

# **The PARA Method**

ALSO BY TIAGO FORTE

*Building a Second Brain*

# The PARA Method

**Simplify, Organise, and Master  
Your Digital Life**

**TIAGO FORTE**

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To my mother, Valéria,  
whose patience and thoughtfulness  
gave me the keys to unlock  
the secrets of organizing

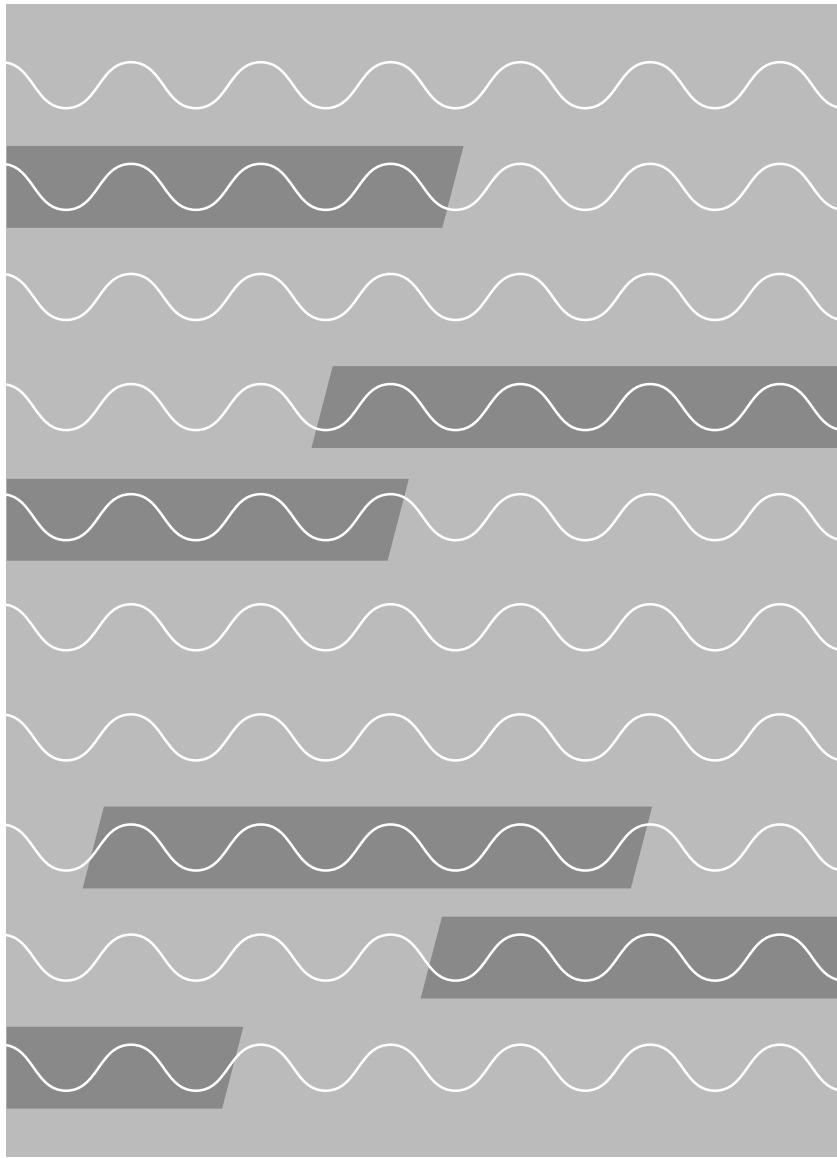
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# **The PARA Method**



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## **INTRODUCTION**

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# **How to Read This Book**

**E**very word in this book is designed to do one thing: propel you forward into taking action.

As you read, highlight anything that strikes you as interesting, surprising, or especially relevant to you. Those highlights can be the first items you add to your new PARA system!

I've structured this book in three parts and included everything you need to know to get started in Part 1. I strongly recommend you stop there and try implementing PARA for yourself, which takes less than sixty seconds using the instructions I've provided.

