

TIME BLOCKING

A Comprehensive Guide

Seth ArBabian

Time blocking is one of the best ways of turning good intentions into action. It's deceptively simple, however. The intention of this guide is to provide you with the best practices and research-based advice to get the maximum benefit.

Are you not happy with the progress, and momentum in your life?

You're probably here because you feel productive work is getting buried under constant emergencies as emails, social media and other interruptions are flying in too fast. Do you feel you're contributing what you could? Perhaps, you feel a little overwhelmed (or a lot)? Sometimes, your workday is out of control and you are behind at work. Isn't it? Do you sometimes feel that you didn't accomplish anything today? Feeling stuck in a spin cycle heading downward toward burnout and stress? What about suffering the guilt from feeling like you didn't get nearly enough done? Does work-life balance sound impossible? Are you busy all day but rarely spend enough time with your loved ones?

If any of this sounds like you, you're in the right place!

The fact that you're reading this proves that you want to fulfill your desires and eliminate overwhelm. You want to enjoy productive days while keeping a healthy work-life balance. And, you want your life to give you all the good things that you deserve. YOU ARE INTERESTED IN SUCCESS, and that's a wonderful sign. It's the most important prerequisite, and you have it.

The fact that you are here also shows that you have the intelligence to look for the right tools that enable you in your journey towards success. You appreciate that you need the right tools unlike many people who forget that there are tools to help them. You're here to learn more about the secrets of **time blocking** as a tool used by the highest performing people in the world. We are going to cover all the steps in making you more successful. And, you'll gain significant order in your chaotic workday and enjoy a refreshing feeling of confidence, and achievement. You'll feel more freedom, and more free time in your life because you're going to be more focused and clear in managing the time you have.

It's time to commit to change

Let's start with this thought that life is too short to be little. Start by committing yourself to change. You have had enough of procrastination, distractions, and getting stressed over deadlines. It's time to commit to change. We are going to see how from now on you can become a more productive person because the way you approach your day is going to change. Stick with us to learn the science behind **how time blocking helps you work smarter and get more of what matters.**

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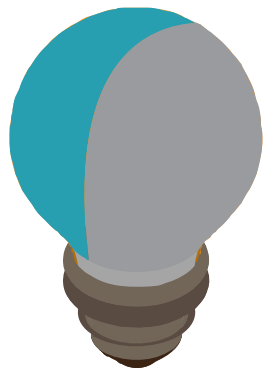
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01

WHAT IS TIME
BLOCKING



To understand time blocking, we first need to understand our perception of time. We think of time in a very relative and intangible way. Let's compare time with space for a moment. If you think of organizing physical stuff, people are usually good at learning to organize space even if they're disorganized. It's because space is so concrete and tangible. You can simply see the space and tell if you have more stuff than it fits. It's easy to say there is not enough room! But, we don't see time in the same way. It's intangible to us, and that's why we usually ask: where did the day go? Sometimes there are hours that feel like a day and sometimes it feels like a minute - depending on what you're doing.



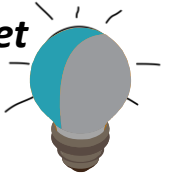
A to-do list entices you to squeeze more tasks into your day. But, space is tangible, and you can easily tell there is no more room.

THE DEFINITION

Time blocking is essentially an exercise in making your time more tangible by organizing your day in a series of time slots. This will make your day more like a limited space that can only fit a limited number of tasks. It's unbelievable how we always think we can bite more than we can chew in a day. So, the first role of time blocking is to concretize time and make it more tangible.

Let's get back to our space analogy. When you have a limited space, you're also conscious of what to keep in the space, and what to throw away. Once you start to see your time like space, you'll start to realize you can't do everything. There are only limited time slots in a day, and you want to give them to your wildly important tasks, things that move the needle for you.

Time blocking helps you budget your time



So, the second role of time blocking is to help you prioritize and budget your time for the right tasks. By dedicating a certain number of hours to just one task, you “block off” your time (and your mind) from everything else that is demanding your attention. If something is important to you, assign it to a slot and complete it. If not, kill it. Loose ends distract you from your main goals.

Time blocking is one of the best ways of turning good intentions into action. It's a simple exercise in segregating your day into various chunks of time that, if stuck to, helps you achieve your goals.



02 THE BENEFITS OF TIME BLOCKING

It Keeps the Time Vampires Out

You know the ruthless people who feed off your time, always trying to get more. It could be your coworkers, clients, or customers who demand more than your better judgment says you should give. Time blocking helps you be very clear with yourself and others about your availability. When you don't have a set plan for your day, you're practically opening yourself up for interruptions. But, a skilled time blocker knows she has budgeted sufficient time for helping her coworkers, or customers at the appropriate times. So, she feels very comfortable to reply with offering a specific time with a pre-planned cap. "Let's talk at 3 PM. I'll have 15 minutes then to go over all your questions at once." You wouldn't give away your money without careful consideration, so don't give away your time.

If others refer to your calendar for your availability, time blocking is again a perfect way to explicitly indicate you're busy during certain hours. The word "block" has a double meaning: it reserves time for your tasks, and it stops others from being able to eat into it.

**I want to
waste
your time**



Time blocking keeps time vampires out

It Beats Procrastination

Even if you do not have external time vampires, you still have your internal enemies: procrastination, bad mood, low energy, forgetfulness, etc. They're far more difficult to overcome than saying no to others. We have all been struggling with delaying, avoiding, and procrastinating on tasks that matter to us. This has been the case for centuries. In fact, Greek philosophers called this Akrasia: the state of acting against your better judgment. It's when you know you should do an important task, and you do something else. It's a lack of self-control.

Nevertheless, research has shown this behavior can be improved through certain techniques. One of the techniques is to reduce the cognitive load of getting started with your work. When you want to start with a task, or you have just finished a task and need to move on to the next task, there is a mental energy demand that needs to decide what to do next. Time blocking significantly reduces this cognitive load as your next action is already preset.



If-then planning kills your procrastination.

Scientific [research](#) has shown that the best way to resist temptation and build good habits is to have an "if-then planning", a technique that is totally aligned with time blocking. Have you ever set your new year's resolution to lose weight, but it never happened? Research shows that if you set a specific plan like on Tuesday 5 PM, you will be going to the gym, amazingly, you are up to 300% more likely to succeed! In [one study](#), 91% of people who used this technique stuck to an exercise program. On the other hand, only 39% of non-planners managed to stick to the program.

The same is true with time blocking your tasks. When you set a specific time to start working on a task, your psyche is more prepared to get to work, and you're more likely to actually do the work. You become mentally aware of the coming task and you are more likely to transition into this task with less friction. In some cases, you might even come up with ideas that improve your performance in doing the task.

The importance of commitment device

Additionally, you have created your 'commitment device' by time blocking on your calendar. A commitment device is a favorite tool psychologist use to overcome procrastination. So, committing yourself to the appointments you're making on your calendar - including the ones you make with yourself - will in fact beat procrastination.

It Reduces Overwhelm

Time blocking reduces the negative psychological impact of long to-do lists known as [the Zeigarnik effect](#). The Zeigarnik effect is a psychological phenomenon describing a tendency to remember interrupted or incomplete tasks or events more easily than tasks that have been completed. This weighing of incomplete tasks on us can lead to stress and feeling of overwhelm. By time blocking, however, you have all of your important and high priority tasks secured and placed into specific time blocks. This is the same sense of security and calm when you have budgeted your money and you know your finances are under control. Time blocking is a kind of time budgeting. When you know you have allocated your core hours to your most important tasks, and all your priorities have a secure time block on your commitment device - i.e. your calendar, this will give you a sense of control and confidence.

