



Book One Year to an Organized Life

From Your Closets to Your Finances, the Week-by-Week Guide to Getting Completely Organized For Good

Regina Leeds
Da Capo Press, 2007

Recommendation

Regina Leeds starts with your mother’s philosophy: There’s a place for everything. She provides all the details you need week-by-week and month-by-month to help you stop searching for keys and remote controls, and quit wondering when your dental appointment is. With her help, you can change from time-wasting time mode to “just do it” mode. The weekly organizational activities on her agenda range from one hour to a full day, though she rarely asks you to tie up an entire day. Leeds knows many people have busy schedules and an overwhelming amount of work to do in organizing their lives. *BooksInShort* finds that her orderly approach might help you transform your life or, at least, your closet.

Take-Aways

- You can organize your life by following a one-year plan.
- To make organizing easier, try not to aim for perfection.
- Create routines for each season and for each room in your home.
- Try to form one new positive habit each month.
- Write every activity in your calendar so you can plan instead of panicking.
- Do as much work before an event as possible.
- Manage and maintain an address book.
- People turn into pack rats when they don’t know how to organize their things.
- When you are deciding to toss or keep an item, anything that doesn’t merit a clear “keep it” should go.
- Create a monthly organizational scheme that fits your life and your home. Follow it step by step.

Summary

The One-Year Plan

If you want to organize your home according to a one-year plan, begin with the current month and work through the year. Capture your goals on a collaged dream board, but don’t worry about being artistic. Cut out and paste up magazine pictures that represent how you want your house to look. This visual aid will help you stick with your organizational projects.

“Everyone can get organized.”

Even if you habitually struggle to find your gloves or can’t use your dining table because of the clutter, you can get organized. Every sorting project falls into three steps:

1. **“Eliminate”** – Return borrowed items, toss unneeded junk and put things back in their proper locations. The drinking glass in your bedroom belongs in the kitchen.
2. **“Categorize”** – As you go through things, start categorizing every item to save time. Put spices together so you know what you need to buy. Create folders for

each person in the household covering medical, financial, school and work concerns.

3. **“Organize”** – After cleaning and sorting, decide how to keep things in order.

“A calm, well-organized environment will nurture and support everyone present.”

At the end of the day, take a break so you don’t burn out. As you develop positive new patterns, remember that when you do the same thing for 21 days in a row, it becomes a habit. Start by making new goals, such as arriving at events on time. Set realistic, clear objectives. Note the steps you need to follow to reach them. Set up a calendar to make this process part of your schedule. Once you have every activity on your calendar, clarifying your priorities and saying “no” will be easier. Don’t answer invitations on the spot; say you need to check your calendar first. If you’re avoiding a project you’ve already promised to do, take a deep breath and get it done.

January: The Kitchen

Consider how you use your kitchen and how you want to use it. Gain control by tossing duplicated or unnecessary items. (Do you need all those beer steins from your travels?) Try to cure trouble spots, such as cluttered drawers or shelves. List things to buy or re-purpose that can help you organize problem areas. If you don’t know a solution, the clerk at the storage store can help you find something that will work. Group things on your countertops for easy access. For example, the coffee maker could go near the sugar and mugs. If you use an appliance daily, keep it on the counter instead of moving it in and out of the cupboard. By the end of the month, have one new kitchen habit in place.

February: The Bedroom

Pick a new habit that relates to organizing your bedroom, such as putting away your clothes each night. Address habitually disorganized areas. Decide what to donate, move or buy. Does your bedroom have some special-purpose zone, such as an office or exercise area? Separate those spaces by using rugs or by grouping furniture to create lines between zones.

“Getting organized is about clearing away the clutter.”

Go through the closet and dump clothes you have not worn for more than a year. Sift through hanging items, then shelved things. Move anything that doesn’t belong (that bike helmet) to a spot in your home where you’ll use it, or, if you won’t use it again, donate it. Distribute empty hangers to other closets to gain more space. Store hats, scarves and shoes in clear boxes. Sort your clothes by categories: business suits, sports apparel and so on. Arrange each section by color, using the same color order in all sections. Toss wire hangers and plastic covers from the cleaners. If you want to change how the room feels, paint the walls or a few pieces of furniture.

March: Business Life

To begin organizing your papers, contact your tax expert to find out what documents you need to keep and for how long. As you go through your mail this month, develop the habit of tossing all the junk mail.

“Organizing gives you options and should open the world of possibilities.”

Set aside 20 minutes to sort through magazines, statements and other paper clutter. Zoom through everything without categorizing and shred as you go. Use file cabinets with hanging folders to organize your business paperwork, personal bills and expenses. Create subcategories, such as car, medical, home, insurance, travel, entertainment and so on. File current projects where you can gain access to the material quickly. Put it in binders (with a tab for each project) or in a project box. After completing a project, file it with the rest of your documents.

“If you never complete your actions, it’s like having a thousand golden threads scattered about.”

Sometimes, attempts to tackle several projects at once can put you on the road to burnout. But, done right, multitasking can prevent exhaustion. People who have to struggle to say “no” either want to be too nice or have codependency issues. Save “yes” for the requests you value and say “no” to the rest. Make use of idle time, such as when something needs to cook or while you are sitting in the doctor’s waiting room. However, don’t overdo it. Reading e-mails while you’re talking on the phone is counterproductive. Don’t automatically pick up the phone every time it rings; let it go to voice mail when you’re busy. Check the caller ID before you answer.