Part 2 contains additional guidelines and best practices I've gathered from years of coaching people through adopting PARA. I suggest you set a reminder to come back to this part after a couple of weeks testing your system in the real world.

Part 3 contains "deep dives" on more advanced topics that my collaborators, clients, and students have found helpful, such as how to formulate a project list, how to adopt habits to stay organized, and how to use PARA to enhance your focus, among others. These chapters can be read as needed when you find yourself hungry for more guidance.

There was a time when I insisted on reading every book I picked up from beginning to end, without exception. I slogged through countless boring, irrelevant books before eventually realizing that this attitude is completely counterproductive. You don't get a prize for starting a book or finishing one. Books are not trophies to collect or evidence you've learned anything.

The only reward from reading a book like this one comes from ***putting what you learn into practice***, and you can do that after you've read just the first five chapters.

To match your commitment with one of my own, I will make you five promises as to what will happen once you adopt PARA:

**PROMISE #1:**

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**You will stop wasting time  
looking for information:**

*You will know exactly where  
your most important notes and  
documents live, and how to  
find them in seconds.*

**PROMISE #2:**

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You will gain greater focus  
on what matters most:

*You will have greater clarity  
about what's important so you  
can intentionally move your  
life into alignment with your  
interests and goals.*

**PROMISE #3:**

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**You will make  
things happen:**

*You will consistently finish  
what you start, beating  
procrastination and tapping  
into your past learning to  
make progress fast.*

**PROMISE #4:**

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**Your creativity and productivity will soar:**  
*You will have access to a playground of your own ideas to finally do the creative work that's been locked up inside you.*