Monthly Budget (Finance)		Weekly Budget (Time)	
HOUSING	Projected Cost	WORK	Planned Time
Mortgage or rent	\$1,500.00	Errands/Admin	7 Hrs
Phone	\$60.00	Writing	12 Hrs
Electricity	\$50.00	Meetings	5 Hrs
Gas	\$200.00	Project ACME	10 Hrs
Water and sewer	\$50.00	Emails	4 Hrs

Budgeting time reduces overwhelm

The other reason time blocking reduces overwhelm is that time blocking makes your plans significantly more realistic. Much of the stress is because of the due dates, and commitments. So, if you plan more realistically, you'll be in a much better position. Time blocking is a time-based approach to productivity. It's very difficult to plan based on a list of tasks to complete that take as long as they take. Time blocking requires you to carefully evaluate each task and estimate (or better overestimate) a duration for each task. And, if you can't estimate the duration of a task, it's a good sign the task is too long. It must be broken down into smaller sub-tasks. Forcing yourself to estimate task duration, and then allocating time blocks to each of those tasks makes you significantly more realistic in your plan.

03



**IS TIME
BLOCKING
FOR ME?**

If you have a small garden, you obviously don't need a big-ticket farm equipment to maintain your garden. This principle is true for all tools. Time Blocking is a powerful tool that can be an overkill for someone who's got only a couple of easy tasks on his to-do list each day. But, if you're on the opposite side of the spectrum with a huge list, and limited time to complete the tasks, then you do need a powerful tool. It maybe true that you're not quite ready to use this powerful tool in full capacity yet.

The three stages of productivity

In your search for a solution to your productivity enhancement, your first step is to assess your current position. The following questions help you rate your current state:

Stage 1: Do you run your day from memory? Do you commit your tasks to memory? Or, do you have a to-do list? What percentage of your tasks are using a to-do list to store?

Stage 2: If you do have a place to store most of your to-do list, is it paper based? Is it always with you? Do you plan your days based on your to-do list? Are you able to filter and search your list?

Stage 3: Do you regularly use a calendar? Do you use it for appointments only? Do you occasionally block time off for solo tasks?



Stages of productivity: From depending on your memory to living in your calendar

If you're at stage 1 where you're basically operating from memory, the first step in your journey to a productive you is to learn how to clear your head. "Your mind is a great place to have ideas, but a terrible place to manage them.", says David Allen, author of Getting Things Done. If you're going through your day with a head full of "stuff" that you have your attention on, Time Blocking will be a very difficult practice for you.

Keeping tasks in your head will never let you focus on the now

One of the principles of time blocking is to focus on the task on hand and block off your mind from everything else that is demanding your attention. And, you can only focus on the task on hand when you have confidence that the rest of your time demands are under control. When you're keeping your tasks in your head, that's a very tall order for your brain. If you use nothing else from David Allen's GTD system, use [ubiquitous capture](#). It helps you clear your head where it will either be a distraction or forgotten.

Is your to-do list getting longer and longer?

This guide to Time Blocking is most useful for those who're in stage 2, or 3. If you already have a combination of task management tools (i.e. methodologies, apps, habits, devices and platforms), but you feel your tool-set has started to develop shortcomings leading to your to-do lists getting longer and longer, and your stress level is building up, Time Blocking is the next phase that will up your game.



Todo lists get longer and longer, adding to your stress and
overwhelm

If the nature of your work is primarily reactive like a customer service representative who's mostly answering calls, and emails, time blocking can still help you to make the best of the remainder of your time. You have 24 hours a day, and obviously you don't spend 24 hours a day in reactive mode. You can always carve out time for what matters to you most, goals that you want to achieve, projects that move the needle for you, or making improvements in your personal or family related areas. In addition, it's best to chunk your time when you're merely reacting to incoming requests. For example, schedule 1 hour every 2 hours in your inbox. You're taking care of clients. You don't need to stop and answer the phone every 3 seconds or check your email because you're pro-actively doing meaningful things.

Time Blocking Takes Practice

Time Blocking is deceptively simple. It looks like all you have to do is to pick a date and time on your calendar and dedicate it to a task. In reality, however, there is a lot more to it. And, this guide is here to help you understand all the subtle techniques to make you successful in time blocking. The path to success with time blocking includes practicing from easy steps to more difficult steps.

If you're new to Time Blocking, you must start with limited time blocking with lots of buffer (more on this later.) A big mistake that many beginners make is to start by scheduling all hours of the day. This is similar to a beginner who starts by weight lifting the heaviest weights first. Time Blocking every hour of your day is a master's level practice. Attempting to do so often fails and leads to berating yourself. You're here to eliminate overwhelm, not to make your procrastination worse and feel helpless.



If you're new to time blocking, don't start by scheduling every minute of your day.

So, if you're new to Time Blocking, start small, and grow your muscles over time. Start with one or two hours of Time Blocking each working day.

As a new time blocker, you'll probably have to reschedule your blocks often. [SkedPal](#) is an automatic scheduling system that can be of great help here. With click of a button, it reschedules your time blocks. It's an intelligent system that is aware of your preferred times for time blocks as well as your existing appointments from Google calendar or Office 365; so it automatically manages your calendar.

Time Blocking Doesn't Mean Lack of Choices

Some people hate having a rigid structure in their day, and fear that Time Blocking leads to this rigidity. There are also those who believe their day is too unpredictable and can't see how time blocking is going to work. The following points address such concerns.

Firstly, having absolutely no structure or plan for your day is a recipe for failure. If you just show up at work to see what's waiting for you, you'll always be reacting to other people's agenda. Or, if you're a freelancer or entrepreneur who flies by the seat of your pants, showing up at work without a plan will make you float in directions that are not necessarily in your best interest. Distractions will easily conquer you and take control of your day. We live in the most distraction rich environment that humanity has ever experienced. There is distraction everywhere.

You need to have a strong anchor plan



We live in the most distraction rich environment in
history

To drive your most important priorities and spend your most valuable asset -time- on what matters most to you, you'll need to proactively shape your day in advance as much as you can. You need to have a strong anchor plan. Without an anchor plan, you'll be living in the distractions. It'll be like 80% distraction, 20% let me go back to my to-do list. You've got to build a structure for your day that you love. A structure that reflects your goals and priorities. A structure that enables you to achieve what you want. This structure is curated by you and is based on your wants and intents. Therefore, building structure into your day is not depriving yourself of choices during the day. Instead, you are pro-actively choosing to do the right things based on a compelling, satisfying, and meaningful structure where your days are primarily for you.

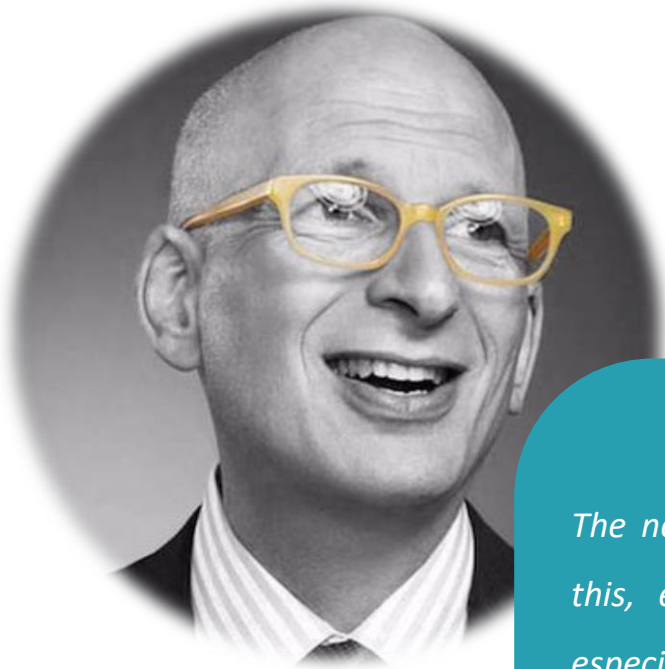
Needless to say, it's next to impossible to have a 100% distraction free day..

So, we want to flip this 80-20 order. It should be 80% plan, 20% distraction. Some distractions are the urgent tasks that come up. Time blocking balances the urgent with the important. If a true crisis happens, you can still drop what you're doing to handle the crisis. But, having an anchor plan forces you to make a conscious choice to do so. Otherwise, distractions automatically win your time.