April: Bathrooms

This month, form the habit of cleaning the counter before you leave the bathroom. To declutter, sift through your cabinets and drawers. See how much you can get done in 15 minutes. Throw away or donate old, unnecessary and duplicate products, and expired cosmetics. Remove items that don’t belong. Toss any extra packaging for things you bought in bulk. Put products into totes or containers for easy storage under the sink. If your bathroom is small, use a shelf or two in the linen closet as additional storage.

May: Attics, Basements, Garages, Laundry Rooms and Guest Rooms

“Bonus,” or extra, small rooms tend to become chaotic storage areas. During May, try to put everything back where it belongs and let those overflow areas function as they should. If you have multiple storage rooms to organize, start small. Pick a manageable room. Carefully prepare items for storage if they will be in a space without temperature control. Extreme heat and cold can ruin photographs and fragile belongings. Use high cabinets or under-bed storage to tuck away things you rarely use. Follow these steps to declutter any space:

1. Find out how to dispose of bulk items. You may need to get a dumpster.
2. Sort through your things, and decide what to toss, sell, return or fix.

3. Plan a garage sale and invite other families to join you.
4. Post items for sale on eBay, Craigslist and similar Web sites.
5. Call a charity to schedule a pick-up of your donated goods.
6. If necessary, buy storage containers for items you're keeping.

“Sometimes all it takes is a willingness to see things differently.”

After clearing the space, you may want to consult a professional closet or garage designer. Refresh the room by painting, updating the flooring or adding curtains.

June: Travel

During this month, make a point of completing anything you start. Don't begin a new project until you have finished any ongoing ones. If you're going to travel, reflect on past trips – what went well and what didn't? How did you pack? What did you forget? What did you take but never use? Consider these experiences as you create a master list of things to take. Refer to it every time you travel.

“When you let go, a space opens for something else to move into your life.”

When you're planning a journey, ask your friends and family for advice. Newspaper articles and Web sites may also provide good information about your destination. Keep tabs on the weather so you pack appropriately. Make practical choices about what to bring, such as two pairs of well-worn shoes, and clothing you can mix and match. Put your itinerary and contact information in your luggage, and make sure others know how to reach you.

July: Scrapbooks, Greeting Cards and Address Books

A message from a friend's new e-mail account, a voice mail about a changed phone number, a postcard with a new mailing address – these reminders pile up. To stay organized, update contact information in your address book right away, or at least by the end of the day. If your cellphone holds your address book, back up the data regularly, because phones can fail or get lost. Store business cards in one place rather than entering all of them into your address book.

“When we feel vulnerable and powerless in our lives, we frequently do one of two things: We gain weight or we weight ourselves down with too much stuff.”

Sort your memorabilia, such as cards, letters, photos and collections. Put the items in two categories for storage: out-of-sight or on display. Decide how attached you are to them and try to keep only the best, most important things. If you display big collections, change the items on a seasonal basis. To tackle the photos you've stored, toss duplicates and snapshots that will never make it into albums. Decide quickly, and avoid dwelling on pictures and memories. Sort photos into broad categories, such as events or trips. Store digital photos on an external hard drive and on DVDs. Limit yourself to two copies per digital photo for each media. Print photos only when you need them.

August: Moving

If you are relocating this month, try to ease your workload during your move so you aren't in a tumult in two different areas of your life. Ask yourself questions to help you feel less panicky about an upcoming move: How much time and money do you have? Is your new place smaller or bigger? Are you taking everything? Don't sidetrack yourself with other projects. Even without a move, make maintenance your habit of the month.

“Our contribution to the progress of the world must, therefore, consist in setting our own house in order.” – Gandhi

What the movers call a “den” may be your “living room.” Avoid such confusion by posting signs in each room, such as “Label these boxes ‘Joe's bedroom’.” Any items that you will need immediately at the new location should go into the moving truck last, so they come out first. Keep valuables and medications with you.

September: Back to School

In September, try to replace the negative talk in your head with good thoughts. Build a family routine for waking up, eating, coming home and going to bed. Set rules around homework and chores. Children need to know that their parents set limits and stick to them. Assign two types of chores: those that are expected and those that earn rewards. The tasks should be age-appropriate.

“To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is only the end of life.” – Robert Louis Stevenson

Before you take on any volunteer projects, ask about the time commitment and any other expectations. If you accept a project, break it down into manageable tasks and apply the formula “eliminate, categorize and organize.”

October: Family Rooms and Living Rooms

Encourage everyone in your home to put things back after using them. Consider how your family utilizes your living room, which often can turn into a catch-all for things that don't belong there. Decide how you want to use the room and work toward that goal. Your family room, on the other hand, is where people tend to gather. Give it furniture and flooring that is easy to clean. Move out-of-place items to a more suitable room. Be selective about displayed photos and rotate them.

November: Entertaining

Many people express gratitude this time of the year. Follow this habit year-round. Think about your holiday celebrations from your childhood to the present. What

seasonal traditions would you like to revive or drop? If you decide to celebrate differently from the past, let your family know ahead of time. To prepare for the holiday, tidy your home and plan your menus. Consider which rooms you will use to entertain and prioritize your cleaning accordingly. Create a budget, and list what to buy or borrow. Try to cultivate a stress-free atmosphere for you and your guests.

December: Celebrating

Instead of starting a new habit, review the good habits you added this year. Consciously put them to use each day. Focus on your calendar this month: Bring it everywhere and update it when you hear of a new event. Prioritize every project from writing cards to having a party, and save energy by shopping online for gifts. Keep things tidy, including those holiday lights (try wrapping them around an object). As always, don’t expect perfection. Sometimes you just don’t have time to decorate every surface or you have to mail the cards late – if at all. Remember, “It’s only stuff.”

About the Author

Regina Leeds, a professional organizer, is also the author of *The Zen of Organizing*.