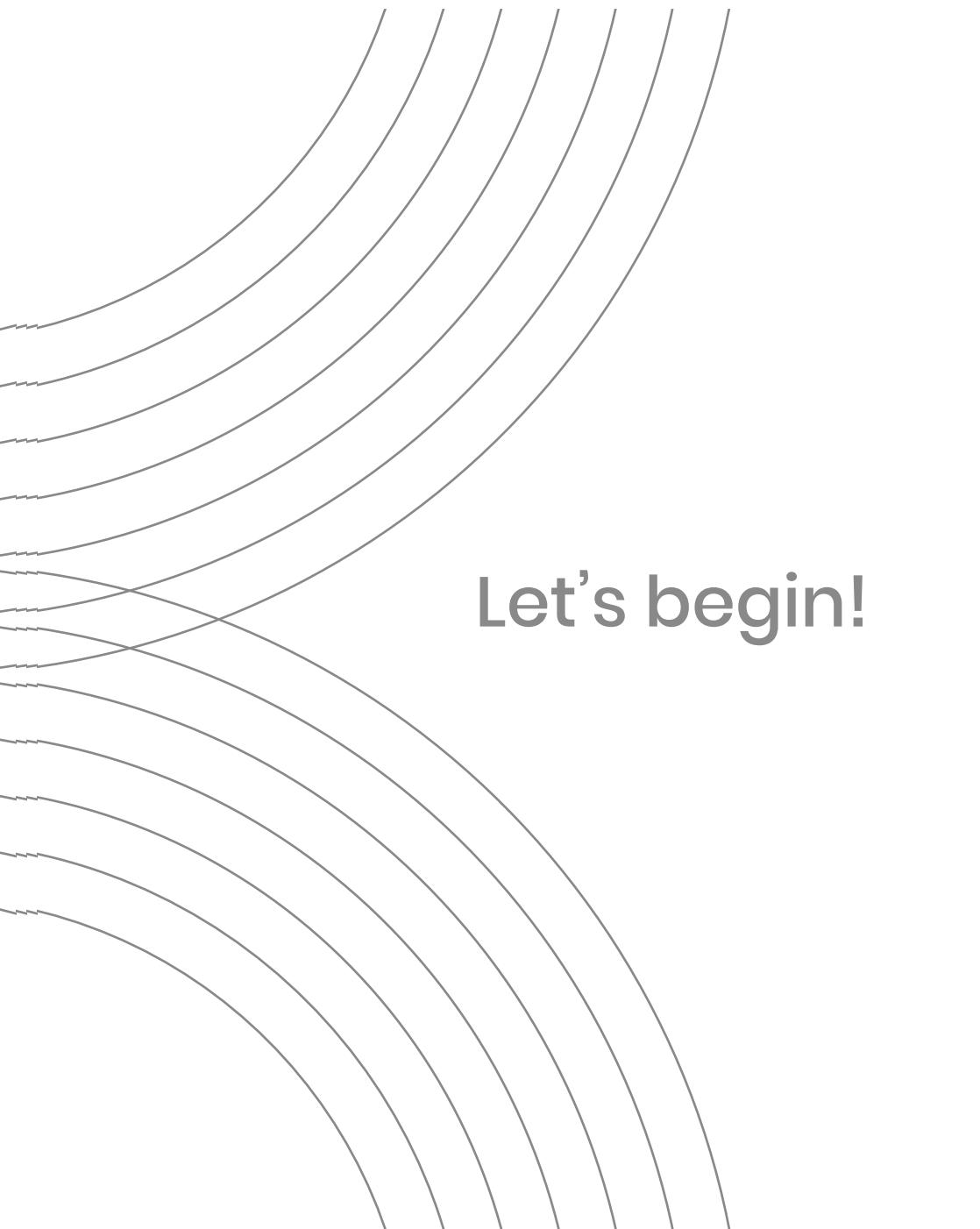
**PROMISE #5:**

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**You will beat information  
overload and FOMO:**

*The fear of missing out on a  
key piece of information will  
disappear and be replaced  
with the confidence that you  
have everything you need to  