Perfectionism creeps into your day as procrastination

Secondly, if you're a perfectionist, you need to be wary of how your perfectionism creeps into your day as procrastination. Perfectionists always look for the 'ideal time' to begin work. Especially if your work is primarily creative work, you tend to begin your work when you feel like doing the work. This is generally a misconception that you'll be more creative later. When you time block a task, regardless of whether you feel like doing the work, get started on what you can do now. The key is to get started. This means that you need to accept that the first stage of working on a piece is messy. People who get things done in this world don't wait for the spirit to move them; they move the spirit, says David J. Schwartz in his best-selling book, the Magic of Thinking Big.

What the experts say



The notion that I do my work here, now, like this, even when I do not feel like it, and especially when I do not feel like it, is very important. Because lots and lots of people are creative when they feel like it, but you are only going to become a professional if you do it when you don't feel like it. And that emotional waiver is why this is your work and not your hobby.

Seth Godin - author of eighteen international bestsellers

What the experts say

Cal Newport, author of Deep Work also believes that time blocking does not stifle creative work. Here is an excerpt from his book:



Sometimes people ask if controlling time will stifle creativity. I understand this concern, but it's fundamentally misguided. If you control your schedule: (1) you can ensure that you consistently dedicate time to the deep efforts that matter for creative pursuits; and (2) the stress relief that comes from this sense of organization allows you to go deeper in your creative blocks and produce more value.

If you're still worried, read Mason Currey's Daily Rituals: very few of the world-famous creatives he profiled adopted a "I'll work when I feel inspired" attitude — they instead controlled their day, so they could control their art.

Cal Newport - Author of Deep Work

Not all distractions are avoidable

While doing your best to stick to the scheduled times for tasks is an important success factor in time blocking, there are always unavoidable distractions. Sometimes the distractions are internal. That means you're emotionally not ready to get started today for whatever reason. External distractions are also not totally unavoidable. "People's biggest misconception with time-blocking their day is that the goal is to stick with the schedule no matter what," says Cal Newport. "A better way is to rework your time blocks throughout the day as circumstances change. The goal is to make sure they you always have an intentional plan for the time that remains in the workday", he adds.

[SkedPal](#) is a great tool to give you that agility in the day. If your day unfolds in unexpected ways, SkedPal quickly re-adjusts your schedule for the remainder of the day to give you the optimum plan.

To-do Lists And Time Blocking

The best toolset for productivity is a to-do list AND a calendar. To-do lists alone do not cut it. To-do lists without time blocking give you the paradox of choice, and cause overwhelm. Scientific research has shown that our brains can only handle about seven options before we're overwhelmed. Looking at the 100+ items on your to-do list will paralyze you or send you into procrastination. Organizing your lists into projects and adding tags and filters is helpful, but if that's what you must do each time you need to decide on your next action, that's overwhelming.

In addition, to-do lists lack 'commitment devices'. A commitment device locks you into a course of action that you might not otherwise choose. When you have an open list of tasks with varying priorities to choose from, you tend to take care of the urgent, and smaller tasks, and let the important ones that require more focus and energy lie fallow until they become urgent too. With time blocking, you're adding that commitment device. You have curated your day in advance based on your most important priorities. And, now you don't want to think again what to do next.

It's critical to have a commitment device

The Chinese general Han Xin positioned his soldiers with their backs to a river, so they couldn't run away from the enemy. That's the kind of a commitment device you'll need to get important work done.

When you time block your tasks, it puts you in a commitment mode just like a meeting you have to show up. It's an appointment with yourself. It's an internal commitment that you don't want to break, same way you don't break your commitment to doctor's appointments, flights, work meetings, and events. We're already indentured to our calendar in many ways. And, that doesn't mean we can't be in charge of our own time.

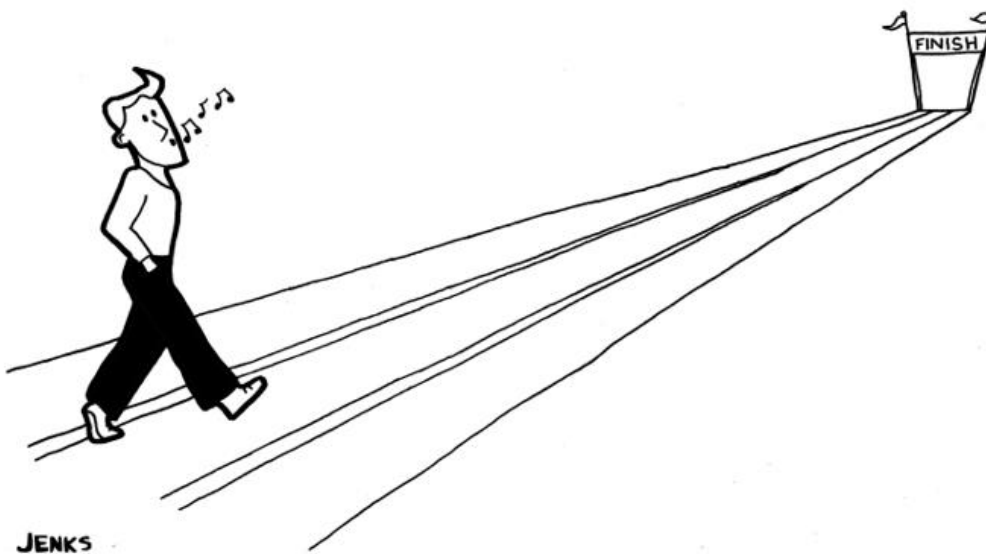
The Chinese general Han Xin positioned his soldiers with their backs to a river, so they couldn't run away from the enemy. That's the kind of a commitment device you'll need to get important work done.



Time blocking is a commitment device that locks you into a course of action

The Parkinson's Law

The other problem with to-do lists without time blocking is that listing all your to-do's for today lets your brain assume that you have all day to get all of them done. This is an erroneous assumption by our brain. The fact is if you operate from a list without time blocking, tasks would take longer than they should. Parkinson's Law says, “work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.” When you time block for a task, you know that you have, say, 2 hours from 10 AM to noon to get that task done. And, since your afternoon is blocked out for other tasks, you're more likely to finish the task in the allotted time.



Parkinson's Law: Work expands so as to fill the time available
for its completion

So, with time blocking, do we need a to-do list too? Time blocking without complementary lists is also a mistake. The rate of incoming time demands far exceeds our agility to time block them right off the bat. In fact, time blocking everything as it comes to us is a mistake. We should capture all ideas, and incoming requests, but store and organize them for later review and processing. David Allen's Getting Things Done methodology offers a great workflow to collect, process, and organize time demands that end up in your inbox. Your lists are the main source of information when you need to plan, and time block your days and decide on the important tasks and projects.

The best app that offers both a to-do list and a calendar in one system is [SkedPal](#). It allows you to maintain your lists the GTD way while benefiting from selective time blocking.



04

How to
Time Block

The following is a practical guide to help you succeed with time blocking.

Choosing the Right Tasks for Time Blocking

Ramp up your productivity one step at a time. Time blocking is the ultimate productivity tool, but you need to work your way up slowly, and carefully. Attempting to start at peak levels of time blocking often fails and leads to berating yourself. You're here to succeed and feel good about it. You don't want this new tool to make you feel defeated, and more overwhelmed. It's just like playing a new digital game. You always start as a beginner with some easy mission. Once you gain more skills and confidence, you move up the next level in the game. And, soon you'll turn into a skilled ninja.



