

**A RAPITUDE GUIDE**

# **HOW TO DO THINGS**

**PRODUCTIVITY FOR THE  
PRODUCTIVITY-CHALLENGED**

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*How to Do Things: Productivity for the Productivity-Challenged* – Version 1.0

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## Notes on This Version

You are reading a revised version of *How to Do Things*. The original release (version 0.91) was intended as a prototype, to garner feedback on the book's central idea. I expected to go back to the drawing board afterward.

That first version turned out to be exactly what many people wanted. It sold unexpectedly well, and the feedback was glowing. In the feedback survey, by far the most common remark was, "Don't change a thing!" That was nice to hear, but it created a bit of a dilemma, given that I had shared my original intention to revamp and expand the book, by adding diagrams, new tools, and a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section.

The book's brevity seemed to be its main strength, so in revising it I was wary of the temptation to add things it didn't absolutely need. This new version leaves the essential instructions largely unchanged, as its fans emphatically requested.

Still, some improvements were necessary. Aside from proofreading and general tightening, the most important addition is the FAQ appended to the end. Rather than try to address every possible contingency in the main text, readers with lingering questions can browse the FAQ, and probably find the answers there.

One other major addition was requested by multiple readers: an example workday, describing how I use the method in my own life.

I had said I would include diagrams and graphics, so I looked for places where they would be helpful, and couldn't find any. It felt like I was trying to complicate the book for no good reason, so I left them out. People did ask for pictures of the tools I use—my timer, my Right Now Lists, and my tally sheet—so I included those.

All in all, the book proper is not substantially longer, excluding the optional material in the appendices, and it conveys the same simple method—only now, it is tried, tested, and polished.

-David

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# What This Guide Is, and Who It's For

*How to Do Things* is a concise resource designed to help people who struggle to get things done.

(To save time, throughout *How to Do Things*, I will refer to this book simply as the Guide.)

The Guide is not aimed at high achievers looking to get an edge. It's aimed at people who are currently struggling with productivity. Specifically, it is designed for:

- People who know they use their available work time poorly
- People having difficulty working from home
- People with ADHD or other executive function issues
- People who haven't had success implementing the methods in popular productivity books, such as *Getting Things Done*, *Deep Work*, or *The Pomodoro Technique*

If this sounds like you, the Guide can help you become more productive in a very short time. It won't necessarily solve the core issues beneath your productivity struggle—it cannot cure your ADHD or make you a natural go-getter. However, it will help you be as productive as you can be in spite of your challenges, which is almost certainly a lot more productive than you're used to.

*How to Do Things* was created with three highly specific goals for its readers:

- 1. Dramatically increase your productivity.**
- 2. Create this dramatic increase in a week or less.**
- 3. Provide this know-how in a resource you can read in one sitting and implement *today*.**

What's a dramatic increase? Somewhere between 50% and 200%, depending on how much room for improvement you have. If your current way of working is far from optimal, the method in this book can help you make a major leap quickly, and as you practice it you will continue to improve beyond that.

One more thing before we begin. The Guide is concerned with how you can be more productive, not *whether* you should be. We will leave aside all debates about work-life balance, office culture, burnout, capitalism, or any of that.

The Guide also makes no comment on what is worth producing. Whether you're writing poetry, cranking widgets, or studying chess openings, it assumes you regard your own productivity as a good thing and that you want more of it.

# Why This Guide is Necessary

I've always struggled with productivity, so I've read all the popular books and have tried to implement their techniques. I know the most famous system, David Allen's *Getting Things Done*, inside and out, but I've never been able to keep it going for long. It's a wonderful book, but like almost all productivity books, it was designed by a high achiever, and so that's who it suits.

The popular productivity books tend to focus on managing complex, airtight workflow systems—they assume that you won't have trouble actually *doing* the tasks you've so perfectly slotted into your immaculate system. The act of *doing*, itself, always seems to be an afterthought. It's taken for granted that you can get yourself do everything you need to do as long as you're organized.

At age 40, an ADHD diagnosis shed some much-needed light on my productivity struggle. It was finally clear why I've never been able to implement the complex systems of lists and procedures that apparently work for many people.

In the meantime, I had gradually pieced together what I always needed: a system with almost no moving parts. For me, and maybe you too, if a system involves maintaining a fleet of interconnected lists, worksheets, and file folders, it will all fall apart in less than 48 hours.

In my life today, and in this Guide, I employ a few doing-focused principles from some of those popular books, namely the 25-minute working sprints popularized by *The Pomodoro Technique*. I leave out, however, the extraneous structures these books tend to build around their best ideas.

This Guide emphasizes two qualities that are rare in productivity books: **brevity** and **ease of implementation**. If advice is too long you won't remember it. If it's too complex you won't implement it. I have tried to distill my method of getting things done into a very simple system, conveyed in the fewest words possible.

The method in this Guide is designed to fit a variety of lifestyles and temperaments. It doesn't matter whether you keep your to-do list on an iPad, a chalkboard, or a crumpled napkin. This method doesn't care whether your workspace is a desk in a corporate office, or on a bunkbed in a submarine. And it will work even if you're the least productive person you know.



# What Productivity Is and Why We Should Want It

You already know you want to be more productive, but it's worth thinking about what "more productivity" might actually do in your life.

In the material sense, becoming more productive generally means you will have more time, and probably more money. At work, you'll be doing more useful action per hour, which translates to more value for your employer or customers. They will want to compensate you for that value, so that you keep creating it for them instead of someone else. Even outside of work and school, more productivity means needing less time to meet your obligations to yourself and others.

Greater productivity will probably also make you happier and more confident, on top of any gains in wealth or time. When you're more productive, the future looks brighter and safer, because you can take advantage of more opportunities, and more easily handle unexpected challenges. You also shed much of the guilt and shame associated with *not* getting much done, which as you probably know can be an enormous daily burden. You feel like a stronger person, and probably seem so to others, because you are.

The rewards of productivity have compounding effects. To name only a few examples:

- More time and money allow you to better optimize your productivity, by outsourcing some of your workload, buying better tools, and refining your workflow and workspace.
- Producing more value for others leads to increased recognition and status, which unlocks more options for how to work and what to work on, and strengthens your confidence further.
- Being happier will improve almost all of your relationships, at work and at home.

Your productivity skills also apply directly to leisure pursuits and hobbies. You can accelerate your progress at learning piano, Spanish, chess, painting, dancing, video production, Zen meditation, Stoic philosophy, programming, vegetable gardening—whatever pursuits you enjoy for their own sake.

You can also, of course, just enjoy these activities without worrying about progress. The point is to have the option of getting really good—at least you'll no longer be stuck at beginner level.

Whatever it is you love doing, the freedom to do more of it might be the greatest reward of productivity.

# How We Will Work

The core of the Guide is a simple method for getting more done in less time. I'll summarize it here first before presenting it in strict steps, so you know where we're going with it.

- **We will work from a simple to-do list.** This only needs to be a list of things that might make sense to do today. It can be written on a piece of scrap paper, typed into an app, scrawled in the margins of your morning newspaper—it doesn't matter.
- **We will complete tasks one at a time, by working on them in timed 25-minute blocks,** as with the Pomodoro Technique. Each of these periods is dedicated to moving towards the completion of the current task. No interruptions are tolerated. Before starting, you will make the finish line of the task clear in your mind, to keep you focused on finishing.
- **We will think of these blocks of work as physical building materials.** Imagine them as small, fine wooden boxes, like jewelry boxes, each one representing a solid chunk of meaningful work. This image might sound strange, but it helps to make your work feel valuable. These boxes are sturdy, well-constructed, sanded, and finished. Because they're all the same size, they look great when you stack them. I picture mine as being made of a rich walnut, but you may prefer pine, oak, or mahogany.

Every task on your list can be made into Blocks. Some take one Block, some take two or three, or five or six. Many tasks are small enough to fit into one Block with other small tasks. By making and stacking these metaphorical Blocks, day by day, you will be building things—*real* things—that permanently improve your life, such as degrees, promotions, vehicles, followers, skills, knowledge, and financial assets. Your Blocks can also build less tangible assets like confidence, acclaim, equanimity, and a sense of abundance. We'll keep this building-block mentality close to mind. Working should be thought of as an act of *building*, not merely surviving—laying bricks rather than treading water.

Working in Blocks will immediately eliminate a lot of productivity-defeating habits—such as haphazard quick email checks, or working without a finish line in mind—precipitating an immediate jump in daily productivity. Once you're making some nice, solid Blocks, we will then increase productivity in three ways:

- **Quantity**... creating more of these Blocks per day
- **Quality**... making denser, sturdier Blocks that do more for you
- **Consistency** ... refining your Block-making routines so that the quality and quantity remain sustainable



# Doesn't Everyone Know This Already?

If you're familiar with popular productivity literature, the concept of "time boxing" might sound like the most obvious thing in the world. Doesn't everyone already know the thing with the 25-minute chunks of work?