get started.*



The background of the image consists of a series of thin, dark gray lines that curve upwards from left to right, creating a sense of motion or depth. These lines are irregular and vary in thickness, with some being more prominent than others.

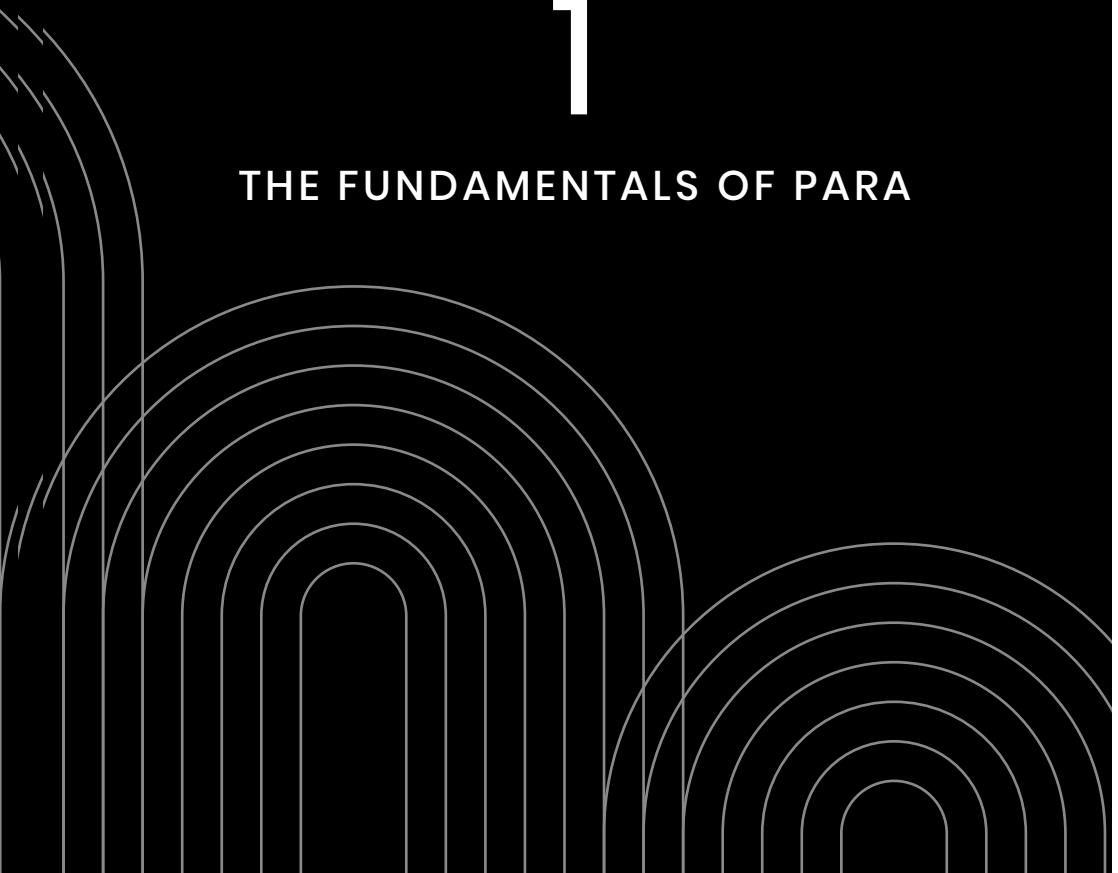
Let's begin!