Ramp up your skills in time blocking one step at a time

The biggest mistake that beginners in time blocking make is that they fill out their entire day with back to back blocks with detailed tasks in each block. This is the ninja's level, and you'll get there. But, let's simplify the game for now so you'll strengthen your muscles first. There are two dimensions in setting the right level of difficulty in time blocking:

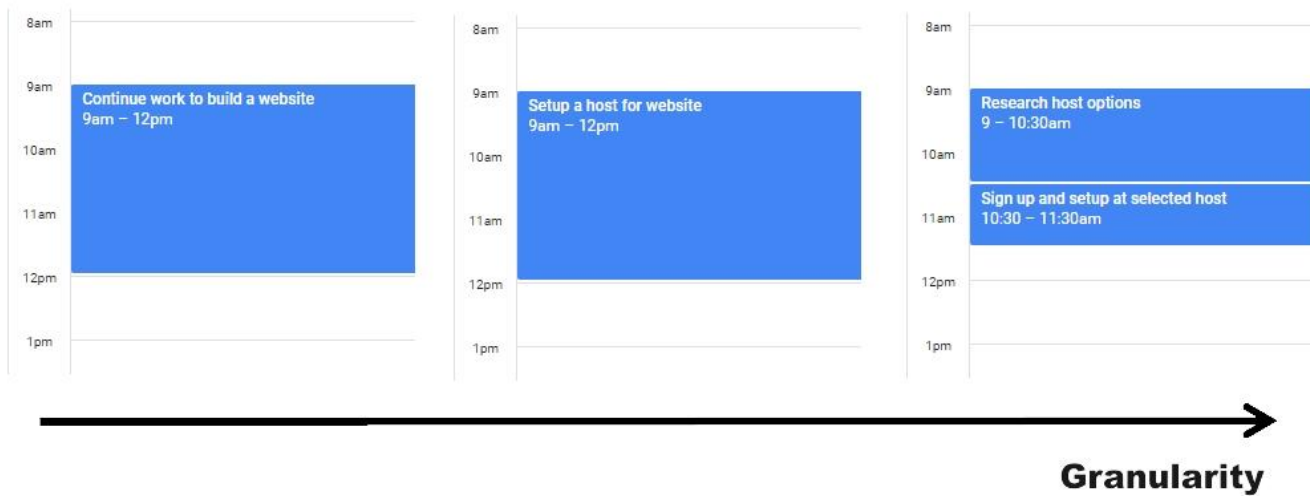
The level of abstraction in a time block

The number and length of time blocks in a day

Getting the right level of granularity

Let's start with the first dimension: Granularity. Say you want to time block your days so you can make progress on writing a book. You don't have to schedule everything in too much detail. The more detailed you set your time blocks, the more challenging it is to complete it within the allocated time. For example, if you set your time block with title "Write the introduction, middle and end of the scene" and give that 30 minutes, that's probably too detailed for a beginner in time blocking.

On the other hand, if you make the time block too vague, you'll be prone to the Parkinson's law. Parkinson's Law says, "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." So, if your block title is 'Write book', that's probably too vague, and lacks the sufficient detail to mentally prepare you to focus on the right task. Deciding on the right level of granularity for your tasks is an art and it really depends on you and your specific projects or goals. So, use your best judgment to set the right level.



The intensity of time blocks

The next dimension is how many time blocks do I need in a day, and for how long. For some people, it's an easy decision because they spend a good part of their day in meetings. Or, you may be looking into time blocking to make the best use of your free time on Saturdays to work on a side hustle. But, if you can design most of your day ([maker's schedule](#)), don't start by time blocking your entire day. Again, that's the ninja's level.

The best way to start as a beginner is to time block maximum of 2 hours each day. After each day, assess yourself: Did I manage to block off my mind from all distractions during the time block? Did I get started on time? Am I happy with the progress I made during the time block? Was the title of the time block too specific or too vague? If you observe a good performance, then you're ready to increase your time blocks during the day.

Otherwise, keep pushing yourself to commit and focus on the limited time blocks you have each day. Time blocking can be highly effective even if you only create one block of focused time and attention every day. You'll be amazed how much progress you'll make over time.

If you use SkedPal, you can use the combination of lists and calendar in one app. It allows you to [cherry pick your most important tasks](#) to be automatically time blocked.

Allocating the right time to the right tasks

In today's fast-paced work environments, you can easily become overwhelmed by unnecessary tasks. American philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, once said "It's not enough to be busy; so are the ants. The question is what are you busy about?" Time blocking is a great opportunity to choose what you want to be busy with during your day. Who we become is a purposeful intent, not an accident. Our intention of who we're going to be, and how our work and life is going to be drives how we spend our days. Each of our days is something that we can design. It's true that we can't always direct every circumstance of our life, but we can certainly set our goals, and do our best to control our responses to the circumstances.

Therefore, be very selective about what you're going to time block. Pareto's principle states that roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. You want to select the top 20% of your tasks that lead to 80% impact on your success. The projects that move the needle for you. Do not start by time blocking 'Check Email'. You'll do that anyway. You want to allocate your time block to projects and goals that deserve a totally distraction free, and focused mind. As you progress into becoming a time blocking ninja, you'll time block everything including emails. But, for now, you want to mobilize your resources, energy and will power on the most important tasks. You have limited will power, and it depletes as your day progresses. So, it's best to give it to the important tasks.



Pareto's principle: Only 20% of your tasks lead to
80% impact on your success

Assess where your time is being spent

If you're having a hard time finding time to time block for these important tasks during the day, you really need to assess how you're spending your time. A smart approach to time management is to face that insurmountable list of tasks once before getting your act together, starting with a thorough reckoning as to where your time is going. You realize that once you understand where your time is going, the right choices become clear. Attending that recurring-no-value-added-routine meeting or spending a long time on your Facebook newsfeed is a lot less tempting when you're aware of the cost: 8000 minutes on average per year. Time blocking for important tasks means never having to pass up an opportunity because you've blown your precious time on discretionary activities.

One of the biggest time vampires in larger organizations is the meetings that you're asked to attend. Always question the purpose of the meeting, and whether you're really needed in the meeting. A good approach is to proactively block your time for important tasks, so you can confidently decline unimportant meetings.

Goals vs dreams

“All things are created twice”, says Stephen Covey, author of the seven habits of highly effective people. Every bit of human progress, all the inventions, discoveries, business or engineering successes were first visualized before they became realities. All success stories start with a vision. But, not just a vision. A vision that is followed by action. And, that’s called a goal. A goal is more than a dream. It’s a dream being acted upon. Until a goal is established, nothing happens.

Do you have an image of the person you want to be five years from now? If you don’t, you should seriously think about it. This is a critical thought. People who fail to set long term goals will most likely get lost in life shuffle. Without goals we cannot grow, and it’s very unlikely to stumble into success.

Goals are hard work

Once you get a clear fix on where you want to go, you should start planning the necessary actions that will take you there. This is where the rubber hits the road. This is where the dreamers are separated from the achievers. Apart from your commitment and willingness, nowadays It is getting increasingly more difficult to find the time even when your goal really matters to you. Goals are hard work. To achieve your goals, you need to commit quality time. Whether it's reading books, learning a new language, or becoming a good hacker, it takes commitment. And, the quantity of your commitment is just as important as the quality. Malcolm Gladwell, pop psych writer, believes you need 10,000 hours of practice to become world-class in any field. Without motivation, commitment and discipline, it's impossible to keep up the streak.

10,000 hours of practice are needed to become world-class in any field.

-Malcolm Gladwell

Time blocking is pivotal in your success with goals. It gives you an opportunity to proactively budget time for your goals, and then commit yourself to the designated time blocks. Without time blocks, your goals are merely dreams. In fact, it's very common for people to WISH they could have these.



Routine, in an intelligent man, is a sign of ambition.