You've probably read about it, sure, but that's very different from doing it. Everyone knows that physical exercise can transform lives, too, but most people never find a consistent exercise routine they are able and willing to do, so the life-changing benefits never become real.

What unlocks the power of good ideas is the implementation, not the information. Good ideas and methods are common. Human beings have been struggling with the same challenges forever, and we've inherited a lot of ideas about how best to respond to them. What we do not inherit are the habits and specific know-how that allows us to change our lives with these ideas. Having books by Plato or the Dalai Lama on your bookshelf doesn't make you wise, and neither does reading them. Implementing their ideas does.

If you have tried working in 25-minute blocks, and it did not drastically improve your productivity, I contend that you didn't find a way to implement it that worked for you. The Guide is designed to get you precisely there.

The idea of working intently in short chunks is a central part of *most* productivity systems, because it works. Francesco Cirillo, author of *The Pomodoro Technique*, insists that 25 minutes is the perfect size for these chunks. (I agree, and later on we will get to why it's so perfect.)

*The Pomodoro Technique* is an excellent book as such books go, but I found its system to be a tad too complex for my ADHD brain to maintain. I suspect there are millions of other people out there who struggle with productivity, and who, like me, need a simpler system than will ever be found in a 150+ page nonfiction book.

So yes, you may already know that working in short chunks is a good thing to do. But it's not the *knowing* that will bring the benefit. The real, life-altering effect comes only from the consistent *doing* of it, and by the end of today you will experience this difference first-hand.

# The Three Things You Will Need

Making Blocks requires very few tools.

**1. A timer with an alarm.** You need a timer of some sort that will ring, buzz, or beep when time runs out. Your phone's stopwatch app, or a web-based one, will work in a pinch. A simple, portable cooking timer is much better, because it isn't attached to an entertainment device, and its controls are already right in front of you. The easier it is to use the better. A good timer might be the most profitable \$20 you ever spend. For now, go with what you have.

**2. A list of tasks to do.** Don't fuss over this list. It doesn't have to contain exactly one day's worth of work, and it doesn't have to be in any particular order. You just need a list of tasks you'd like to get done today if you could.

A paper list is generally superior to one stored on an electronic device, for the reasons mentioned above. You want to be able to see it without clicking, opening, or moving anything.

**3. A place to mark down your completed Blocks.** Completed Blocks are the raw building materials of a happy and interesting life. You will harness the power of short-term rewards by marking down each block you complete in a session.

Again, paper is usually better here. Your scoresheet can be as simple as a sticky note on the corner of your desk, with ticks representing the day's Blocks, or as elaborate as a wall-mounted grid chart whose boxes you fill in with pencil crayons. Start with the sticky note version, and once you get used to the method, you can decide what's most rewarding to you.

Making Blocks also requires *time*, but you don't need much of it. Depending on your roles and obligations, your typical day might be relatively open, or fragmented by meetings and appointments. Whenever you have a half hour or more available for getting something done, at home, school, or work, you can make Blocks. (Smaller fragments can also be utilized – see the FAQ section.)

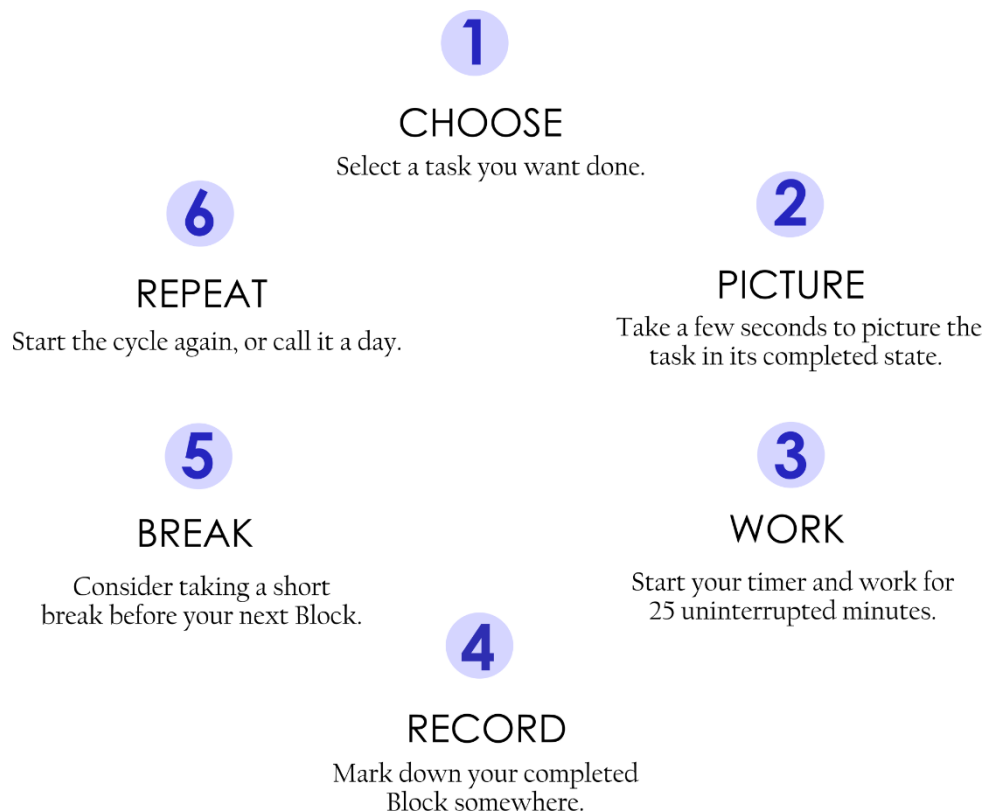
# The Block Method

Our method can be distilled into six steps, five of which take only seconds.

For each Block, you will:

- Choose a task from your list.
- Briefly picture reaching the finish line of that task.
- Make a Block—using a timer, work towards the end of the chosen task, practicing unwavering intention, for 25 minutes.
- Mark down one completed Block on a simple scoresheet, with gratitude and care.
- Consider taking a short break.
- Repeat and refine the process.

This list of steps might seem underwhelming. That’s intentional. We’re going to get a lot done by mastering something very simple that works.



As pedestrian as this procedure may seem, there is an art to it. Each step has nuances.

## STEP 1: Choose a task

Choose without worrying about which is the “right” next task. As you practice this method, you’ll discover what sort of task-order strategy works best for you—tackling tough tasks first, warming up with some easy ones, or some other approach. For your first few Blocks, pick any task that isn’t likely to overwhelm you.

If you have multiple tasks on your list that will only take a few minutes, you might select a small batch of them to tackle in this Block. In this case, you might want to make a tick mark next to them on your to-do list to identify the batch at a glance.

## STEP 2: Briefly picture the finish line of the task

Take five or ten seconds to picture what completing the task might look like. We all know the glorious feeling of a finishing a task. Just for a moment, think of something that might happen at the very end of the task:

- Saving the finished document as “Budget Report – FINAL”
- Submitting the booklet to the printers
- Holding a stack of letters ready to be mailed

It doesn’t matter whether you expect to complete your chosen task in a single Block. Picture its last moments anyway.

This step may sound trivial, but it is an extremely productive few seconds. By doing this we are making contact with the part of each of us that knows the exhilarating feeling of *doneness*. When you get something truly *done*, even a small thing, you feel amazing, and you advance to a slightly better position in life. Creating a hint of that feeling at the beginning of a Block boosts your motivation and clarifies your intentions. Without Step 2, it’s easy to slip into a mode of “working on” a task, without working toward anything.

Don’t worry about picturing the “right” outcome. Just imagine finishing your task, and see what comes to you. A single gratifying image will do wonders. A complete spreadsheet. A tidy workshop. A confirmation email that says, “Your appointment is booked!”

### **A word about task size**

Don’t split hairs about what constitutes a “task.” If it’s on your to-do list, it’s a task. However, we do want tasks to be small enough that you’ll reach a finish-line point in a Block or two, three at most.

If you find your tasks are taking so long that you’re picturing the same finish line several Blocks in a row, then divide the task into smaller pieces on your list. Instead of chapters, go by subsections or pages. Instead of “clean the house,” make each room a task. Make the finish lines closer together so you can feel the progress you’re making.

If your Block will comprise a batch of very small tasks, you don’t need to envision finish lines for each one. Simply picture yourself crossing them off your list one by one, with strong, triumphant pencil-strokes. That image is gratifying enough. All we’re looking for is a spark of positive feeling from remembering the ever-available thrill of doneness.

## STEP 3: Make one Block

In this method, you get things done by making Blocks—25-minute pieces of quality work, which accumulate into all sorts of real-life prizes and advantages. Since we intend to build great things out of Blocks, we need to exercise quality control.

