

Summary To-Do List Formula: A Stress-Free Guide To Creating To-Do Lists That Work!

Take a look at the following numbers, courtesy of productivity app developer

41% of to-do items are never completed.

50% of completed to-do items are done within a day.

18% of completed to-do items are done within an hour.

10% of completed to-do items are done within a minute.

- What do these numbers tell us? First, they reveal that many to-do lists are ineffective.
- Second, many to-do list items are completed quickly, some within minutes.
- This suggests many people's lists fail to specify the amount of time individual tasks will take to complete.
- Third, it indicates that many to-do lists are too long. They're overloaded with tasks.
- Fourth, the data above suggest that many people approach task management without having a clear grasp of their schedules and availability.

Why You're Not Finishing Your List Of To-Do Items

1. You Misunderstand The Goal Of To-Do Lists

Why do you create to-do lists? What do you hope to accomplish with them?

Most people answer "to get things done." But that's not the purpose of a properly designed to-do list.

The main purpose of your to-do list is to help you organize your tasks and projects, and highlight the important stuff.

On the contrary, a solid to-do list will focus your attention on the right work and prevent you from getting sidelined by less-critical items.

Your task list isn't a tool for getting everything done. Rather, it's a tool that will ensure you get the right things done.

2. You Neglect To Assign Deadlines

A to-do list without deadlines is a wish list. Nothing more. Without deadlines, we lean toward inaction.

Deadlines also help us to decide where to spend our limited time and attention. This is important. There will always be more tasks to finish than the time needed to finish them.

3. Your Lists Are Too Long

Many people do a brain dump of every task they need or want to get done.

They record everything on a single list. The problem is, they neglect to categorize these tasks and put them on separate lists according to context, priority, and urgency

4. Your Lists Have Too Much Variability

too much variability in your to-do lists increases your stress levels.

You're more distracted, which means you'll work less efficiently.

5. You Give Yourself Too Many Options

This issue is closely related to having too much variability in your task lists. But it deserves its own mention due to its effect on how the brain makes decisions.

We wake up in the morning with a limited store of cognitive resources. This store is quickly used up throughout the day as we make decisions. All decisions, simple and complex, take a toll. This eventually leads to a predicament known as "decision avoidance."

Confronted with too many options, you avoid picking from among them because doing so requires too much mental effort. Instead, you spend valuable time checking email, visiting Facebook, and reading news headlines, all in an attempt to sidestep the act of deciding what to work on.

The result is predictable. Your productivity plummets and your to-do items, including the important ones, go unfinished.

6. You Neglect To Add Context For Each Task

suppose your to-do list includes the task "call my accountant."

It provides no information about the item's priority. Do you need to call your accountant today or can it wait until next week? Nor is there any information concerning how long the call is likely to last. Will it take a few minutes or will you be on the phone for an hour? Also lacking are details regarding the purpose of the call. The result? Your list, which is supposed to be a record of things you need to get done, becomes a growing record of things left unaddressed and unfinished.

7. Your Tasks Are Not Attached To Specific Goals

The point is that you must attach a specific goal to each task on your to-do list. Know the reason each item needs to be completed. If you neglect this step, you'll be less motivated to get the item done.

10 Most Popular To-Do List Systems

#1 - The Massive, All-Inclusive List

There's nothing elegant about this strategy. It is essentially a brain dump.

You write down every task you can think of onto a single list. You can already see the problems inherent in this approach. This approach is popular. But its popularity isn't due to its effectiveness.

#2 - The "Task + Starting Date + Due Date" List

The appeal of this format is its simplicity. It also introduces one of the most important elements of a proper task management system: deadlines.

Deadlines are important because they prompt us to take action. This approach to creating to-do lists also introduces a second crucial feature: starting dates. It delivers two important benefits. First, it allows you to focus on a smaller number of to-do items. Second, you'll be less likely to work on tasks at the last possible minute.

#3 - The To-Do List Twosome: Master Task List + Daily Task List

This approach is the one-two punch of to-do list creation. It involves keeping two distinct lists: your master list and your daily list. Here's a summary of how this system works:

Your master list is a rolling repository of every task you think of. It's where you record every item, regardless of its priority, deadline, the time required to complete it, and the project with which it's associated. The purpose of this list is to capture the myriad tasks swimming around in your head, saving you the effort of having to remember them.

Here's how the two lists work together:

Each evening, you would review your master list. You'd look for tasks due in the near future or those that need to be addressed in order to move other tasks forward. Once you identify these to-do items, you'd choose several and transfer them to the following day's daily list, assuming your schedule allows adequate time to address them.