W. H. Auden

The pickle jar theory

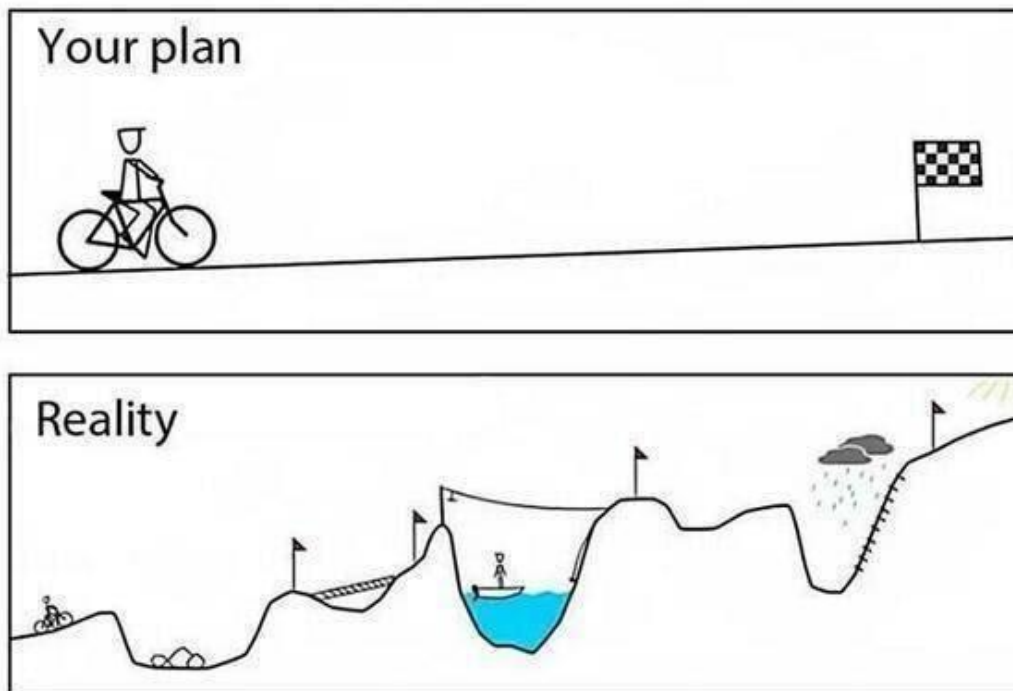
Before time blocking these goals, ask yourself how serious you are about your goals. Achieving these goals means **not** doing some other things. The pickle jar theory of time management states that our time is like a jar. You can't fit everything in it. If there is something you really want to add to a full jar, you need to remove something that's already in the jar. So, are you willing to cut down on other activities to open up room for your goals? Are you dead serious about your goals? If yes, then you're ready to time block for your goals. If you're using SkedPal, use [the power of routine task scheduling](#). It finds the best time for your goals on your calendar based on your preferences.

Remember, it's the consistency in working on your goal that is important. Goals take a lot of practice and hard work. So, break them down into manageable and consistently repeating time blocks. "Routine, in an intelligent man, is a sign of ambition.", says W. H. Auden

Do you have an image of the person you want to be five years from now? If you don't, you should seriously think about it.

Estimating the Effort for Your Tasks

We generally tend to underestimate how long tasks will take. This chronic error not only causes our plans to fail, but it also leads to frustration, and overwhelm. This is especially true if you're new to time blocking and have never estimated the effort your tasks will take. This phenomenon is called the [planning fallacy](#). (also, sometimes referred to as the optimism bias). So why do we, as human beings, systematically underestimate the effort (or even money) we will need? Part of the reason is that our brain is not made for this activity. In a [recent study](#), scientists have found that there are no sensory receptors specifically dedicated for perceiving time. It is an almost uniquely intangible sensation. The other reason for our underestimation is that we usually forget we're going to hit snags; almost always.



We usually forget we're going to hit snags.

Always overestimate!

One solution to this problem is to deliberately overestimate your tasks for the first few months. This is a good advice for beginners. For at least the first month, you should take your initial estimate and multiply that by three! It may sound too much now, but you'll be surprised how far off your initial estimates are in practice. This overestimation needs to adjust over time. As you practice estimating your tasks, you need to reduce the multiplication factor down. It's hard to get perfect at estimation, but you'll have other methods to combat this problem as explained below.

[SkedPal](#) helps you quickly adjust your estimate and re-plan all your time blocks instantly. So, if your initial estimate for a task was 2 hours, and then you feel you need another hour, all you have to do is to update the duration and ask [SkedPal](#) to reschedule everything else.

Use buffers to plan for the unplanned

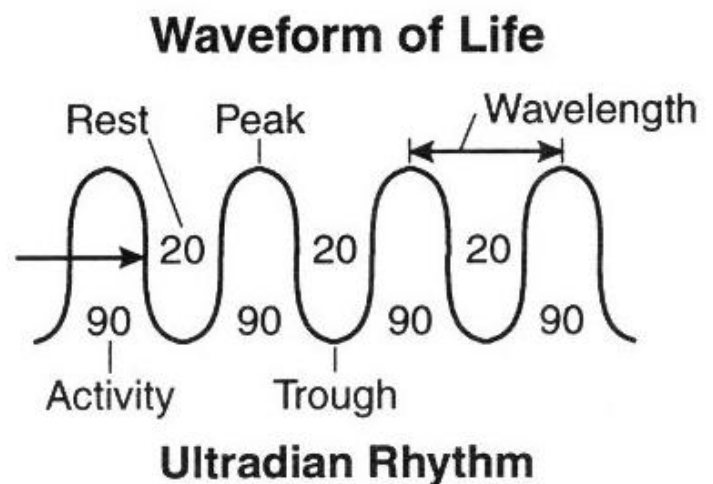
Another good practice is to always include some buffer zones in your time blocking. Make sure you have one to three 30-minute blocks of time as buffer in your day. This is more applicable to more advanced time blockers. Beginners shouldn't time block more than a couple of hours a day anyway. The buffer zone is a win-win strategy. If you run over, you can bump another time block into the buffer zone. And, when you're on schedule, the buffer zone is a pleasant gift for you to recharge or catch up with your email.

If you're using [SkedPal](#), buffers are automatically added to your schedule. So, you can decide to have, say 20%, buffer in your day. That's the only setting you need to do. The rest is automatically managed by [SkedPal](#).

If you're time blocking for a long stretch of time, make sure you also include breaks. Breaks are critical for your productivity. The best way to design your break times is to make them short and often. Sleep researcher, Nathan Kleitman, has [discovered](#) that our bodies operate in 90-minute cycles. This concept is called the Ultradian Rhythm. This rhythm occurs during night time as well as the day. So, your performance slows down every 90 minutes, and that's a perfect time for a short 5 to 10-minute break.

The break strategy

To implement this break strategy, do not try to schedule these short breaks; instead, use a timer that reminds you every 90 minutes to take a short break. Pomodoro timer is a special timer that is designed for this process. It breaks down work into intervals, originally 25 minutes in length, separated by 5-minute breaks. You can decide how long you want to work before you take a break, and how long you like your break to be. That's flexible and it depends on you. But, make sure the minimum break time is set to repeat every 90 minutes.



When you have a big task or project, always chunk it into pieces. It's always easier and more accurate to estimate the smaller tasks or sub-tasks than it is to estimate the project. So, if you have a big task that you think is going to take 20 hours, you're most likely wrong in your estimate (unless you have extensive experience in doing the same project several times in the past.) Break it down, and you'll be in a much better position to estimate the pieces. It's more work and takes time to think through the steps of a project, but it's well worth it.

Eating the elephant

In general, if you're estimating any task to take longer than 90 minutes, it's best if you try to break it down into smaller steps. This hack is not only helpful in having better time estimates for your tasks, it also helps you avoid procrastination. When you begin to work on a big task, you'll be looking at an elephant and wondering how to eat it. It's much easier to get started with smaller tasks.

