

# The PARA Method: The Simple System for Organizing Your Digital Life in Seconds


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Imagine for a moment the perfect organizational system.

 system that told you *exactly* where to put every piece of information in your life – every document, file, note, agenda, outline, and bit of research – and exactly where to find it when you needed it.

  ch a system would need to be incredibly easy to set up, and even easier to maintain. In other words, only the simplest, most effortless habits endure long term.

 would need to be both flexible, adapting to your needs in different seasons of your life, and also comprehensive, so you can use it in every one of the many places where you store information, such as your computer's file system, a cloud storage platform (e.g., Dropbox or Google Drive), or a digital notetaking app.

But most of all, the ideal organizational system would be one that leads directly to tangible benefits in your career and life. It would dramatically accelerate you toward completing the projects and achieving the goals that are most important to you.

In other words, **the ultimate system for organizing your life is one that is actionable.**

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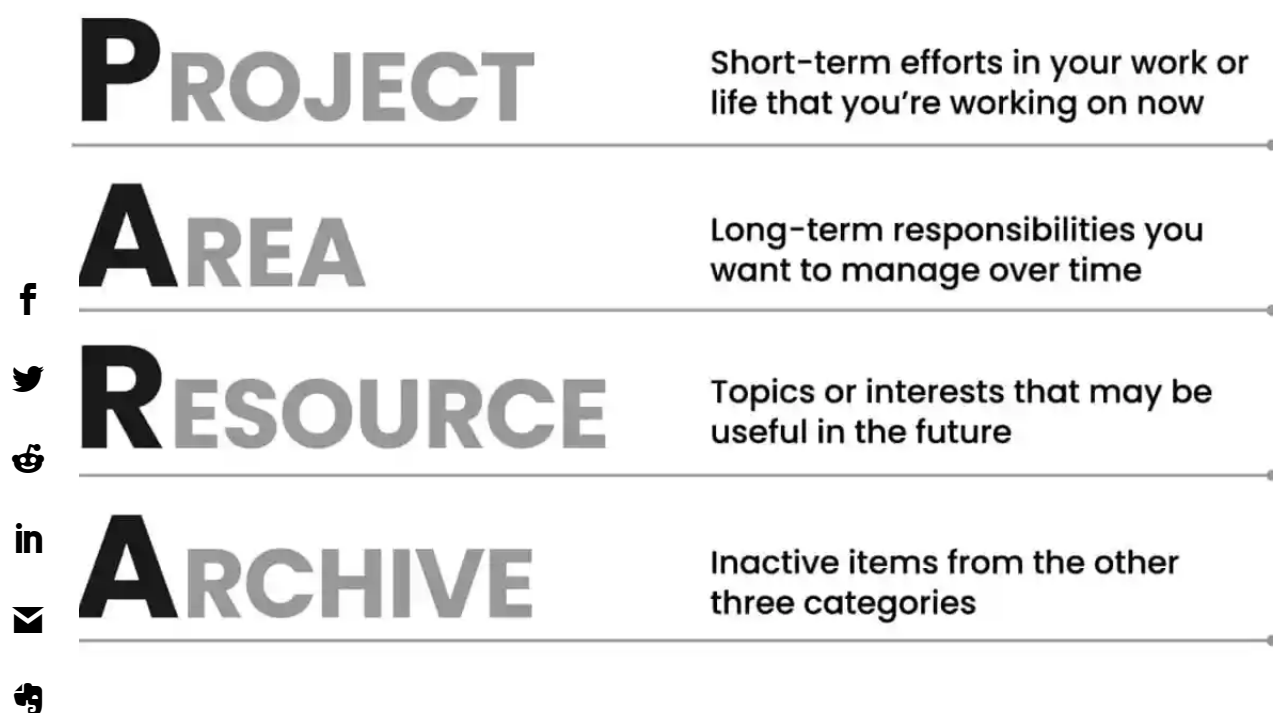
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I promise you that it will not only bring order to your life, but equip you with a set of tools for skillfully mastering the flow of information to achieve anything you set your mind to.

## 4 Categories to Encompass Your Entire Life

PARA is based on a simple observation: that there are only four categories that encompass all the information in your life.