#4 - The "3+2" Strategy

This to-do list system follows a simple formula: three big tasks and two small tasks. Each day, you select the five items you'll work on. (Or better yet, select them the night before.) The big items should take between one and two hours to complete. The small items should take 30 minutes or less.

#5 - The 1-3-5 Rule

The "1-3-5 rule" is an extrapolation of the "3+2 strategy" described in the previous section. Here, you choose one big task, three medium-sized tasks, and five small tasks to complete during the day.

#6 - The Project-Based System

This system entails categorizing your to-do items based on the projects with which they're associated. In the end, you're left with multiple lists, one per project. Suppose you want to remodel your kitchen. You'd create a list for this particular project. You'd create a separate list for a different project you'd like to complete, such as buying a new car. Another advantage of this system is that it gives you a bird's-eye view of your multiple projects in progress. You can select tasks to work on depending on which project you want to move forward.

#7 - The 3-MIT Approach

MIT is an acronym. It stands for "most important task." The original strategy called for identifying a single MIT, and focusing on its completion to the exclusion of everything else. If you struggle with procrastination, are regularly

waylaid by distractions, and suffer a lack of motivation, an open-ended task management strategy isn't a good solution. A structured system with well-defined rules and less latitude is likely to be more useful.

#8 - The Kanban Method

The Kanban method is a more visual approach to task management than the systems we've covered thus far. Here's how it works: Grab a cork board and a stack of Post-It notes. Make three columns on your board. Title the left column "To Do." Title the middle column "Doing." Title the right column "Done." You don't have to use a cork board. You can use a dry erase board to the same effect. You can use apps like Trello. One of the downsides to using the Kanban method is that it's easy to lose track of small tasks. For instance, suppose your master to-do list contains more than 100 items that have yet to be worked on. Color-coding can be an effective solution; different colors can be used to indicate task-level priority. But even then, your ability to monitor a large volume of to-do items will be limited.

#9 - The Matrix System

It is also known as the "Eisenhower Box." The same principles apply to both. It's a tool used to decide how to allocate one's time among competing tasks. A matrix is made up of four quadrants titled as follows:

1. Important - Urgent
2. Important - Not Urgent
3. Not Important - Urgent
4. Not Important - Not Urgent

#10 - Getting Things Done (GTD)

Here are the basics: You have a lot of stuff swimming around in your head. Most of it remains uncategorized in terms of context, priority, and intended outcomes. We want to get things done, but we haven't committed ourselves to their completion. Open loops cause us stress. GTD seeks to get this stuff out of your head and onto a list. I believe it's the same as #1 where you dump everything that you have in your mind and then categorize or prioritize it.

How To Create The Perfect To-Do List

#1: Isolate Current Tasks From Future Tasks

This is a crucial distinction. You'll find that completing each day's to-do list will motivate and inspire you. There's something invigorating about crossing off every item from your list.

#2: Define Tasks By Desired Outcomes

Why would we spend time and effort doing things that prevent us from pursuing activities we find more enjoyable (for example,

binge-watching our favorite TV series on Netflix)? The simplest way to get through your daily to-do list is to assign a “why” to each item found on it. Write down that goal, or desired outcome, next to the task.

#3: Break Projects Down To Individual Tasks

It illustrates an important concept related to task management. The only way to complete any project is to first break it down to its constituent parts. Any distraction is preferable to grappling with an endeavor for which we lack direction and momentum.

****Make sure your to-do lists are limited to actionable tasks, not projects.****

#4: Assign A Deadline To Each Task

You already know the importance of deadlines.

#5: Limit The Number Of Current Tasks To Seven

One of the most common problems with to-do lists is that they're too long. My “limit-to-seven” suggestion refers solely to tasks that require at least 15 minutes to complete. You'll find that many of the tasks on your master list can be handled within one or two minutes.

Following are a few examples:

- Make your bed
- Check your voicemail
- Sort your mail
- Start a load of laundry

These are “tiny tasks” that don't belong on your daily to-do list. Why? Because they could potentially cause the list to grow to dozens of items.

#6: Organize Tasks By Project, Type, Or Location

Categorize each task on your master to-do list using the following three contexts:

1. Project
2. Type
3. Location

I recommend creating a separate list for each project, each type of task, and each location.