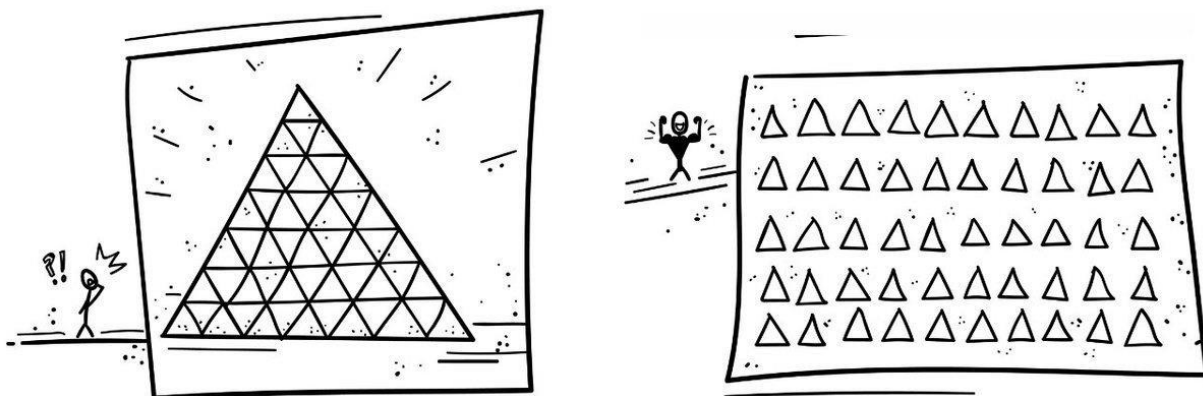


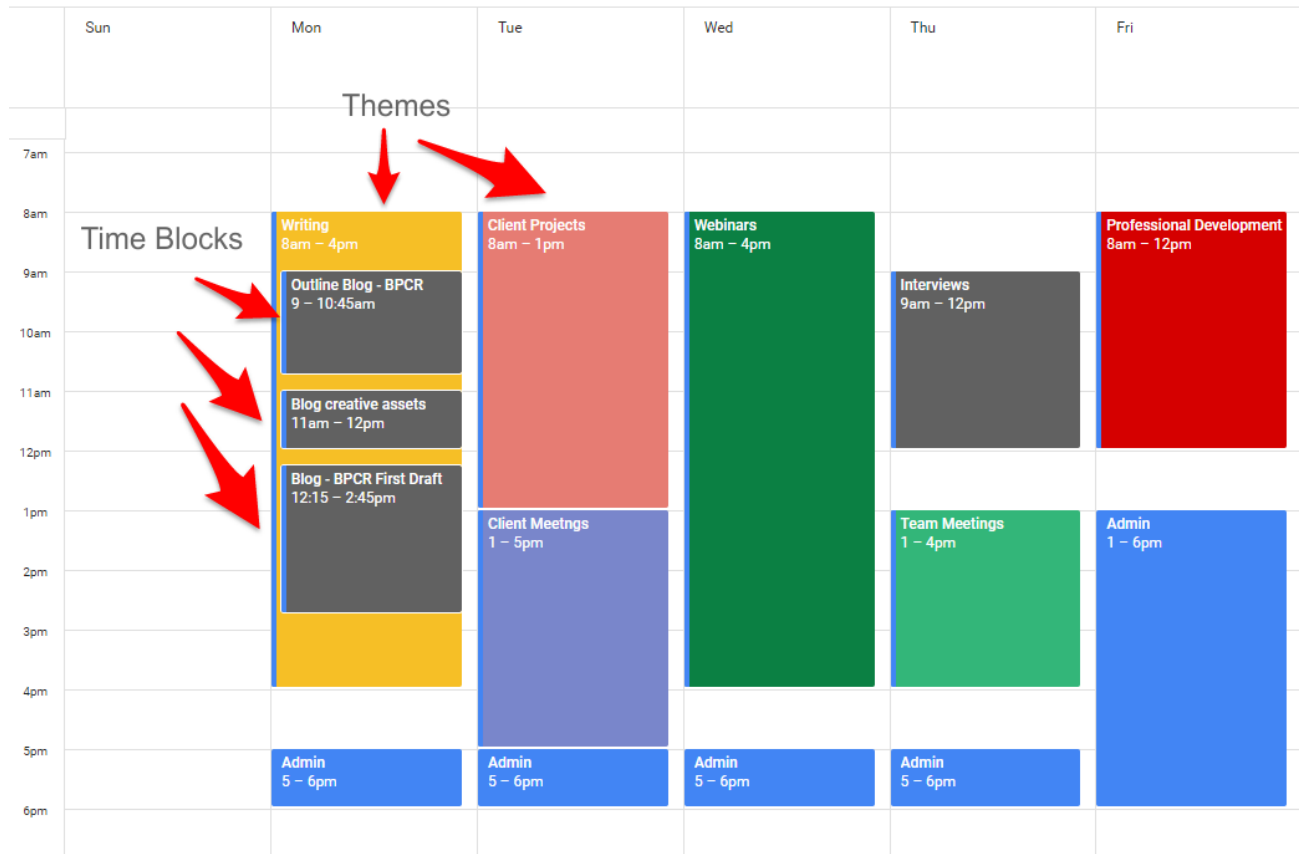
Illustration from the book: Surge: Your Guide to Put Any Idea Into Action

Let's say now that you have done all the above to avoid underestimating your task effort. What if it's the end of your time block and you still need more time to complete your work? There are different strategies here, and you need to choose the one that best suits you. The first strategy is based on [time boxing](#). Remember the [Parkinson's Law](#)? "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." Time boxing advocates a fixed time for a task even if you feel you need more time.

The goal is here to do your best in the given time, just like an exam in school where time is always fixed. The other school of thought is to continue your work until you feel you're done. The advocates of this method believe in [event time](#) not the clock time. The difference is you don't want to let a clock dictate when you're done. Perhaps, the best strategy is to allow yourself to run over a bit if you feel that you can really make a big progress in a limited time. And, if you're still not done, schedule another time block for some other time to continue. This is done automatically in [SkedPal](#) for you.

Theming Your Days

Usually, there are very different tasks that are being planned within one day. Each of these has a "start-up" cost. It takes about 20 minutes just to get into the flow of things. Therefore, context switching is very costly to your productivity. One technique that helps reduce this inefficiency is called day theming. Day theming basically means batching similar kinds of work together. As an example, you might decide to allocate Mondays to meetings with your team, Tuesdays to focused work on a certain project, etc. Theming can also be done for part of the day. For example, you can decide to theme your Friday afternoons to reviewing your projects and planning the week ahead. It really depends on you and your work requirement to design your [ideal week](#). Once you batch similar tasks together, you reduce the start-up time as you're already in the same context.

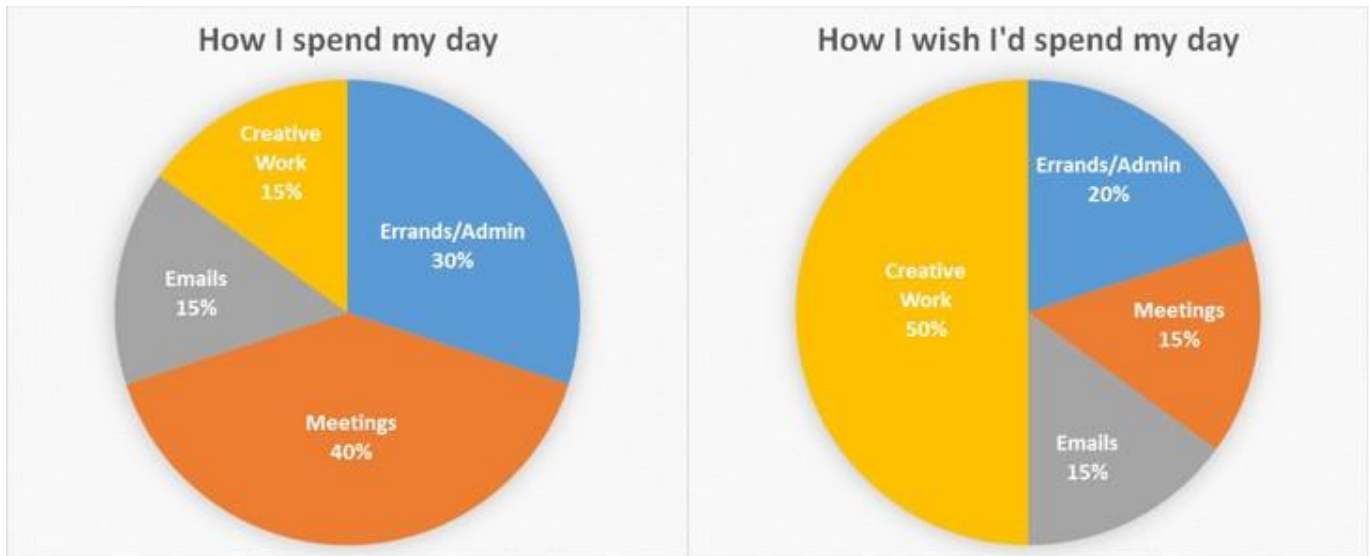


Batch similar kinds of tasks together (theming) reduces
context switching cost

There are other advantages to day theming such as the opportunity to make the best of your [circadian rhythm](#). Usually, we tend to feel energized and drowsy around the same times every day. This is due to our circadian rhythm - an internal clock that cycles between sleepiness and alertness at regular intervals. This will help you to theme your most alert hours for the most demanding jobs. So, if you need to write with deep focus, choose the optimum time for your time block at part of the day you are most productive. How you design your themes is dependent on you and your work habits.