You have **projects** you're actively working on – short-term efforts (in your work or personal life) that you take on with a certain goal in mind. For example:

- Complete webpage design
- Buy a new computer
- Write research report
- Renovate the bathroom
- Finish Spanish language course

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- Personal responsibilities such as Health, Finances, Kids, Writing, Car, or Home

Then you have **resources** on a range of topics you're interested in and learning about, such as:

- Graphic design
- Personal productivity
- Organic gardening
- Coffee
- Modern architecture
- Web design
- Japanese language
- French literature
- Notetaking
- Breathwork
- Habit formation
- Photography
- Marketing assets



ally, you have **archives**, which include anything from the previous three categories that is no longer active, but you might want to save for future reference:

- Projects you've completed or put on hold
- Areas that are no longer active or relevant
- Resources that you're no longer interested in

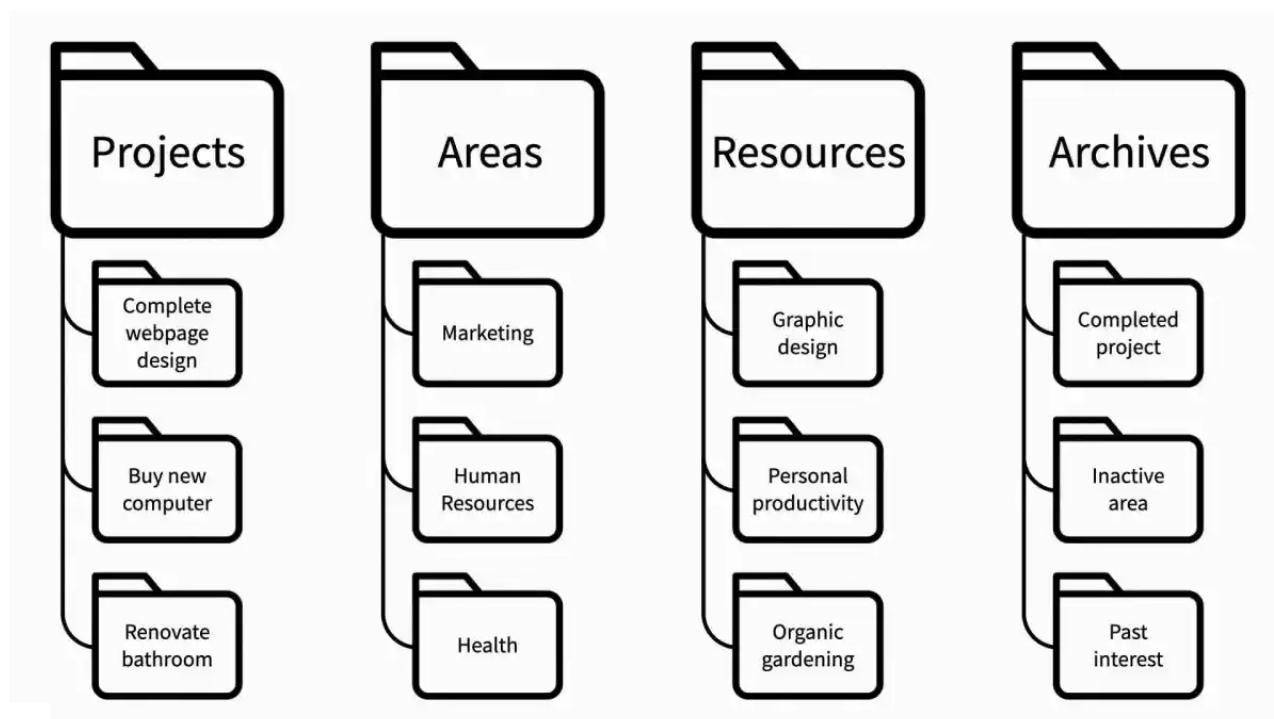
And that's it! Four top-level folders – Projects, Areas, Resources, and Archives – each containing a small number of subfolders dedicated to each active project, area of responsibility, resource, and archive in your life.

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may be difficult to believe that a complex, modern human life like yours can be reduced just four categories. It may feel like you have far more to deal with than can fit into such simple system.

It is that exactly the point: if your organizational system is as complex as your life, then the demands of maintaining it will end up robbing you of the time and energy you need to live that life.

The system you use to organize information has to be so simple that it *frees up* your attention, instead of taking more of it. Your system has to give you time, not take time.

## The Key Principle – Organizing Information By Your Projects And Goals

Most of us first learned how to organize information in school. We were taught to categorize our class notes, handouts, and study material by *academic subject*, such as

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down for the final exam, because there isn't one.

What you do have, both at work and in life, are *outcomes you are trying to achieve*. You are trying to launch a new product, plan a family vacation, come to a crucial decision, find daycare in your neighborhood, publish a new piece of writing, or reach a quarterly sales number.

In the midst of your busy day, as you are trying to make these things happen, you *absolutely do not have time* to go rummaging through a vast category like "Psychology" to find the one piece of information you need.

Instead of organizing information according to broad subjects like in school, I advise you to organize it according to the projects and goals you are committed to right now. This is what it means to "organize by actionability," a mantra I will return to again and again throughout this book.



When you sit down to work on a graphic design project, for example, you will need all the photos, documents, assets, and other material related to that project all in one place and ready to go.