For example, the following projects would warrant their own lists:

- Write a book
- Remodel my kitchen
- Buy a car

The following types of tasks would also warrant their own lists:

- Analytical work
- Creative work
- Mindless work

Likewise, the following locations would warrant their own lists:

- At the office
- At home
- On the road

For example, “vacuum the living room” is clearly a location-based task. You must be at home to do it. If you plan to be at the office all day, you wouldn’t add this item to your daily list

#7: Prune Your List Of Unnecessary Tasks

One of the most important things you can do is to keep your master to-do list clean. You need to prune the list on a regular basis, purging tasks that are no longer necessary or consistent with your goals. Otherwise, it can quickly become unmanageable as you add new items to it each day.

What types of tasks are candidates for removal? Look for these four items:

1. Wishes
2. Unclear tasks
3. Trivial tasks
4. Resolutions

#8: Estimate The Amount Of Time Each Task Will Take To Complete

You should know how long each to-do item on your master list will take you to finish. This information allows you to choose tasks for your daily list based on how much time you’ll have available to work on them.

#9: Lead Each Task With An Active Verb

Sometimes, all you need is the right word to spur you to action. Verbs have that power. Put them in front of your to-do items and you’ll be more inclined to get the items done.

Notice how the verbs (start, buy, finish, check, and call) tell us exactly what to do

#10: Note Which Tasks Require Input From Others

Personally, I think the use of a “waiting for” list is overkill. If you’ve followed the previous nine steps in creating your master list, context-based lists, and daily lists, you’ll do fine without it. In fact, a “waiting for” list would just over complicate your task management system. Here’s my recommendation: write a short note next to each to-do item for which you’re waiting for someone’s input. Detail the type of input you need, its format (email, phone call, report, spreadsheet, etc.), and the date you expect it to be delivered. The expected delivery date will prompt you to follow up with the person if you don’t receive his or her input in a timely fashion. To that end, it will help you to set expectations for others and hold them accountable for needed deliverables

How To Maintain A Well-Oiled To-Do List System

Tip #1: Keep A “Tiny Task” Batch List

Tip #2: Remain Vigilant Against Feeling Overwhelmed

Tip #3: Define Your To-Do Lists By Context

Tip #4: Conduct Weekly Reviews

1. How do you conduct a weekly review? Here are the basic steps:
 - a. Gather all of your to-do lists. This includes your master list and context-based lists.
 - b. Do a brain dump of all the tasks and projects floating around your head. Add them to your master list.
 - c. Break down new projects into individual tasks.
 - d. Separate new tasks according to context (project, type, and location). Create new context-based lists, if necessary.
 - e. Clear out your email inbox. Send responses if they're necessary. If an email requires you to take action, but isn't urgent, make a note of it on your master to-do list and archive the message. Also, archive emails that don't warrant a response or action, but may be needed later. Delete the rest.
 - f. Review your master list and context-based lists. Purge tasks that are no longer necessary or important.
 - g. Note the tasks that are both important and urgent. Mark them as candidates for your daily to-do list.
 - h. Note the tasks for which you're waiting on input from others. Write down the person's name and the date you expect to receive his or her input. The date will tell you when to follow up if you don't receive it.
 - i. Review your current deadlines for high-value tasks. Make adjustments if necessary.
 - j. Assign deadlines to new tasks you've added to your master list and context-based lists.
 - k. Review your calendar for the coming week. Create your daily to-do list based on your availability.

Tip #5: Update Your List Of Goals

Tip #6: Avoid Getting Bugged Down In Methodology

Tip #7: Build And Follow A System That Works For YOU

Tip #8: Be Consistent

What To Do If You Fall Off The Wagon

Acknowledge that perfection is a pipe dream. A delusion. They expect to stumble occasionally. Instead of giving up, however, you should forgive yourself and get back in the proverbial saddle

Offline vs. Online: Where Should You Create Your To-Do Lists?



There's no one true answer here.

How To Incorporate Your Calendar Into Your To-Do Lists

The best way to maximize your output each day is to combine your to-do list and calendar.

Here's a simple approach:

First, at the end of the day, review your calendar for the following day. Determine when you'll be in meetings, on conference calls, or otherwise unavailable

Second, estimate how much time you'll be able to allocate to your to-do items. Don't forget to leave yourself time for lunch and breaks.

Third, think of your day as a series of 30-minute time chunks and build your list in a sensible **"From Time - To Time: Task: Context / Goal"**

What Is A "Done List" (And Should You Keep One)?

If you're not sure whether a done list will help you to get things done, I recommend that you experiment with it. Maintain a done list for two weeks and note how it influences you. If you discover that it has a positive impact on your productivity, keep using it. Otherwise, drop it.