Creating balance in your work

Another advantage of day theming is creating a balance in your work and allocating the right amount of time to each category in your work. Most people can think of different broad categories of their work that reflect their core responsibilities. For example, an online entrepreneur has the following categories: writing blog posts, hosting webinars, creating video contents, and social Media. Or, as another example, an architect's work can be broken down into: writing proposals, client meetings, site plan drawings, and phone calls/emails. Typically, some of these categories suck up more of your time than you want. Theming your days is a great way to proactively allocate the right amount of time to each of these categories and balance your work. It helps you work on-purpose, and avoid working by accident, reacting to other people's agenda.



Theming your days helps you proactively balance your work

4 Steps to design your themes for time blocking:

Step One

Pick 2 or 3 broad categories of your work that are core to your success. You want to pick the categories that move the needle for you. These are the categories that require you to be creative and do deep work.

Step Two

For each category, decide how much time you want to allocate per week. In other words, budget sufficient time for each category. When budgeting time, think of your work-life balance first. In fact, you should start by allocating time for your personal areas such as dinner with friends, regular date nights with a partner, time with your kids, or just reading. Decide what time you want to get home each day and work your way up to see the available time you can allocate to your work projects. Think thoroughly about all areas of your life including your health, and fitness.

They all deserve your time. And, this is the best time to design your life the way you want it. Want to do that professional development course, or work on a side business? This is the time to budget for it. You have 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. Allocate your time wisely to each area of your life.

Once you set the time budget for your personal areas, start to think about your work categories. Don't overgeneralize everything into just 'work'. You'll need to create balance in your work by dividing your work into different categories and give each category a time budget. Otherwise, you'll always be reacting to the urgent as opposed to proactively planning for the important.



Step Three

Think of the best days and hours to allocate to these work categories. For example, if you know your office is typically very busy on Fridays, you might want to avoid theming concentrated work on Fridays. Or, if you feel you're slower in afternoons, use mornings. Try to use the same hours every day.

In other words, if you decide to work on concentrated work for two hours daily, keep the hours the same for each day. This will help you create a habit. When you start doing the same kind of work at the same hour of each day, you'll develop a good habit. This will reduce the initial friction that normally exists in the early stage. On average, it takes [more than 2 months](#) before a new behavior becomes automatic. If you consistently follow your themes for 2 months, it will be a lot easier to get started on your time blocks.

Step Four

Mark these themes on your calendar. In your weekly review, and planning session (explained later), ensure to time block the tasks inside the right themes.

SkedPal's [time map feature](#) facilitates the theming process, and enables you to automatically assign your tasks to different themes.

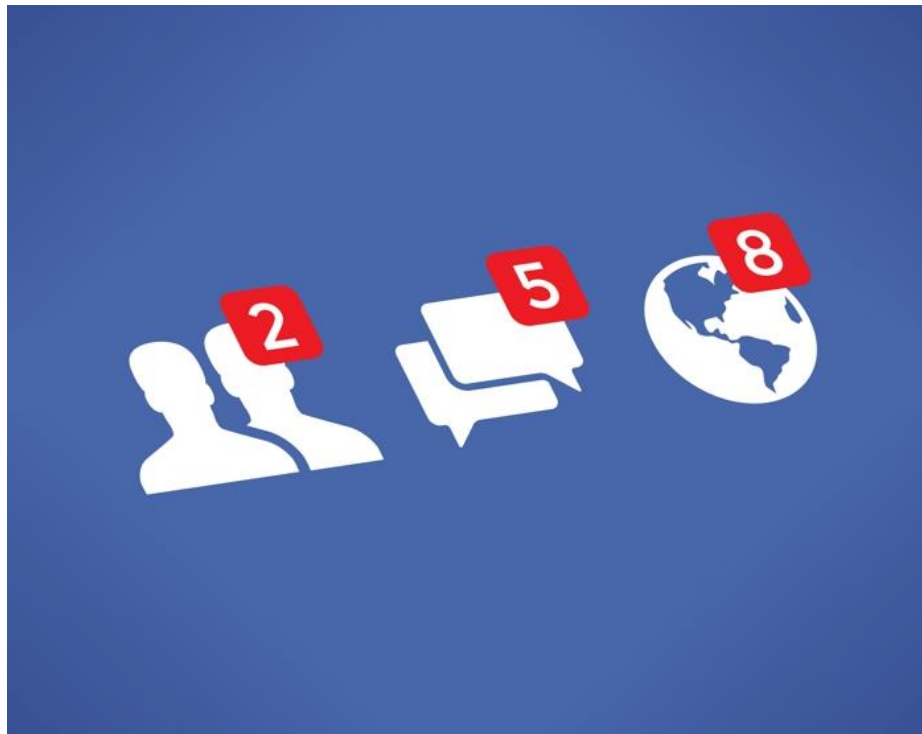
Therefore, be very selective about what you're going to time block. Pareto's principle states that roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. You want to select the top 20% of your tasks that lead to 80% impact on your success. The projects that move the needle for you. Do not start by time blocking 'Check Email'. You'll do that anyway. You want to allocate your time block to projects and goals that deserve a totally distraction free, and focused mind. As you progress into becoming a time blocking ninja, you'll time block everything including emails. But, for now, you want to mobilize your resources, energy and will power on the most important tasks. You have limited will power, and it depletes as your day progresses. So, it's best to give it to the important tasks.

Preparing the Work Environment

Time blocking is all about focused and deep work. You won't be able to focus if you're in the middle of a lot of distractions. This is particularly true for those who work in a busy office. The following suggests a number of tactics to prepare the environment for your time blocks.

Keep off digital distractions

Turn off your mobile push notifications. Keep your mobile silent; or even turn it off if possible. Redirect calls to your voicemail. What's a voicemail for? It's for times when you can't answer the phone, and this is one of them. It's your choice to get into the flow and increase your focus and productivity and make the best use of your time. Don't let others take a toll on your productivity.



Push notifications are designed to interrupt you. Turn them off

Avoid the temptation to check your email. Even a quick glance at your email is enough to put you back by at least 20 minutes. Not because you take 20 minutes to check your email, but because your mind must change context to something different. It has [been proved](#) by many researchers that when you switch tasks, it takes about 20 minutes to get back into the [flow state](#). So, the best way is to shut down your email client. There are [many tools available](#) that will help you block ALL digital distractions including web sites and social media.

Remember, it's YOU who needs to make a choice here. You are more of a danger to your productivity and focus than anyone else. So, make a choice. Eliminate all these temptations in your environment. Social media is carefully designed to lure you. They use psychological methods to build habits in you to continuously use them. Not checking in with your email, Twitter or Facebook for a couple of hours is harder than you think it is.

Location is crucial

While social media and Internet can be the biggest threat to your focus, your location in a busy office is crucial too. This is particularly true if you work in an open plan office or work remotely from home with kids around. If you can find a way to block the noise by using a headset, do that. Invest in a set of noise-cancelling headphones and listen to [music for focus and concentration](#). Wearing a headphone can dramatically reduce the interruptions. A positive side effect of wearing a headphone is that it discourages others around you to disturb you.

If you have the option to book a meeting room for your time blocks, use the opportunity. Remember, a time block is just as important as any other appointments on your calendar except that you're having this appointment with yourself. If you have a quiet home, that's another option for some of your key time blocks.

Educate Others



If you work in a cubicle, or an open plan office, you need to have a gate keeping method for your time blocks. After all, you're working in a team, and others are supposed to be talking to you. So, it's up to you to plan your days in a way that is both focused and collaborative. One hack is to set some core hours and educate others about it. Share your core hours with your teammates and let them know you shouldn't be distracted during your core hours. Set a “Do Not Disturb” sign on your desk, during the core hours. Be unapologetic when it comes to your most precious asset, your time. It can seem daunting to draw boundaries with your friends, family or co-workers, but your focus is your key success factor. When you say YES to your priorities, you should defend it by a thousand NO’s.