Recall that a Block is always made of:

- 25 minutes
- of uninterrupted work
- directed towards the completion of a task

All three of these ingredients are necessary for each block, or else we're building with shoddy materials. We always want smooth, sturdy, tight-fitting blocks, to optimize our ability to build what we want.

If a Block isn't 25 minutes of work, or if we're tolerating interruptions, then we're just starting and stopping arbitrarily, which is the death of productivity for those of us to whom productivity doesn't come naturally.

A more insidious problem happens when you try to work without having a completed task in mind. It's easy to slip into a state of activity that doesn't bring anything closer to completion. You can research best gardening practices for hours without coming any closer to actually planting anything. An essential part of learning to work this way is learning to keep completion in mind as you work.

**Having chosen a task, and having pictured its completed state, start your timer.** With a sense of mild urgency—not panic—begin taking action towards the end of the task. Open the appropriate application. Take out the appropriate tools. Do what seems to make sense and don't worry about being perfect. Try to finish the task with the time you have, or at least reach some concrete milestone on the way to the finish. (If you do finish, begin another task.)

While you're making a Block, renounce all diversions. No texts, no 10-second email checks, no daydreaming. Because you only have 25 minutes, everything else in life can almost certainly wait, except true emergencies. You are declaring yourself free to do just this one thing, for this small but significant stretch of time.

Succumbing to diversion will happen, and that's okay. However, if you do, then the Block doesn't count. That might seem harsh, but it is actually extremely liberating. I will explain why in an upcoming section.

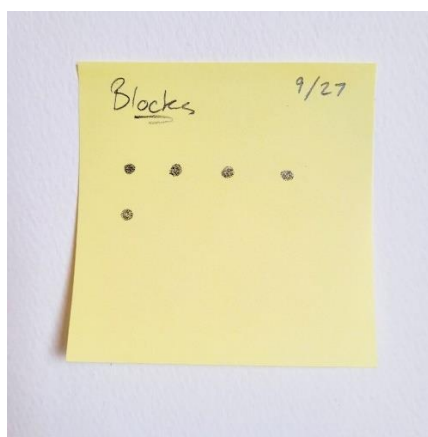
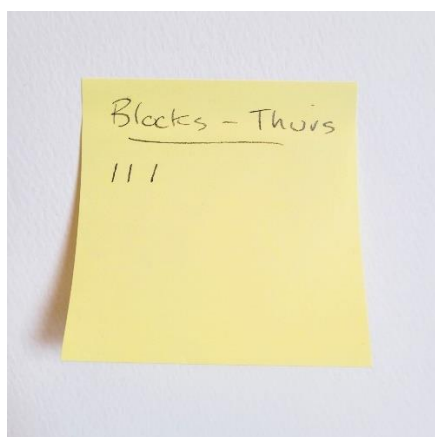
## STEP 4: Tally the completed Block somewhere

When the timer goes, if you worked towards the end of a task the whole time without succumbing to distraction, you have completed a Block. Mark it down on the piece of paper you've designated for this. Draw a line or a little circle—whatever looks best to you.

There are two reasons to tally the number of Blocks you complete in a day. The first is to remind you that Blocks are permanent creations, not ephemeral periods of toil. They are building materials, being laid down to create a stronger and happier life.

The second reason to tally your Blocks is to gauge your productivity. Once you're in the habit of working in Blocks, you'll learn how many are reasonable or desirable given your schedule. It's fun to see how many you can do in a day, or a half day.

I avoid elaborate scoresheets because they're just another thing to maintain. While the Blocks you make are permanent creations that improve your life long-term, you don't need to keep weekly, monthly, or yearly counts. Long-term recordkeeping is certainly an *option*, and some users of the Block method make good use of it. However, this extra bookkeeping does add more moving parts to our dead-simple system. The Guide's official recommendation is to stick with daily tallies only, at least until making Blocks has become a habit. But it is ultimately up to you. (See page 42 in the FAQ section for more discussion on this question.)



*A simple scoresheet is all you need. Use whatever format feels good.*



## STEP 5: Consider taking a short break

Once the timer goes and the Block is made, sealed, and stacked, you might want to take a short break before making another.

I say *might* because breaks aren't always necessary, or helpful. A mandatory 5-minute break policy, as is often suggested, probably doesn't suit productivity non-naturals like ourselves, because of two ever-present dangers: letting the break go on longer than 5 minutes, and shutting down your momentum right when you're finally being productive.

Big caveat here, however: you should at least stand up from your seat after completing a Block (or sit down, if you've been standing or moving). If you launch immediately into another one, the whole sense of making discrete Blocks quickly falls apart. You're liable to slip back into busyness without aiming at *doneness*, as you simply reset the timer meaninglessly every 25 minutes.

So when you finish a Block, *always*—at the very least—stand up, take a breath, and reassert your intentions for the next Block. It is tempting to skip Steps 1 and 2, especially once you're on a roll. Don't! Learn to enjoy this act of consciously aiming your intentions before you pull the trigger.

In other words, *don't begin making another Block until you're ready to make a good one*. You might only need twenty seconds to stand up, recollect your intentions and set your mental sights on your finished task again. If you can't seem to locate that kind of intentionality, a break might be just what you need.

When you do take a break, beware the temptation to extend it beyond your initial intention. If you're taking five, take five. If you're taking twenty, take twenty. Use the timer to keep your breaktimes tight, if you expect to get any more Blocks made today.

Most importantly, enjoy your breaks. Savor the time.

## STEP 6: Repeat and refine

After taking a break, or not, it's time to make another Block, unless you're done for the day. That means beginning the cycle again.

The important thing to remember here is that all the same steps are necessary for each Block.

- Identify the task and picture its finish line before you start that timer, in order to keep yourself focused on finishing.
- Mark down the Block upon completion, in order to maintain your sense of progress.
- Pause or break after each Block, to keep your Block-making intentional and orderly.

Repeating these steps between each Block takes so little time that you might be tempted to skip them. Don't. Once you're familiar with the steps, they take only seconds. Yet they will save you days, weeks, or years of your life, because without them, entropy will take over and you won't be making Blocks anymore.

If you do the steps each time, they will become second nature. Until then, it can help to say them to yourself as you transition into each one:

*Okay, so what am I doing here... One: choose a task. Okay, got it. Two: think of the finish line...*

And so on. Giving words to the steps trains the mind to expect what's next.

Each time you make a Block this way, you'll get a little better at moving through the process. You'll learn what kind of breaks work for you and which don't. You'll figure out how to divide tasks into smaller pieces, and how to shoot for completion each time.

This refinement occurs naturally if you repeat the process faithfully. Later on, we will discuss ways to accelerate this process, in the "Tightening Up the Ship" section.

# Start Now

It's time to begin.

Before you continue reading, you will make your first Block.

Take a half an hour—right now if possible—and make a Block using the steps we just covered. If you can't do your first Block now, *then schedule it now for a time when you can.*

To refresh your memory on what you're about to do:

- You will select a task from your to-do list, and imagine it completed.
- Then you'll work towards completing it for 25 uninterrupted minutes. (If you finish with time to spare, start another task.)
- At the end, you'll give yourself a checkmark—your first Block.

The steps are simple, but can be easy to forget when you're new to making Blocks. So print out the Quick Reference Sheet included with this Guide and keep it near you. If you don't have access to a printer, jot down a word or two for each step on a sticky note or scrap of paper—Choose, Picture, Work, Record, Break. (We won't need the Repeat step this time because you're just doing a single Block).

If you have to refer to this book to remember what you're trying to do, that's okay. Count that as part of your task, not an interruption.

When you're done your first Block, however it turned out, come right back here.

(Go!)

## After Your First Block

Welcome back. Well done. Whether your first Block felt like a masterpiece or a 7<sup>th</sup>-grade shop class project, you just did something significant. You began building a richer life.

In the next part of the Guide, we will look closer at the Block-making experience. We'll look at why the 25-minute Block happens to work so well, and we'll address some questions and trouble spots that might arise as you get used to this process.

# Three Things You Might Notice

So you've made your first Block. Making a Block probably felt different than just "getting to work" in your usual manner.

A few things you might notice working this way:

## **You can get a lot done in 25 minutes.**

Twenty-five minutes sounds like pocket change. It's barely enough time to shower and hurriedly comb your hair. I used to think I needed two or three hours to really get something done. Because I insisted on these large stretches of time, I didn't work with much urgency, and I allowed my focus to be perforated by interruptions, which seemed necessary precisely because I was trying to work in hours-long chunks.

Despite my expectations, and perhaps yours, a single Block contains enough time to knock off many small tasks, or completely change the complexion of a large one. Once you discover how big a step forward a single, focused Block can be, a whole *day* in which to get things done seems like a vast amount of time.

The dwindling timer breathes life into every minute that remains. If you have five minutes left, you *use* it, and in doing so discover how much use five minutes really is.