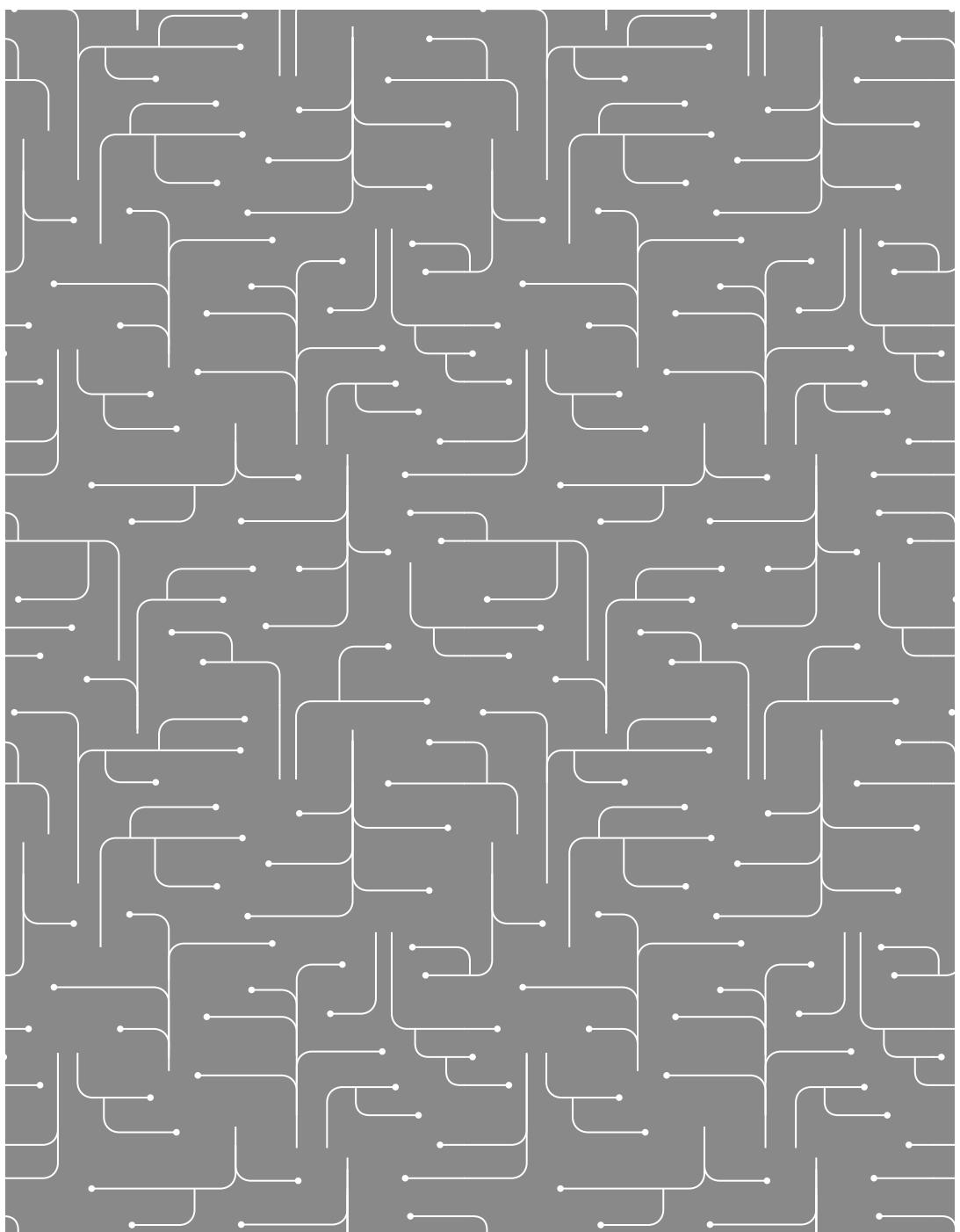


PART

1

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF PARA





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**1**

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# Introducing PARA

Imagine for a moment the perfect organizational system.

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

Such a system would need to be incredibly easy to set up, and even easier to maintain. After all, only the simplest, most frictionless habits endure long term.

It would need to be both flexible, adapting to your needs in different seasons of your life, and comprehensive, so you can use it in every one of the many places where you store information. For example, the Documents folder on your computer, a cloud storage platform,<sup>1</sup> or a digital notetaking app.<sup>2</sup>

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*.

Instead of putting more obstacles in your path, postponing the actions that will make a difference, it would pull those actions closer and make them easier to start and finish.

After more than a decade of personal experimentation, teaching thousands of students, and coaching world-class pro-

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1 Commonly used cloud storage platforms include Microsoft OneDrive, Google Drive, Box, and Dropbox.

2 Popular digital notetaking apps include Notion, Evernote, Microsoft OneNote, Apple Notes, Google Keep, and Obsidian. You can find my full recommendations for which app to choose in our resource guide at [buildingasecondbrain.com/resources](http://buildingasecondbrain.com/resources).

fessionals, I've developed such a system. It's being used today by elementary schoolchildren all the way to multinational corporations, and everyone in between.

It's called PARA—a simple, comprehensive, yet flexible system for organizing any type of information across any digital platform.<sup>3</sup>

Whether you want to save excerpts from a book you're reading, a voice memo about an interesting new idea, inspiring quotes from a podcast interview, web bookmarks with useful online resources, notes from important meetings or phone calls at work, photos that remind you of cherished memories, or your own personal journal entries, this system will equip you with a set of tools for preserving any information far into the future. And not only preserving it, but skillfully using it to achieve anything you set your mind to.

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<sup>3</sup> *Para* is a Greek word that means “side by side,” as in “parallel”; this reminds us that PARA works “side by side” with our brain to augment our memory and thinking.

## Four Categories to Encompass Your Entire Life

PARA is based on a simple observation: there are only four categories that encompass all the information in your life.<sup>4</sup>

### PROJECTS

Short-term efforts in your work or life that you're working on now

### AREAS

Long-term responsibilities you want to manage over time

### RESOURCES

Topics or interests that may be useful in the future

### ARCHIVES

Inactive items from the other three categories

You have **projects** you're actively working on—short-term efforts (whether 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

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<sup>4</sup> You can find a full list of common examples for each of the letters of PARA at [buildingasecondbrain.com/para/examples](http://buildingasecondbrain.com/para/examples).

- Write research report
- Renovate the bathroom
- Finish Spanish-language course
- Set up new living room furniture

You have **areas** of responsibility—important parts of your work and life that require ongoing attention more broadly. These might include:

- Work responsibilities such as Marketing, Human Resources, Product Management, Research and Development, Direct Reports, or Software Development
- Personal responsibilities such as Health, Finances, Kids, Writing, Car, or Home

Then you have **resources**<sup>5</sup> on a range of topics you're interested in and learning about, such as:

