from whatever system you use into your daily time-block schedules, but as with meetings and appointments, this will not be the primary place you store them.

The time-block planner instead focuses on a narrower objective: getting the most out of the time and attention you have available to allocate toward work each day. You already know what you need to do. This planner helps you do more of it, and do it more intentionally, than you ever thought possible. But enough with the preamble. Let's dive into the details of exactly how this planner works. . . .

METRIC TRACKING

## WEEK 1 DAY 1

Daily Metrics

shutdown complete 

TASKS:

IDEAS:

COLLECTION

( )

*date* \_\_\_\_\_

A large 8x8 grid for scheduling tasks. The grid consists of 64 individual squares arranged in 8 rows and 8 columns. The first column contains a small circle icon in its top-left square.

TODAY'S DATE

TIME-BLOCK GRID

Figure 1

## **Instructions for Using the Time-Block Planner**

The time-block planner dedicates a two-page spread to each workday. I call these the *daily pages*. It also dedicates a two-page spread for each week, which I call the *weekly pages*. We'll return to the weekly pages later in these instructions. For now, let's focus on the daily pages, as they're the key to this system's scheduling discipline.

As shown in figure 1, the daily pages contain several elements. On the right-hand side is the time-block grid. This is where you'll maintain your time-block schedule for the given day. On the left-hand side is a pair of columns for collecting obligations or ideas that come up while you're in the middle of executing a time block. By writing these intrusions down in the moment to deal with later, you'll avoid the need to divert your attention. The left-hand side of the daily pages spread also includes a box dedicated to tracking metrics designed to measure behaviors that you identify as crucial to succeeding in your professional life. Inside this box is the “shutdown complete” checkbox that indicates that you've completed a shutdown ritual for the day. As you'll learn, this ritual has become a favorite of this system's devotees.

Let's walk through the use of these daily page elements one by one, starting with the most important, the time-block grid.

## >>> USING THE TIME-BLOCK GRID

At the beginning of each workday, flip to the next empty daily pages spread and record the date in the box at the top of the right-hand page. You're now ready to create a time-block schedule for the day. To do so, you'll use the time-block grid, also on the right-hand page. Each solid horizontal line represents one hour, and each dotted line represents a half hour. Moving from the top to the bottom,

		(1) Morning Tasks
9	finish report	- email triage - submit form - call Karen - fill out doodle
10	(1)	
11	research client x	
12	lunch w. Sam	
1		
2	email	
3	planning meeting	
4	edit copy & shutdown	

Figure 2

label the solid lines on the left side of the page with the hours during which you plan to work during the day. For example, if you’re working from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., you’d label the first solid line 9:00, the second 10:00, and so on, down to 5:00.

You can now create a time-block schedule for these hours. When you build your first schedule for the day, use the first column of the grid. The other columns will be used later if you end up needing to fix your schedule as the day unfolds.

To build the schedule, partition your working hours into blocks of time, and assign to each block the specific work you plan to accomplish during this time. You record this schedule on the time-block grid by actually drawing boxes around the time captured by each block and then labeling each block with the work assigned to it. If you need more room for a block’s description—for example, if you want to list out multiple tasks you plan to accomplish during a short block—put a number in the block, and then use that same number to label a list of the extra information in the upper right corner of the time-block grid, where it’s unlikely to get in the way of future schedule fixes. To make these instructions concrete, see figure 2, which shows a sample time-block schedule.

When building your time-block schedule, you should first reference whatever calendar you use to make sure that you’re adding time blocks for any meetings or appointments you’ve already scheduled. The real decision then becomes what to do with the free time that remains. To help make these choices, next consult whatever external system you use to track and organize all of the tasks, projects, long-term goals, or other obligations for which you’re currently responsible. You want your schedule to help you make progress on the right activities.

Finally, keep in mind factors such as time of day—perhaps earlier in the day is better for hard thinking and later in the day is better for small tasks—and

(1) Morning Tasks		
9 finish report		email triage submit form call Karen fill out doodle
10 (1)	(1) cont.	
11 research client x	email	
12 lunch w. Sam	lunch w. Sam	
1 email	start research	
2		
3 planning meeting	planning meeting	planning meeting
4 edit copy & shutdown	finish research & shutdown	shutdown

Figure 3

how you're feeling. If you're exhausted, you might want a schedule designed to help you catch up on administrative obligations, whereas if you're feeling energized, you might want to put aside large blocks of uninterrupted time for intense projects.

As your day unfolds, you should use your time-block schedule to determine

what work you should be doing at any given moment. It's important that you don't let your attention wander. Focus exclusively on the work scheduled for the current block until the block is completed. If you need breaks, schedule them.

It's unavoidable, of course, that you'll occasionally deviate from your current schedule. For example, maybe a given task took longer than expected, or your boss asked you to stop everything to tackle a new, urgent assignment. In these cases, you don't abandon your time-block schedule; you instead *fix* it whenever you next get the chance. To make this fix, first cross out the time blocks that remain in your current schedule. Then, in the column to the right of your current schedule, create a new schedule for these remaining hours, and turn your attention to executing this new plan. If this revised schedule breaks at some point, then repeat the same fixing process: cross out the blocks that remain and schedule new blocks for this time in the next column to the right. And so on. Figure 3 shows an example of this schedule-fixing process in action.

Notice that it's possible to instead craft your block schedule using pencil and then fix it by erasing and redrawing the blocks in the same column. I generally avoid this method for two reasons: the erasing and redrawing can get messy, and I like to have a record of the changes I made, as these can later help me identify recurring scheduling mistakes.

## ADVANCED TIME-BLOCKING TIPS

### **Tip #1: Embrace schedule fixes.**

The goal of time blocking is not to stick to your original schedule no matter what. It's instead to try to always have an intentional plan for what to do with your