## **It's a relief to have clear boundaries between working and not working (again).**

People used to enjoy much clearer lines between working and not working. You would clock in at the factory, or head out into the fields, and you were working. Then a whistle would blow or it would get dark, and you'd stop working and be not working.

Today the line is much blurrier, with our tools doubling as entertainment devices, and with so many of us working from home. Working in Blocks is a refreshing return to a clear boundary between being officially working and officially not working. When the timer is running, it's clear that it's *not* time to check your Twitter feed, see if that book is on sale, or look up the name of the actor your professor resembles.

## **You probably don't get anywhere near 8 hours of real work done in a day (and you don't need to).**

A standard eight-hour workday is large enough to accommodate sixteen Blocks, assuming five-minute breaks after each one, or *nineteen* if you pushed straight through like Iron Man.

It is unlikely you will achieve anywhere near that many Blocks in a standard workday, even one with no meetings. If I get three or four Blocks made in the morning and that many again in the afternoon, that's a very productive day.

This surprisingly low output is a good thing. It means (1) you can probably get your daily work done in less time than you thought, and (2) that the time *is* there to get massive amounts done when you need to. The key is not to “find more time” as we often tell ourselves, but to make your available time dense with productivity.

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The 25-minute Block is optimal for getting lots done while defending against distraction, busywork, and other productivity killers. It's like the golden ratio, except for productivity instead of geometry. In the next section, we will tease apart why that is.



*The best twenty dollars you'll ever spend*

# Why It Works So Well

Working in Blocks isn't just a way to allocate your time into focused pieces, or trick yourself into actually working instead of procrastinating. Something more profound starts happening. The 25-minute Block seems to hit a sweet spot on two psychological dimensions—maximizing clarity and motivation, while minimizing your incentives to distract yourself or drift into busywork.

Francisco Cirillo, author of *The Pomodoro Technique*, identified 25 minutes as the perfect length of time for working in sprints like this, and I agree. There's something transformative about turning our work obligations into small, discrete units that meet a certain quality standard. It makes the whole idea of "working" feel much more pleasant to the mind, and eliminates many pitfalls inherent in less structured ways of working.

For me, and surely many others who have a troubled relationship to productivity, this effect feels almost magical. I've studied this effect during my sessions, and here's why I think it works.

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**25 minutes is enough time to get real work done – unless you're not really working.** I always thought getting some *real* work requires at least two hours, but that's because I spent the first thirty or sixty minutes hemming and hawing about what to do, or perhaps answering a few emails first, to ease my way into the important thing. If 25 minutes seems inadequate for getting real work done, real work is probably not what it's being used for.

**25 minutes creates just enough urgency.** It's enough time get a meaningful amount done, but not enough time that you feel you can waste any. This mild sense of scarcity gets you pumping value into your time. With the timer quickly ticking down from 25:00 to 21:00, to 16:00, to 9:00, you feel a healthy desire to make every minute count—and so you do.

**The Block trains you to give up the "quick check."** Cal Newport writes frequently about the folly of the *quick check*—a supposedly harmless checking of email, sports scores, or social media mentions, under the pretense that it only takes a few seconds, so it's no big deal. Sometimes these diversions really do only take five seconds, but the real problem is that they interrupt your intention to finish the task at hand, and it is this intention that converts time into productivity. Blocks are so short that it feels absurd to indulge in a quick check during one, so you learn to say no quickly. (Especially because then the Block doesn't count.)

**Working in Blocks reduces dread.** Workload-related stress often revolves around the fear that you don't have enough days or weeks to get your current slate of tasks done. The Block method makes it clear that productivity isn't about how many days remain till your deadline, it's about how much real work happens in that time. Whatever is coming down the pipe, you know you have the ability to use your time to make Blocks to meet those challenges. That's all you can do, and all you need to do.

**Blocks reveal your biggest time wasters.** When work is getting done in dense, 25-minute stretches, you will immediately notice which tasks are quick and worthwhile, and which take more time than they deserve. If processing customer service emails takes up four or five blocks a day, there may be a much better way to handle customer service. If you're familiar with the 80/20 rule—that 80 percent of the results come from the best 20 percent of the work—working in blocks makes it clear what's 80 and what's 20.

**Blocks allow you to get started even when you have almost no appetite for work.** A Block is always a significant amount of work, and it is almost always achievable. When motivation is low, the brain is foggy, and you're on the verge of chickening out of starting (or resuming) your work, you can agree to do a single Block before resigning for the day. This single block is easy enough to do, always makes you feel better about yourself, and usually makes tomorrow a lot easier. Quite often, you will want to continue working afterward, because the feeling of getting things done tends to evaporate mental fog.

**Working in Blocks virtually eliminates “rage quitting.”** Some of us are prone to throwing up our hands and storming off when we hit a snag with certain kinds of work. (For me, it's website/computer stuff.) When you're making a Block, you're usually only a handful of minutes from finishing, so it seldom makes sense to unceremoniously quit working in response to a frustrating moment. Retaining your composure for the eight or ten remaining minutes—and often getting past the snag—is preferable to losing the Block, which guarantees that tomorrow you will have to resume the task at its most objectionable part.

**Blocks create rewards all the way.** Blocks make the rewards of work frequent and immediate. Instead of grinding towards a distant goal that will supposedly make it all worthwhile, you are getting things done now and getting rewarded now. Human beings have limited ability to delay the rewards of our toil. When we try to grind away at our work indefinitely, we end up looking for our reward at the coffee machine or on a news site or a mobile app. Blocks bring the rewards into the work itself, and they're never more than a handful of minutes away.



**Blocks make breaks much more enjoyable.** When frivolous activities like messaging and social media are relegated to breaktimes, you might notice two positive differences. First, you can enjoy these activities without guilt. Second, you need fewer of them to feel rewarded. If diversions are allowed during working time, they become much more compelling but less satisfying—not only do they supply their expected bump of stimulation, but they also feel like a temporary haven from work—the moment you stop, you have to go back. The result is an uneasy combination of half-enjoyment, half-guilt, which procrastinators know well and often get stuck in. Blocks designate time for both work and repose, eliminating both the uneasiness and the magnetic pull of certain breaktime diversions. When you're making Blocks, breaks feel clean and earned.

# The Finer Points of Block-Making

Making Blocks is both a craft and an art, just like actual woodworking. There are nuances in the process you'll discover and adapt to as you go.

While experience alone will teach you virtually everything you need to know, it can help to get a few pointers from an experienced Block-maker. Consider this section a lesson on the ins and outs of Step 5—navigating the Block itself.

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The most important thing to understand about Blocks is that they are *not* simply 25 minutes of doing stuff.

Let's revisit our definition. A Block is made of three elements:

- 25 minutes
- of uninterrupted work
- directed towards the completion of a task

It is essential to keep the work uninterrupted and aimed at a finish line. Otherwise we slip into an aimless activity state, and then we're no longer making Blocks or building anything. While you make your Blocks, you want to work with a sense of what you're doing and where you're trying to go.

This is why Steps 1 and 2 are vital. At the top of each Block, you refresh your intentions by stating or re-stating the task to yourself, and remembering how great it will feel to finish it.

There's an art to seeking the finish line. As you make a Block, you are zeroing in on the finished state of the current task, like a circling shark. You're moving towards the blissful experience of *doneness*, deferring all other concerns until the Block is done. Just begin with the end in mind, as Stephen Covey famously put it—and keep it in mind while you work.

Or, to use a sales analogy, remember to ABC—Always Be Closing.

If you do the steps faithfully and work with the end in mind, you will quickly grasp the art of Block-making. To speed things up I want to address a few common snags.

## If you keep forgetting what you're trying to do

With my ADHD, I'm constantly forgetting what I'm trying to do—I always know what I'm nominally *working on*, but I often forget what I'm specifically trying to accomplish right now, or the immediate steps to get there.

For this and other purposes, I've made great use of a very simple mechanism I call a Right Now List. I put a sticky note on my desk, with the heading Right Now List (abbreviated RNL), that simply lists in a few bullets what I need to do next:

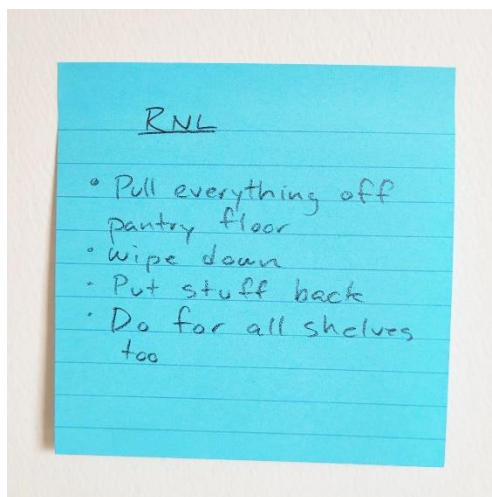
- open MS word
- load both documents I need
- check the draft against the outline

Identifying a few clear, physical actions is almost always enough to get me into the mode of working with the end in mind. If I don't know what to do, I look at the list. And if the list can't tell me, I make another one. At the end of the Guide there is a standalone lesson on using Right Now Lists.