- Graphic design
- Organic gardening
- Web design
- Japanese cuisine

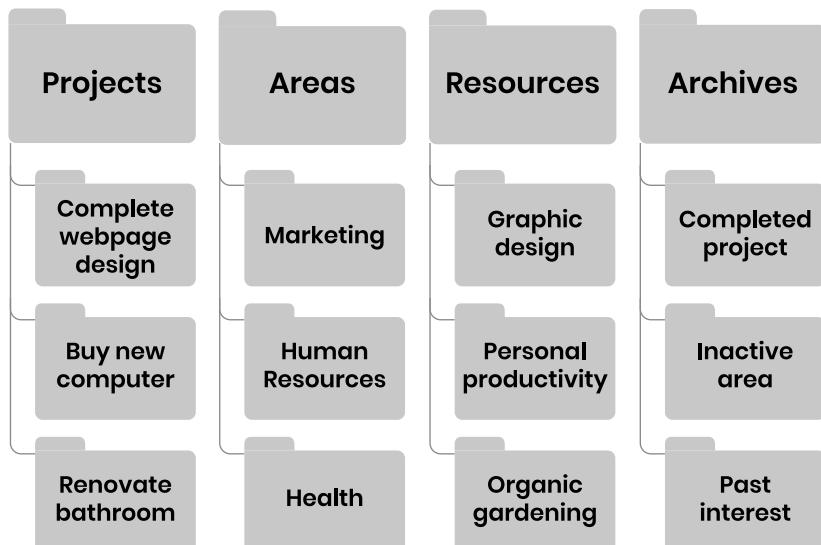
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<sup>5</sup> Alternative words for this category that some people have found more helpful are “reference” or “research.”

- Photography
- Marketing assets

Finally, 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<sup>6</sup>—Projects, Areas, Resources, and Archives—each containing subfolders dedicated to each specific project, area of responsibility, resource, and archive in your life.

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

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<sup>6</sup> I will use the term “folder” to refer to the main unit of organization used by most software programs; some software instead uses directories, notebooks, tags, or links, which work just as well.

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 must 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 math, history, or chemistry.

Without realizing it, we took that same approach into adulthood. We continued to categorize our documents and files according to incredibly broad subjects like “Marketing,” “Psychology,” “Business,” or “Ideas.”

This makes zero sense in your postacademic career. In the workplace, there are no classes, no tests, no grades, and no diplomas. There is no teacher to tell you what to write 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, come to a crucial decision, or reach a quarterly sales number. You are doing your best to plan a fun family vacation, publish a new piece of personal writing, or find affordable day care in your neighborhood.

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 article you saved six months ago.

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.

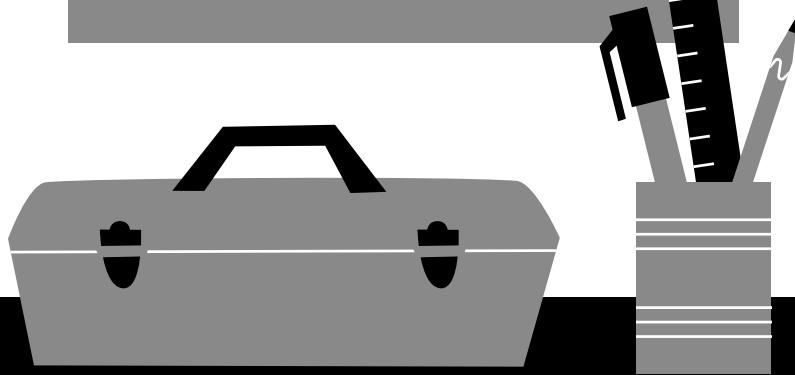
This is what it means to “organize for action,” a mantra I will return to throughout this book.