Make sure your calendar leaves some space open for others to invite you to meetings; otherwise, a fully blocked calendar encourages people to ignore your calendar and reach out to you by email or in person. If you're working on a project at home during moonlight hours, you'll need to communicate your need for focus with your family members. Let them know you're unavailable at this certain time to make space for a passion project.

Don't sweat it too much when there is really a need to attend to something. But, give time grudgingly during your time blocks. Use the right language when communicating with others. Never say you're free! Instead say you can make time or can move things around to remind them this change is costly to you, your time, and your focus.

Prepare the resources in advance

If you need access to resource information during your time block such as links to resources on the web, or work files on Dropbox, etc., make sure they're easily accessible during your time block. For example, choose your location so you can have access to Internet, or ensure you have access to your Dropbox account where your files are stored. This is particularly important when you can't make any progress on your task because of the dependency on these resources. Otherwise, you might end up wasting the time reserved for the work.

• How to Begin and End Your Scheduled Task

You'll notice that there is usually a mental friction to start your scheduled task. Maybe, it has to do with context switching. That is detaching yourself from what you're currently doing and getting into a different zone. Or, it may have to do with a feeling of overwhelm. This feeling stems from worries, distractions, responsibilities, or maybe even some new ideas you want to work on. This friction to start must be handled first. Otherwise, you will either skip the scheduled task. Or, you will not be able to get your full attention and focus on it. Unsettled whims and worries will grab a good part of your attention and significantly degrade the quality of your time block. Remember, you can get a lot more done when you're focused. Cal Newport, author of Deep Work, believes that an hour of deep work is estimated to produce 50% more output.



So, how do we settle our thoughts before we engage with our scheduled task? Kourosh Dini, Psychiatrist, and author of *Zen and the Art of Work* suggests that we must first pause before we attempt to engage with work. It may sound obvious and simplistic, but it's not. Pausing helps us realize we have a decision to make. It's true that you had previously thought about your priorities and committed yourself to this time block. However, a lot might have happened in your mind since then. So, it's time to reassess your values and priorities and remind yourself of why you decided to work on this task at this hour.

Settle your thoughts before starting to work

Pause to connect with your thoughts. You'll start to see the pushes and pulls of the moment. An inbox can be incredibly helpful at this time. An inbox is a place to hold your ideas for a later time. Maybe, you'll need to reply to an important email and that's occupying your mind right now. Add it to your inbox. You'll need this pause to clear your mind and have a settled decision to start your work. And while pausing, if you decide that you want to do something more important right now, re-schedule your time block. That's perfectly fine too as long as you make a conscious decision about it. Whatever you do, do not start your task without a clear mind.

Ending Your Task

When it's the end of the task, it's important for you to review and revise the rest of your work. It's very likely that your day does not go 100% as planned. So, it's important to revise your plan to avoid a delay ripple effect.

Three approaches to finishing a task

Previously, we discussed different approaches to finishing a task. They were mainly time boxing, event time, and the hybrid method (See Estimating the Effort for Your Tasks.) Depending on your preferred approach, you may have to take the time to adjust your time blocks. For example, suppose you prefer to take your time to finish a task regardless of the allotted time block. Then, you'll probably be eating into other time blocks. So, take the time to reschedule them.

Now, suppose you follow the time boxing method, and you still feel there is more work to be done. Then, you should schedule the remainder of the work in a new time block. It's also important to review and revise at the end of each day. This process should reflect the fact that priorities change, new stuff come up, and projects take more or less time than you expect them to.

The Weekly Review

As mentioned earlier, the rate at which new ideas and time demands come at you far exceeds your realistic availability to do them. In other words, you're never going to be able to accomplish everything you want to accomplish. Therefore, it's important to have a workflow for capturing your incoming time demands and reviewing them regularly. It's a mistake to try to schedule new ideas and time demands as they come in unless you're certain of their priority. You need to appreciate that you have a very limited time during each day. The difference between successful and unsuccessful people is in the choices they make on what to allocate their time to. So, it's a very critical decision what is going to go into your time blocks.

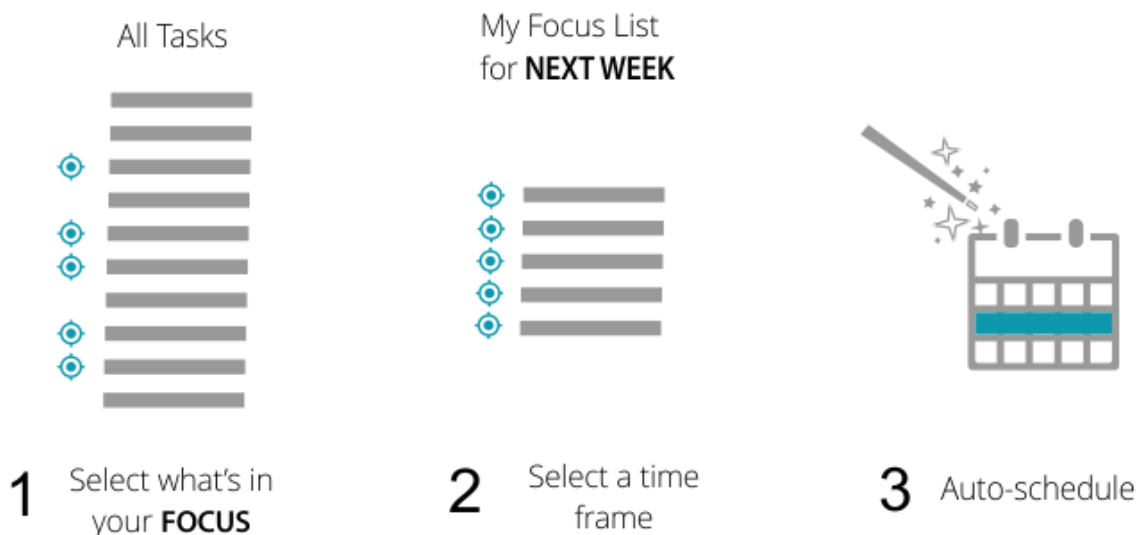
Having a backlog is inevitable

Prioritizing your work is not easy as there are always things you need to consciously put on the backlog for some time later. You might even decide to kill the loose ends. This process is best done on a weekly basis. Perhaps, every Friday afternoon, you can add a time block for your review process. This is an opportunity to review your lists and decide on the wildly important tasks you must be focusing on for the following week.

This process should be an integrated part of your time blocking practice. Without a review process, you'll find that things can get relatively out of control during the course of a few days. So, most of your time blocks for the following week should be set during the weekly review session.

SkedPal weekly focus workflow

SkedPal's [weekly focus workflow](#) is designed to streamline the weekly review process.



When you review your entire backlog and all the tasks you had saved before, you're in a much better position to decide what you want to focus on for the following week. This is because you have a much better overview of the entire backlog which is the opposite way of deciding to schedule a task right off the bat. Time blocking tasks as they come in is a poor decision because you're not considering other opportunities or commitments.

Let's use grocery shopping as a metaphor to elaborate this. When you go to a grocery market with a clear shopping list prepared in advance, you're more likely to do a smarter job. If you do not prepare a shopping list in advance, you'll probably be spending your money impulsively, and will end up forgetting to buy the right goods. The same is true for planning your week. If you go through a review process to cherry pick the wildly important tasks, you'll begin your week with a clear and smart agenda.

Watch out for planning fallacy

However, if you impulsively time block your tasks as they come in, you'll either must bear the opportunity cost for the more important tasks that could have been done or fall into the planning fallacy. Planning fallacy is more likely to happen when you decide to schedule your tasks one by one as they come in as opposed to reviewing the entire lot before deciding what to do.

It must be noted, however, that you cannot set your time blocks in advance, and expect that everything must go 100% according to the plan. As mentioned before, the idea here is to create an anchor plan. Of course, unavoidable interruptions happen, and priorities can shift during the week. You should do your best effort to shape your future but be flexible to adjust when you must.



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