## If you don't know how to start (or resume) a task

If at any point you don't know the next step, then the next step is to figure out the next step or two (or three).

This is another job for a Right Now List. Get out a scrap of paper or sticky note, and write down what next steps *seem* to make sense from where you are. This is usually all you will need.



*A Right Now List propels you into the middle of the task.*

If your task requires elaborate planning, then it should be divided up. Your first task, in that case, is to divide the big task into smaller tasks, and the second task is to do the first of these smaller tasks, which may be to draft a more comprehensive plan for the whole project.

## Dealing with distractions and interruptions

While you're working on a task, other things will pull at your attention—external stimuli like text notifications, or things happening in the room, or inner distractions such as your own thoughts.

Some basic preventative measures go a long way: mute your phone, disable on-screen notifications, close your web browser, ask others not to disturb you, and so on. You'll quickly discover what tends to distract you, and those are the diversions you need to shut down.

The general interruption policy is *say no to everything but the task*. A Block isn't very long, so virtually everything else in the world can wait. Whenever you notice your attention has been captured by something, simply come back to the intended task.

If you do succumb to distraction—you end up browsing email, daydreaming, or going and getting a muffin—the Block doesn't count. We'll cover what that means below.

## The power of cultivating mild urgency

I prefer to have the timer in full view while I work. A visible countdown imparts a certain positive form of urgency, wherein you feel a healthy desire to make the most of your time, because you don't have tons of it. Regardless of how much time remains—21:13, 11:03, 6:38—you know that those minutes can be packed with excellent work.

Harness this exhilarating sense of urgency. When you're in the middle of a Block, make a game of getting as much done as you can without getting reckless. Treat the interior of a Block as if you're in a pilot's seat, or you're live and on the air. It should feel like it's performance time.

When the timer gets down to less than two minutes, ratchet up the urgency a step—it is astonishing what you can get done with 38 seconds if you challenge yourself.

## What to do when the timer goes off

When the timer goes, stop, and mentally congratulate yourself. You've just done what's always been so hard—a significant piece of real work! Allow yourself the pleasure of marking the Block

down on your sheet. Make this mark with care. Picture yourself sliding a beautiful, finished wood Block into place, the latest brick in the building of something you really want.

The ringing of the timer will sometimes be jarring, which probably means you're on a roll. You might want to keep working. Good! Stop anyway. The desire to keep going will fuel your next Block, and reinforce a positive relationship with the idea of getting to work.

If you need to finish the sentence you were writing, or write down the next step so you don't forget what it is, then do that. After that, make a clean break from the task. Stand up at least, and (Step 5) consider taking a break.

## If your Block wasn't very productive

The timer going off should feel good, because you know you've done some real work. If you feel like your Block wasn't a very good one, take a moment to figure out why. There are three likely possibilities:

- 1. You let interruptions or diversions get the better of you.** You didn't really work on the intended task, or you let yourself get diverted into unintentional activities. If this is the case, the Block doesn't count. That's okay, as we'll discuss.
- 2. The task was larger or more difficult than you expected.** You thought the task would fit into one Block, and now you realize it will take several. This happens all the time, and it's fine. Remember that the Block probably accomplished the hardest part: reckoning with the reality of the task, and figuring out what it entails. If so, your Block was an *especially* productive 25 minutes.
- 3. You just don't feel like you did your best.** You worked on the task as intended, but perhaps without a lot of tenacity. This is okay too. All that's usually needed is to resolve to make a better Block this next time. If this keeps happening, perhaps this isn't the right task for right now. Choose something better suited for your mood or energy level for your next Block.

## On Blocks that don't count

When you succumb to diversion or aimless busywork during a Block, the Block doesn't count.

That seems harsh, but it's vital for staying productive. If you begin to compromise your Blocks, by allowing seemingly harmless diversions—an email check here, a trip to the kitchen there—

the boundaries will soon be gone and you will no longer be making Blocks or getting much done.

Throwing out a compromised Block *is* productive, because, by doing it, you're guaranteeing the quality of *all* of your Blocks. If you're ten minutes into a Block and you realize you haven't been focused on the task, then just stop, locate your intentions again, and reset your timer to make a real, dignified Block. When it comes to Blocks, *quality outranks quantity completely*. Racking up any number of compromised Blocks is, frankly, wasted time. Making three real Blocks is better than sixteen that don't fit our definition. Remember this whenever an attempted Block doesn't work out—keeping your standards up is the most productive thing you can do.

We'll talk about what exactly should and shouldn't disqualify a Block in the "Tightening up the Ship" section.

# Tightening Up the Ship

In the introduction, we established the purpose of this Guide: to help you create a dramatic increase in your productivity, and to do it in a week or less.

Just switching to the Block method will probably represent a massive jump in productivity if you've been struggling to get things done. The next step is to ramp up your productivity further, by improving your Block-making across three dimensions:

**Quantity** – make more Blocks per day

**Quality** – make better Blocks, more densely packed with work

**Consistency** – refine your Block-making routines so that the quality and quantity remain sustainable

As long as you keep working this way, you'll naturally improve in each of these respects. To use a seafaring analogy, you're now piloting the vessel and cruising at a good clip, so you can't help but become a better captain. However, we can take some proactive measures to tighten up the ship, in order to make it faster and more resilient to the elements.

We will also cover a few questions that might come up as you make Blocks.

## Quantity: How to make more Blocks

You may be surprised at how few Blocks are needed to really feel like you did something. Three or four are enough to move any major project forward, or knock off a dozen or more small tasks. Imagine then what ten or twelve Blocks could do, especially if you did that many every day.

Bringing up your Blocks-per-workday count is the most straightforward way to increase your overall productivity. In general, Blocks scale linearly—if a project will take you ten days working at a rate of three Blocks per day, then doing six Blocks per day should take you about five days.

It's liberating to be able to think about productivity in this quantitative way. Whenever you're falling behind, you don't need to "find more time", you only need to find a way to make more Blocks. Recall that a standard eight-hour workday technically has room for a ridiculous *nineteen* Blocks, which strongly suggests that time itself isn't usually the limiting factor in how much a person gets done.



Since Blocks don't require much time, adding one here or there is often easy enough. When the schedule gets heavy, adding a single after-dinner or Sunday-morning Block can take a tremendous load off the next day.

Challenging yourself to get more Blocks done today than yesterday can be a fun way to ratchet up your productivity. Say you've got a big project coming up—can you do four Blocks on it this morning? What if you did that every morning this week? What a bombshell of productivity that would be.

Calibrate your ambitions based on your workload and your capability. There are no objective standards for how many is a lot, but as long as your Blocks remain good quality, more is better.

## Quality: How to make better Blocks

While ramping up quantity is the most straightforward way to become more productive, improving quality is the long term goal. If you can get done in three Blocks what used to take six, you've become exponentially more powerful. Each day has essentially become longer and you need to use less of it to keep up with work. You can use the rest of your time to get ahead, or just enjoy life.

The first and most essential principle of quality control is to count only the Blocks that meet our definition. (That's 25 minutes, of uninterrupted work, directed towards the completion of a task.)

Beyond that, improving quality is mostly a matter of doing three things we've already mentioned:

1. Harnessing the mild urgency of the running timer
2. Keeping the end of the task in mind as you work (Always Be Closing)
3. Identifying and cutting out time-wasters

You don't need any specific strategies to improve these three micro-skills—you can go by feel. As you make Blocks, you'll notice that some feel better than others, and they're probably the ones where you're doing these things. Take note of that feeling, and try to work from that place every time, the best you can.

I also strongly suggest exploring the 80/20 rule. Look for the 20 percent of your work that's responsible for the majority of the results, and optimize your habits around it.

## Consistency: How to keep making Blocks

Since making Blocks is part of a longer process of building what you want in your life, you want to be able to keep up your production over time.

Consistency is achieved by forming a regular schedule around Block-making that you can maintain.

As you begin to work in Blocks, you can only guess at the best schedule for you. You might start out aggressively, trying to turn out a Block from each half-hour of your normal workday — one at 9:00, 9:30, and so on. Or perhaps you ease in, going for three Blocks in the morning and two later in the day.

Whatever you do, you'll quickly discover what you can pull off regularly and what you can't, and it might be quite different than what you expected.

You may find you do best when you get up early and get most of your work done by noon. Or perhaps you discover the value of pacing yourself, slipping in a Block in the evening or a few on the weekend.

You will also discover the best way to use Blocks for certain kinds of work. Perhaps you can handle nearly your daily email processing in a single afternoon Block, with a short session on the weekend for overflow. You might find a regularly-scheduled morning Block allows you to progress on your manuscript a little every day. The quantitative nature of Blocks allows us to define clear regimens for tackling long-term projects or maintaining regular obligations.