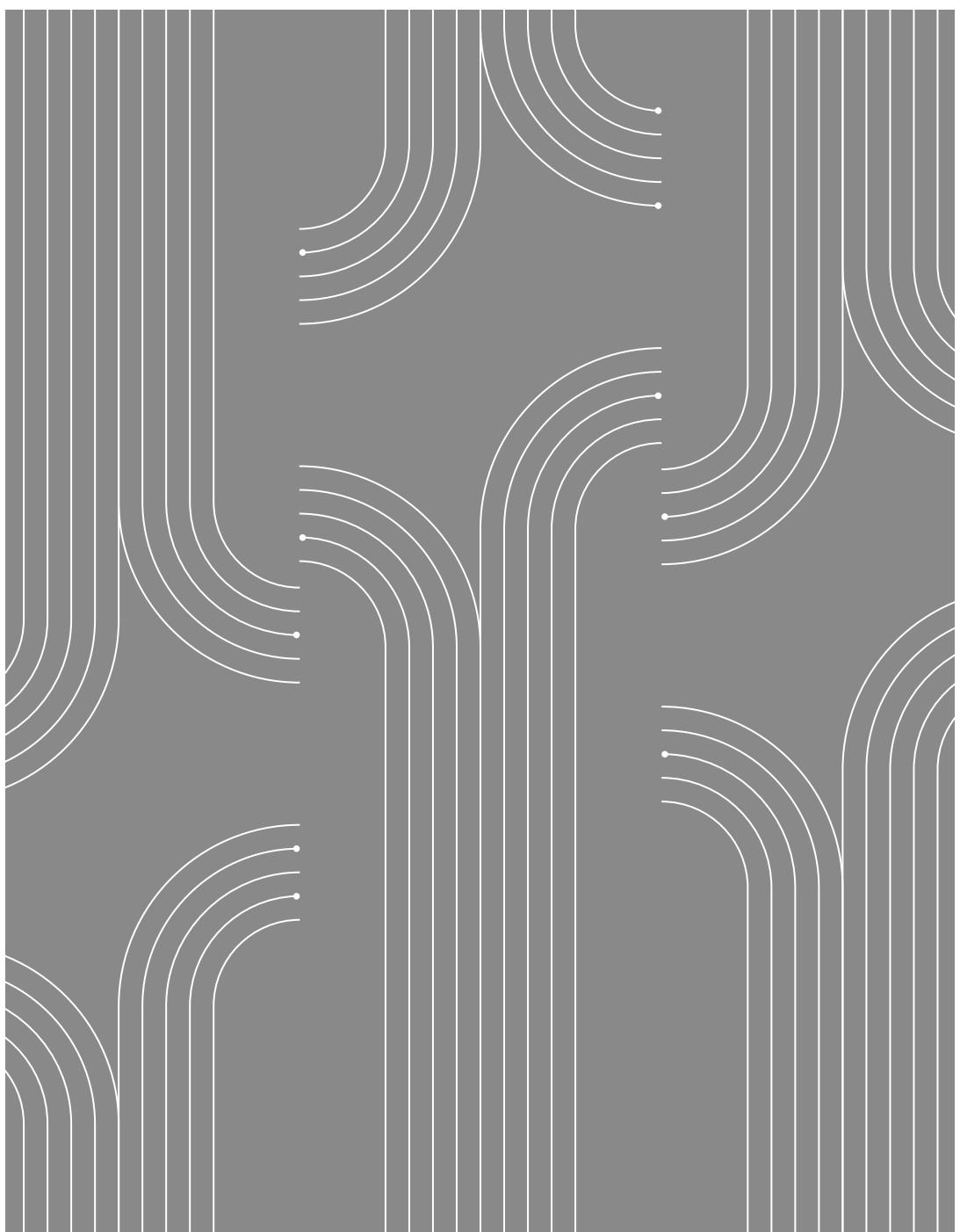
When you sit down to work on a graphic design project, for example, you will need all the notes, documents, assets, and other material related to that project all in one place and ready to go.

That might seem obvious, yet I've found it is exactly the opposite of what most people do. Most people tend to spread out all the relevant material they need to make progress in a dozen different places, which means they have to spend half an hour to locate them before they can even get started.

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 know exactly where to put everything and exactly where to find it.

Your goals are that much closer to being achieved when all the information you need to execute your vision is right at hand. Let's find out what you're capable of achieving when the obstacles to that vision disappear.





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# The Power of Organizing by Project

I started my career as a productivity coach in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early tens. 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 coached several executives at a well-known biotech firm in South San Francisco, on a beautiful campus overlooking the bay. I remember one spring day I was waiting for my next client, a