That might seem obvious, yet it is exactly the opposite of what most people do. Most



people tend to spread out all the relevant material in a dozen different places that would take them half an hour just to locate.

How do you make sure that all the material related to each project or goal is all in one place? You organize it that way in the first place. That way you'll know exactly where to put everything, and exactly where to find it.

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To help you put what you learn into practice, I've created a **handy printable cheat sheet** with the main principle and rules for PARA success.

Send me the PARA Cheat Sheet

Look out for an email from [hello@fortelabs.com](mailto:hello@fortelabs.com)

## The Power of Organizing By Project



For several years, I worked as a productivity coach in the San Francisco Bay Area. It was the peak of the tech boom, and high-powered professionals from some of the world's most influential companies were looking for any edge in their performance. I was happy to oblige.

I reached several executives at a well-known biotech firm in South San Francisco, on a beautiful campus overlooking the bay. I remember one beautiful spring day I was waiting for my next client, a Senior Director in charge of developing several new life-saving pharmaceuticals.

Once he arrived, our coaching session started like every other, with a simple question of mine: "Do you have a project list?"

When working with a client as a productivity coach, one of the first things I will always ask them is to show me their project list. I need it to get a sense of what kind of work they do, their current workload, and what priorities and outcomes they are trying to move forward.

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## My Project List

1. Hiring/staffing
2. Events
3. Direct reports
4. Strategic planning
5. Research
6. Vacations
7. Professional development
8. Productivity

**f** you see the problem? Look again closely.

**t** a single item on this list is a project, according to our earlier definition. Does “strategic planning” ever end for good? Is there ever a time when you can permanently cross off “vacations” from your list? Hopefully not!

**in**

**every** item on this list is, in fact, an area of responsibility. This might seem like semantics, but it’s anything but. I’ve learned that no matter how smart or driven you are, there are **too** critical things you cannot do until you break down your areas of responsibility into specific projects.

## 1. YOU CAN’T TRULY KNOW THE EXTENT OF YOUR COMMITMENTS

One of the most common complaints I hear from people is that they “have no bandwidth.” And I sympathize – how much of the time does it feel like you have way too much on your plate?

But as long as you view your work through the lens of areas, you’ll never quite know *just how much* is on your plate. Looking at the list above, how much of a workload does

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should do next? For example:

### Hiring Projects

1. Hire an “Engineering Manager”
2. Hire a “Project Analyst”
3. Hire a “Marketing Director”
4. Hire a “Field Researcher”
5. Hire a “Financial Manager”



## YOU CAN'T CONNECT YOUR CURRENT EFFORTS TO YOUR LONG-TERM GOALS

One of the most challenging (but also rewarding) aspects of knowledge work is that it requires our creativity. And creativity can't really be sustained without a sense of motivation. You can't keep doing your best thinking and contributing your best ideas if you're burned out and demoralized.

What does our motivation depend on? Mostly, on making consistent progress. We can endure quite a bit of stress and frustration in the short term if we know it's *leading somewhere*.

Which brings us to our second problem: without a list of individual projects, you can't connect your current efforts to your long-term goals.

Look at the list above again. None of the items on it will end or change – that's the

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project list is constantly turning over. This turnover creates a cadence of regular victories that you get to celebrate every time you successfully complete a project. Imagine how motivated and accomplished you'd feel by breaking out the broad area of "Events" into each individual event you're running:

### Event Projects

1. Quarterly staff retreat
2. Annual stakeholder conference
3. Workshop on research methods
4. End-of-year hiring fair
5. Executive summer retreat



matter how wide-ranging your responsibilities are, you can *always* break them down into smaller projects. And you must, if you want to know whether you're actually making progress toward your goals.



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Order your copy now. The book is available in hardcover, ebook, and audio format.

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## Getting Organized For the Life You Want to Lead

Using PARA is not just about creating a bunch of folders to put things in.

**f** s about identifying the structure of your work and life—what you are committed to, what you want to change, and where you want to go. It is about organizing information in a way that it supports and calls into being the future life you want to lead.

**in** much of what we call “organizing” is essentially procrastination in disguise. We tell ourselves we’re “getting ready” or “doing research,” pretending like it’s progress. When in reality, we are seeking any little thing we can polish or tidy to avoid having to face the task we are dreading.

PARA cuts through this facade, giving us a method for organizing anything that is so radically simple, there is no excuse and nothing left to do except the next essential step. It is a minimalistic way to add *just enough* order to your environment that you have the clarity to move forward, and no more.

There are other more complex, sophisticated, and specialized ways of organizing information out there, but PARA is the only one that stands the test of time because it gives you more time than it takes.

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# Get the cheat sheet to implementing the PARA Method



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