This is a natural process of discovery. Ask yourself, at the end of the day, what you would do differently tomorrow. This daily question is all you need to converge on an optimal schedule.

## Anti-Interruption Strategies

Blocks are by definition uninterrupted work, and all kinds of things can interrupt you while the timer is running. Your brother calls. Missionaries knock on the door. A chatty colleague leans over your cubicle wall.

The primary strategy, if it's not too obvious to say so, is to do everything possible to prevent these interruptions from happening. Put your phone on silent, if you can. Close the office door. Ask people not to disturb you. Work when others are less likely to ask your attention.

When an interruption does happen, you have two basic tricks up your sleeve to prevent it from undermining the Block:

Option 1: Ignore it, making a note to get back to it later if needed

Option 2: Quickly respond, letting the person know you'll be just a few minutes (and you can tell them how many)

However, some interruptions cannot be deflected, especially if you are working at home and you have children.

If a Block gets torpedoed by something or someone needing immediate attention, that's just a part of life, and it's okay. Blocks are valuable precisely because they don't come easily. And you probably got something done anyway. Just start a new one as soon as you can.

## On "Borderline Case" Interruptions

You will undoubtedly have instances in which it's not clear whether an interruption is significant enough for the Block not to count.

For example – does signing for a parcel invalidate your Block if you get right back to work? What if you open Gmail out of muscle memory and catch yourself after ten seconds?

You'll have to make rulings in these cases. The general principle is this: if the interruption makes you feel uneasy afterward, as though you know the Block has been compromised, then it has been. Better to stop the timer, take a breather, and begin a new one. Remember that throwing out a compromised Block is a productivity power move—it saves the day from going mushy, and sharpens your productivity prowess overall.

# A Real-life Example of a Block-Driven Workday

*Here's an account of an unspectacular Tuesday from my own life. You'll notice that, while I'm still subject to procrastination, the Block method leads to a far more productive day than it could have been.*

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Today I need to tidy my office, get some of my article done, attend a Zoom call, run some errands, and then make dinner for a friend who's coming over. With any extra time I'll work down my master to-do list.

Last night I wrote the above plan on a piece of blank looseleaf on a clipboard, and set it on my kitchen table. At the top I scrawled, "Start at 9:00 a.m. sharp!" and double-underlined it.

Being a chronic procrastinator with no supervisor, it's actually 9:48 by the time I pick up the clipboard. Not an ideal start, but what really matters is whether I get some good Blocks made today.

I choose the task for my first Block: tidy the office. (Step 1)

Setting my timer on a shelf, I dial up 25 minutes, then take a moment to picture the finish line of my task. I think of a nice clear desk, with my closed laptop sitting in the middle. This pleasant image is all that's needed. I don't have to imagine an entire scene. (Step 2)

I hit the timer and go, gathering and sorting papers, making file folders as needed, returning stray objects to their homes, wiping down surfaces, sweeping and Swiffering the floor. (Step 3)

It doesn't take as long as I expected. I'm done with eight minutes left on the timer, which I decide to use to clear a few emails. I take five seconds to think about this new finish line: that little popup in Gmail that announces, "Message sent!" This image will do. (Step 2 again, because it's a new task.)

I check the time, and it's dwindling—2:37. . . 2:36 . . .—which I take as a cue to quickly get one more email done. I make it just in time, completing four in total. With a pencil, I record my Block with a tally-mark on a yellow sticky note at the corner of my desk, under the heading "Blocks – Tuesday." (Step 4)

I'm on a roll, so I want to jump into another Block rather than take a break. I get a glass of water and sit back down at my desk. (Step 5)

Time to repeat the process (Step 6).

I already know my next job, which is to get a good start on an article. Writing can be a murky task, with no clear starting point, so I make a Right Now List on another sticky note:

- Open “ideas” document
- Pick a topic that feels promising
- Free-write on it for ten minutes

After that, I know what to do. I’ll either run with the idea, or toss it and repeat the above process. The Right Now List is enough to get myself inside the task, past the resistance on the surface.

I picture the finish line, or at least possible one—a full page of freewriting, ripe for chopping up into an outline. Then I set the timer and go.

The Block goes okay, but I’m not quite where I want to be when the time’s up. I record Block two on my tally, and I do take a break this time. I make tea, stand by the window, and text a friend. After about ten minutes, I start another Block on the same task.

This one goes better. I find the groove of my topic, complete the freewriting phase and even begin outlining it. With ten minutes on the timer, I hear my friend text me back. I will answer when the timer goes.

Done. It’s now just after 11 a.m., and I have three Blocks made. I take an early lunch because the afternoon is so full, and I want to fit some Blocks in around my other obligations.

I run my errands, returning a little after 2 p.m. My Zoom call is at 3, so I want to get another Block in before that. I select a batch of small tasks (order an HDMI cable, email someone, etc.) and write them on a new Right Now List (after tossing the old one). Instead of picturing each task’s finish line, I picture myself physically crossing these small items off, with straight, gratifying pencil strokes.

The timer goes and there’s still twenty minutes left till my call. I’m on a roll again, so I just keep doing small tasks. It doesn’t count as a Block, but I might as well use the momentum I have.

The call goes long, and there’s no time to make another Block before I have to start dinner. Including the errands and the stray tasks I did, it feels like a decently productive day, even though I only tallied four Blocks. I could easily have pushed *all* of those tasks to another day.

By eight o’clock, my friend has gone home. The day feels like it’s ending now. I mostly want to just read my book or watch TV, but I seize the chance to hit a home run: I will take 25 of the

day's 200 or so remaining minutes, and make one more Block. If I can make a dent in tomorrow's most intimidating task—record some guided meditations—it could transform how the day goes.

As usual, making a dent in the next day's work is easy and worth it. I set up a new project in WavePad, play around till I find the right settings, and write down a clear list of steps for tomorrow's session, essentially “red carpeting” the task (see *Secret Weapons* on page 38). This will reduce my likelihood of procrastinating tomorrow, because I know I've made it as easy to begin as it ever will be.

It wasn't my best day by any stretch, but I go to bed with five Blocks under my belt—barely two total hours of focused, self-directed work—and I feel pretty good.

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# A Productive Life

By now you've made at least one Block of your own, and you can probably see the immense potential in working this way.

Virtually any goal or aspiration can be met with some number of Blocks. All you have to do is parse the goal into rough steps, and then make the Blocks for each one.

Want a healthier lawn? A Block or two of research will yield a list of steps, each of which might take couple of Blocks to do. Then, every Saturday, you can make yourself a lemonade and perform the needed lawncare routines, maybe getting it down to two or three Blocks a week.

Want to play *Stairway to Heaven* on the guitar? In one Block you can map out song's different parts and make a plan to practice them. Then you can start applying Blocks to each one, tracking how long they take to master. Whether it's seventeen or seventy-seven, you will be playing it, and for your next song you'll see how much you can cut that total down.

Want to speak a second language? A Block a day would go a *long* way in a year. You'll quickly learn what sort of Blocks yield meaningful progress and what's a waste of time.

Everything accomplished on this earth is built from effort, and now you have an extremely efficient (yet relatively easy) way of budgeting and directing your own effort. You can work towards anything you want, and the path is always finite—if it can be done, it can be done in some number of Blocks.

## A Seat at the Table

Racking up good solid Blocks on important projects is immediately rewarding, and often translates quickly into more free time, and more options, at work and at home. There is an even greater reward offered by the Block method, however, especially if you've always felt that even a "normal" level of productivity is beyond your reach.

If getting things done has been a long-term struggle for you, that struggle can become a part of your identity. When you identify with being unproductive, you might feel like many of the great things life has to offer are available to others but not to you. You can dream about landing a cool job, owning your own home, or developing an expert skillset, but it feels as though only other people can actually have those things. All those go-getter types are playing a different game than you are, and it has better prizes.



Now you can play the productivity game, too. You're no longer an outsider. Those once-distant prizes—the coveted job, the expert-level skills, the profitable business—are now available in the game *you're* playing. All of it—anything you want—can be made out of Blocks. And you can make Blocks.

You still have to play the game well, but you're at the table now. Whether your dream project takes sixty Blocks to complete, or six thousand, it's now yours if you want it. You can start stacking those Blocks today.

Let me be the first to welcome you to what is likely to be a new and more abundant phase of your life. I wish you the best in your adventures.

David

# ADDITIONAL TOOLS

You now know the Block method. The remainder of this book contains optional tools and advice to support and streamline your Block-making.

## Secret Weapon 1: The Right Now List

Earlier I described an immensely useful tool I call the Right Now List.

A Right Now List is a scrap of paper or sticky note on which you list the next physical action (or two or three) that you need to take. Usually these actions are very small in size—on the order of “Open Microsoft Excel” or “Get out a sheet of looseleaf.”

