**Why bike shedding is the enemy of getting things done**

About bike shedding and Parkinson’s law of triviality

Have you heard of “bike shedding”— and are you guilty of it? I know I am. The term “bike shedding” (also known as “Parkinson’s law of triviality”) comes from naval historian [C. Northcote Parkinson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._Northcote_Parkinson)’s *Parkinson’s Law* (1957) book. You’ve probably heard of Parkinson’s more famous law in productivity circles— “work expand[s to fill the time available.” Parkinson’s law of triviality](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_triviality) comes from the same book, in which he imagines a fictional committee tasked with developing and approving plans for a nuclear power plant.

The project of approving a nuclear power plant is daunting, and takes special skill, insight, and hard work. There is much that could go wrong, and the stakes are high. Therefore, the committee doesn’t want to focus on the real task at hand. Instead, they focus their attention, time, and emotional energy on a trivial detail— in Parkinson’s example, the specific design for a bike shed on the nuclear power plant property. The stakes are not very high. It doesn’t, in the end, much matter exactly which colour the bike shed is painted, or its precise dimensions, or the type of door. It certainly doesn’t matter nearly so much as coming to a consensus on the parameters of a nuclear reactor.

But precisely because it feels [overwhelming](https://elizabethbutlermd.com/why-personal-knowledge-management-matters-for-busy-people/) to the committee to take on the highly responsible, difficult task of making the right high-stakes choice on the technical specifications of the nuclear power plant, they instead choose to focus all their attention on (and argue vociferously with one another about) the bike shed.

Why we bike shed

When we’re working on a project that feels overwhelming in some way— perhaps it’s large, time-consuming, or complex— it’s totally understandable that we want to latch on to some piece of the project that feels within our control. A small piece of the puzzle. A part of the project with a scope and complexity that [feels manageable](https://elizabethbutlermd.com/effortless-personal-knowledge-management-calmer-notes/). And there’s nothing inherently wrong with that— breaking down a large project into smaller, achievable pieces helps give us a sense of momentum and forward motion, particularly when we’re working on a long-term timeline.

The problem happens when we get too absorbed with our smaller piece of the puzzle— when we start to obsess over the bike shed. We end up devoting a disproportionate amount of time and energy to the smallest, minute details— yet we know, deep down, that these details don’t meaningfully contribute to the larger project that actually matters to us.

But bike shedding feels safer. Simpler. Attractive. We feel like we’re making movement— even if that movement, realistically, is just spinning our wheels.

Examples of bike shedding

Bike shedding is a common barrier to [productivity](https://elizabethbutlermd.com/focusmate-virtual-coworking/), and source of procrastination, but it can look different for everyone, depending on your own season of life. Here are some examples of bike shedding:

* Finessing your colour-coded tags and filing system for [emails in Outlook without actually answering pressing emails in your inbox](https://elizabethbutlermd.com/manage-email-subscriptions-newsletter-reader-apps/)
* Spending hours comparing the features of different note taking software and apps so you can [build a so-called “perfect” personal knowledge management system](https://elizabethbutlermd.com/why-system-matters-more-than-software-for-organizing-your-digital-notes/)— but not actually taking notes
* Fiddling with the margins and fonts of your Word document instead of writing your thesis
* Researching the [best software for taking notes on your iPad](https://elizabethbutlermd.com/best-note-taking-apps-for-ipad/) during class time instead of actually listening to the lecture and taking notes using the software you already have installed
* Spending hours in the backend of your website, optimizing plugins and typography, instead of writing new content <- (this one is me, and what inspired this post! 😉)

Why you might be bikeshedding

There’s not one single reason that we fall into the trap of bike shedding. Some of us bike shed frequently, and some of us only do it now and again. You might rarely bikeshed at work, but find yourself bike shedding when you’re trying to work on part-time graduate work. Or maybe you never bike shed with your creative work— you can sit down to write your novel without messing around with Word margins and pagination— but you find yourself bike shedding on work projects.

Here are a few of the reasons you might start bike shedding— do any of them ring true for you right now?:

* You’re tired.
* You’re hungry.
* You’re in pain.
* You’ve used up all your focus and feel distracted.
* You don’t have clarity on the project you’re working on.
* You don’t agree with the project you’re working on, but someone else (your boss, your teacher, your partner, your colleague) needs you to do it anyhow.
* You don’t see the point of what you’re working on.
* The next big step in the project feels too daunting.
* The project’s timeline is so long that you’re craving an easy win.
* You’re lacking confidence or falling prey to impostor syndrome, so feel like you only have expertise for the bikeshed portion of the project.

3 steps to stop bike shedding

So you’ve figured out that you’re bike shedding. What can you do to stop it? Here’s a 3-pronged approach you can use.

1. Identify the problem (+ use the 5 Whys if needed)

Why are you bike shedding? And what’s the underlying, root cause of this choice? In some cases, the root cause will be clear to you with only minimal reflection— at other times, you might need to go through a [session of the 5 Whys](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_whys" \t "_blank) to dig a little deeper into why you’re procrastinating with bike shedding.

For example, maybe you’ve identified that you’re focusing on the graphic design for a work report rather than the content itself (and you’re not paid to be a graphic designer in your role). You can work through the five whys like this:

* Why am I focusing on the graphic design instead of the content?
  + Because it makes me feel like I’m making progress, and it’s something in my control.
* Why are you using graphic design to make progress and feel in control?
  + I’m waiting for content from other departments before I can finalize the content of the report, but I can do graphic design without their contributions.
* Why are you working on the report without the content you need to develop it?
  + I’m new in my job and don’t know who to ask in each department to get the finalized content.

2. Figure out your next right step

Based on the root cause you’ve identified in step one, you can start taking actionable steps instead of spending stressful, unproductive hours in bike shedding land. Your goal is to figure out one small, achievable step you can take to fix this root issue. In the example, it might be reaching out to your boss or colleagues in your new role to clarify who you need to contact to get the material for the report— which is, in the end, going to be a much more effective use of your time than tweaking colour schemes in Word while nervously refreshing your email, hoping that the content you’re waiting for appears in your inbox.

3. Clarify the scope and purpose of your project

Bike shedding often happens in nebulous projects— ones that are complex, long-term, and nuanced. So identifying the next right step is a good, practical action to take— but it will be all too easy to fall back into the bike shedding routine if you don’t also get clarity on the larger purpose and scope of the project itself. Consider these questions (either by yourself or with your team):

* Why am I trying to achieve with this project?
* What does success look like with this project? Are there any specific metrics or benchmarks for success? How will I know the project is done?
* Who are the stakeholders on the project, and what matters most to them?
* What does an 80% (aka applying the [Pareto principle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_principle" \t "_blank)) on this project look like?
* What can I best contribute to this project, and which pieces should I delegate to a team member or employee?

Summary & Conclusion

In this post, we discussed

* What bike shedding is
* Why we fall victim to bike shedding
* Common reasons for bike shedding
* How to stop bike shedding: 3 steps

I am very grateful that Dr. Parkinson came up with this pithy fictional example— I can just imagine the committee sitting around, dressed in their 1950s business wear, debating the finer points of a bike shed— because the task of planning a nuclear reactor is all too daunting.

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