The purpose of this tiny list is to get you from being not quite sure what’s next to knowing and doing what’s next. It’s especially helpful for tasks that seem messy or don’t have clear starting points.

Let’s say you sit down to do a straightforward task from your to-do list: “Reply to Fred re: his proposal.”

It sounds simple enough – you need to reply to an email. But you notice you’re not sure what to say, or how to respond, and you *really* just want to do this later.

Instead of procrastinating, or getting stuck dithering, you can make a Right Now List. You simply list the most basic, bare-bones actions that probably have to happen next. In this case:

- Open Gmail
- Reread Fred’s email
- List my reservations about the proposal

... and suddenly you’re in the middle of it. None of these micro-tasks are difficult, but once you do them you’re already past the messy don’t-know-how-to-start phase where you’re likely to procrastinate.

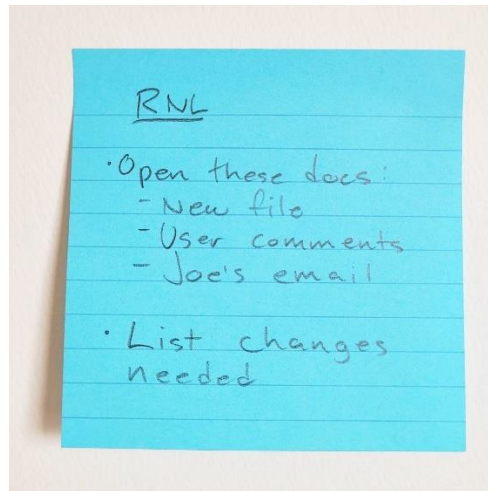
Any time your current RNL no longer describes what you’re doing right now, toss it. Make new ones as needed.

The Right Now List is also helpful when you’re doing something complex or unpredictable and there’s a danger of losing track of what you’re trying to do. When I’m doing genealogy research, for example, I write down precisely what I’m trying to do right now—*check the 1920*

*census for the Bradley family's birth years*—so I don't get sidetracked with the many productive-seeming diversions that pop up during this kind of work.

The items on the Right Now List will be smaller and more granular than the task written on your main to-do list, making it easy to move forward from any point.

I keep a sticky note pad within arm's reach whenever I'm working. If I have any sense of ambiguity about the next step, I look at my Right Now List. If I don't have a Right Now List, the thing to do is stop and make one.



*A Right Now List dissolves resistance towards a task by guiding you past the beginning.*

## Secret Weapon 2: The Red Carpet

Often, we never get around to a major task that we intended to do today. Naturally, we resolve to do it tomorrow.

Sometimes we have good reasons to put something off, and sometimes we're just procrastinating. Either way, despite our intentions, there's always a danger of putting it off again tomorrow.

When you decide to do a thing the next day instead of today, there's a way you can almost guarantee you *will* get it done in the next 24 hours.

Deciding to do a task tomorrow always frees up a bit of time today. The first thing you should do with this liberated time is to *make it as easy as possible to do the task first thing tomorrow*.

Clear your workspace and lay out any tools you'll need. Make a clean list of the steps you're going to take, and put it in the center of your desk, or somewhere you can't miss it. Remove as much psychological resistance to the task as possible. In particular, get absolutely clear on the very first thing you're going to do.

I call this "red-carpeting" the task. You arrange the environment so that it feels like there's a red carpet leading right to the doing of the task. You're doing this not just to make the task easier, but to make sure that tomorrow it will be *as easy as it is ever going to be*. Red-carpeting the task will undermine any impulses you may have to procrastinate again tomorrow morning, because you will know that the task has reached peak ease—if you want it done, you want to do it now.

The red carpet is a great concession for a rough day. Okay, so you're not going to be a hero today. But you *will* do the task tomorrow, and for once you're not just saying that.

For further reading, there is an article about red carpeting on Raptitude: [How to Do it Tomorrow Instead of Never](#)

## Secret Weapon 3: The Co-Work

The Block method takes away a lot of the psychological resistance towards starting, and also finishing, any given task. It can't remove all of this resistance, however.

When I need to get something done, and can't seem to drag myself to the starting line, I involve another person. It works for a simple reason: breaking an appointment with yourself is easy, and breaking an appointment with someone else is harder. You can think of this as a sort of productivity "nuclear option" — for times when self-motivation is not cutting it and you need to force things to happen.

To do a Co-Work, you make an appointment with a friend or peer, who also needs to get something done and is avoiding it. You can get together physically, or through videoconferencing software like Zoom. You tell each other what you're trying to do. Then you both work in silence, for the agreed period of time.

There are online services that streamline the Co-Work arrangement. I use one called FocusMate. You select a time, and the computer matches you with some other person who wants to get something done at that time. You meet on video chat, briefly describe your tasks to each other, then get to work, leaving each other visible while you work, but muted so you don't distract each other. The sessions are 50 minutes long, which equals two back-to-back Blocks. At the end, the buzzer goes, and you take a minute to debrief.

The presence of another person, whether it's live or virtual, provides enough accountability that at least you'll show up and get a Block started. Once the timer is going and you're working again, you've already overcome most of the resistance.

If you're worried nobody will want to make this sort of appointment, try it anyway. In my experience, *everyone* has some task they really want to get done, and would probably love some unexpected help in getting down to it.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## **Is a Block “complete” if you finish the task before twenty-five minutes? What if I have time left over?**

A Block is always 25 minutes of uninterrupted work, directed towards the completion of a task. You will always be working till the timer goes. If you finish your first task in less time, begin another with the remaining time. Take a few seconds to picture the outcome, and go.

The leftover minutes of a Block are a good place to fit in small but necessary tasks like answering messages, clearing your workspace, or planning the rest of the day.

## **What do you do if you just need a few more minutes (and not a whole new Block) to finish your task?**

Recall that Step 5 is to *consider* taking a break. It's okay to go right back to working after you complete a Block, and if you only need a few minutes, then you don't need to reset your timer for another Block. Sometimes I throw a five or eight minute countdown on my timer, to keep that sense of urgency going while I finish. It's not a Block, but it keeps me in a completion-focused frame of mind, and spares tomorrow's Blocks from having to begin with the end of today's task.

It's still good practice to stop for just a moment to stretch or have a drink of water when the timer goes, however. Letting your Blocks bleed haphazardly into 29- or 36-minute mutant pseudo-Blocks will undermine the integrity of the Block concept.

## **Why not keep ongoing totals of Blocks per day, week, and month? Wouldn't that motivate me, and help me improve over time?**

A more elaborate accounting of Blocks certainly can be helpful, and I don't want you to think that isn't allowed. I just think it introduces a potential problem.

The reason I throw out my daily tally is that ongoing recordkeeping adds a layer of complexity to what we're doing. Making a Block is a straightforward, self-contained procedure. You can jump into a Block any time you have half an hour, and get something real done. There's no prep, no overhead. That is the method's great strength.

However, if you connect your Block-making to a nested system of daily, weekly, and monthly Block-making schedules, it is no longer self-contained and simple. You might feel you now have the additional duties of keeping records and meeting quotas. If you fall behind in those duties, you might feel like you can't get back to making Blocks until you "get organized" again, which is pure procrastination fuel.

Many people do track Blocks every day, however, and there are certainly benefits to doing it, if it doesn't cause problems for you. Counting how many Blocks large projects really take can be quite revealing. It can also be fun and motivating to graph your progress towards a major goal.

So by all means, experiment. If you do notice yourself becoming stressed about record keeping, consider returning to a daily tally on a sticky note.

### **How do I work in Blocks at my job, when my workday consists of appointments with clients? (e.g. hairstylist, personal trainer)**

The Block method aids productivity by helping to eliminate certain common productivity-killing phenomena—distraction, lack of intention, and psychological resistance—from the equation. These phenomena may not be major factors in client work, because the pace of your work is constrained by the fact that you're interacting with another person. Trying to cut hair or talk on the phone faster may not result in many benefits for you or your clients, because distraction, lack of intention, and psychological resistance aren't holding your productivity back in that scenario.

Making Blocks is intended for independent types of work, where you have a list of tasks and limited time to do them in, and also some flexibility in how you go about them—most schoolwork, housework, office work, and creative work fit this template. If your job is purely live client work, you might find the Block method most helpful for the other areas of your life.

### **How do I create a to-do list in the first place? How do I know *what* to work on?**

If you don't already have a to-do list, just write down a few things you already know you need to get done, and start making Blocks. The Guide is focused on the *doing* part of getting things done, so it doesn't prescribe a more elaborate method for list-making.

Determining what should *truly* be on your to-do list is a dizzying rabbit hole of a question, because you're essentially trying to figure out how to spend your life. Why weed the garden instead of reading Shakespeare? I can't tell you. The Guide is purpose-agnostic.

There are many comprehensive systems out there for organizing your worldly concerns into to-do lists, available online and in bookstores. In my experience, that's what most productivity books focus on. However you create your list, once you have a few tasks that need doing, you can use the Block method to knock them off.

**Some of my tasks aren't on my list but still need to be done, such as responding to messages periodically. Should these be included in my Block time, or is this stuff to get done during breaks, when my timer isn't running?**

If it's work that needs to get done, you can make it a part of your Blocks. It doesn't have to be written on your to-do list. I often slip a quick email response or other small task in before or after the Block's main task. That's totally okay. It's just another way of batching small tasks.

**Should I squeeze all my to-do's into Blocks? I work out and do a Spanish lesson every day, both of which are consistent habits now. Does it make sense to "Blockify" these daily activities?**

When it comes to recurring daily activities that you complete as a matter of routine, you may just want to do them without using the Block method.

If your reason for doing these tasks as Blocks is just to increase the number of Blocks you tally in a day, then definitely don't. If you began to count cooking, driving, and other routine activities as Blocks, the concept would quickly lose meaning.

However, if you would like to get a routine activity done in minimal time (e.g. trying to get all your dumbbell sets done in 25 focused minutes instead of a more leisurely 45 minutes), or if you tend to procrastinate on the activity, the Block structure might be a helpful way to work, since it can help you get started and get finished.

I find the Block method more powerful when I reserve it for tasks that can be done and crossed off my list, rather than recurring daily tasks.



**I like the idea of my Blocks building something real. Is it okay to tally my Blocks by using physical objects like Lego pieces or actual wooden blocks?**

Definitely, if you find it helpful. Your fellow *How to Do Things* readers have used Lego blocks, coins, color-by-number charts, and even children's building blocks to tally their Blocks.

I use the simple tally on a sticky note, because I would probably think too much about the "best" way to stack the Lego blocks or the coins, and end up making things complicated again. The important thing is that your tally works for you.

**How to I make myself *start*? I mean, how do I get myself to actually begin making Blocks? I keep procrastinating on getting started.**

The Block method's purpose is to remove as much psychological resistance as possible around getting work started and finished, by making the commitment small and the rewards short-term. It feels good to complete a Block—you've accomplished something real, and life is a little easier—and that reward is only ever 25 minutes away.

Of course, this method can't remove all the resistance. You may have to employ other strategies to get yourself to the desk/workbench/easel. I describe some in the *Secret Weapons* section, on page 38. I've written about a few others in Raptitude Posts [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Thankfully, once you've made it past the beginning of the Block, and the timer is running and you're doing stuff, most of the resistance is behind you. It's as though the beginning of any task is a paper wall that just needs to be punctured, and then the going is easier. The more often you experience that relief, the less apt you are to hesitate rather than punch through. Each Block you do makes it easier to start.

**How do I deal with Block-destroying interruptions I can't prevent? For example, my boss comes in halfway through a Block, or I get a call I have to take. I feel like I deserve to count some of these would-be Blocks.**

If your situation is such that you are frequently being interrupted halfway through your Blocks, and you've done everything you can to prevent these interruptions, there are two basic approaches.

The first is to stay perfectly strict with what constitutes a Block – if you have to answer the phone 24 minutes into a Block, then that Block just doesn't count. This sounds tragic, but it might not affect your bottom-line productivity much. You still got a lot of work done in that 24 minutes, and so what if your official count was three Blocks today instead of five? The finished work is what really matters, not the count. Under this approach, completed Blocks are rarer but represent more work done.

The second way is to develop your own rules for these recurring situations. You might pause the timer if an interruption happens, then add five minutes when you resume, to compensate for having to refocus on the task. Or perhaps you reset the timer if you're only a few minutes in, and pause it if you're closer to halfway or more.

The important part is that you apply your rules consistently, otherwise the idea of the Block will start to become less meaningful. If that happens, take the more strict approach. The official count doesn't mean as much as the amount of work that actually gets done. Four strict Blocks, in a workplace rife with interruptions, might represent a very productive day.

**My workday is all broken up by meetings and appointments. Often I only have 10 or 15 minutes to get anything done between them. How do I do Blocks with this sort of workday? (Can I make "half" a Block?)**

Meetings are the great productivity destroyer of our time, and much has been written about that. They reduce the amount of time everyone has for work each day, and fragment the remainder into short windows that are hard to use.

If your workday is fragmented like this, you have to work with what you have. Ten or fifteen minutes is still enough time to get something real done, and you can use the same steps in the Block-making process to maximize your efficiency. If the fragments you have are routinely that short, you may want to define Blocks as smaller segments of time.

Of course, if you have *any* influence over the timing and number of meetings you attend, use it. One less one-hour meeting per week can become two beautiful Blocks.

And when you do have longer stretches, make the most of them, with some good, solid, 25-minute Blocks.

**I have trouble visualizing things, so the idea of Blocks as physical objects doesn't really work for me. Is there another way to make it satisfying to make Blocks, without having to picture anything in my mind?**

The visual wooden Block metaphor is intuitive and helpful for some, and the opposite for others. If it doesn't do anything for you, it's fine to keep the idea of Blocks abstract. Think of a Block as just a standardized chunk of work. Getting these chunks completed gets you closer to your goals.

What's important is that you feel good when you complete a Block, and that you want to make more of them. Whether or not you enjoy the thought of stacked wooden Blocks isn't important. It's just a simple way to think about progress, for those who find that the image resonates.

Some people make their own *real-life* visual representation of Blocks, by drawing and filling in circles with pencil crayon, shading the squares in graph paper, or even stacking Lego Blocks on their desk. Do whatever makes the idea of finished Blocks appeal to you.

**What kind of timer do you use?**

I use a Liorque kitchen timer—the one pictured on page 20.

**How do I visualize the finish line of a task when it's something that will take more than one Block? Do I picture where I hope to be after 25 minutes? Or where I'll be after the whole task is done?**

Don't worry too much about picturing the "correct" finish line. Just picture anything to do with the task getting done. For example, if you're cleaning the garage, a multi-part task which could take two, or four, or seven more Blocks, you might picture any of the following:

- The concrete floor, swept clean of dust and leaves
- The garden tools all hung up on their nails on the wall
- Pulling your car into a completely orderly garage
- Crossing "Clean the garage" off your to-do list
- The flowerpots stacked neatly in one corner

The image doesn't have to correspond to where you'll be after the next Block, and it doesn't have to represent the true finish line of the task. You just want an image that evokes that feeling

of *doneness* we all know and desire. If you get hung up on thinking of an image, don't worry about it and just start.

Also, remember that if a task is going to take more than a few Blocks, break it up into smaller tasks. The smaller the task, the closer the finish line.

**I really struggle with Step 2: picturing the finish line of the task. I'm tempted to skip that step because it's hard for me and I just want to get going. Is that okay?**

There are two productivity hindrances Step 2 is intended to prevent: a lack of desire to do the work, and a slipping into a kind of "working on / chipping away" mode that doesn't get you closer to finishing anything. Picturing the finish line of the task clarifies where you're trying to get to, and evokes some desire to get there.

You don't need to rely on mental images to achieve this effect, however, if that doesn't come easily to you. All that's really necessary is to remember why you're doing this task. Why do you want to get the bathroom cleaned or your essay finished? What would that do for you? An alternative Step 2 might be "Remember why you want this done."

And to be clear, by "visualizing," I'm not referring to creating an elaborately detailed fantasy. For most of my own office tasks, I just think of myself saving the finished document and closing my laptop, and that's enough. Then I hit the timer and go. What works will be different for everyone, but Step 2 never needs to be laborious.

# Block Method Quick Reference Sheet

*Print this sheet and keep it nearby until you know the steps by heart.*

## 1 CHOOSE

Select a task you want done.

- If it's a very large task, break it into a few pieces.

## 2 PICTURE

Take a few seconds to picture the task in its completed state.

- A single positive image will do. A printed, stapled report. A clean kitchen counter.

## 3 WORK

Start your timer and work for 25 uninterrupted minutes.

- Aim for the completed task you just pictured.
- The Block only counts if you stay on task

## 4 RECORD

Mark down your completed Block somewhere.

- A sticky note or scrap of paper is fine.
- This is just to track today's total number of Blocks; no need to keep it.

## 5 BREAK

Consider taking a short break before your next Block.

- At the very least, stand up if you've been sitting.
- Decide when you're starting your next Block before beginning your break.

## 6 REPEAT & REFINE

Start the cycle again, or call it a day.

- Work on streamlining your process each time to make more and better Blocks.

# What Did You Think of *How to Do Things*?

Please let me know whether you found *How to Do Things* helpful. Your feedback is a huge help for me in making the Guide better.

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If you have any questions or comments about this Guide, please send me a message at [raptitude.com/contact](http://raptitude.com/contact).