

Learning on Steroids:

Weekly/Daily Goals



by Scott Young

Do you procrastinate?

Sorry, stupid question. We all procrastinate. We all have moments where we feel there is something that *should* be done, but we don't do it.

What if there were a way you could cut your procrastination in half, or almost completely eliminate it. Wouldn't that be a valuable method?

In this rather meaty implementation guide, I'm going to explain what that method has been for me. The method I'm going to describe is:

1. Ruthlessly simple.
2. Doesn't require robot-like execution to be effective.

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3. Allows me to complete 95% of my work, when I decide to (without procrastinating).

Of course, no system is perfect. The most rigorous productivity systems are so complex they are irritating to manage. I've improved my system over years of iterations so that it is insanely simple, yet still covers almost everything I need to do.

That system is, of course, weekly/daily goals. And in this guide I'm going to tell you exactly how you can set it up for yourself.

Why Use a System at All?

The attacks on using a productivity system are usually misguided. No, having a system will not make you a robot. No, a

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system will not eliminate spontaneity. And, no, having a system won't stifle your creativity and flow.

To be fair, most the attacks on systems come either from people who have never actually put more than a month into trying a system (so they can only judge from little evidence) or they are attacks at the grossly complicated systems that are often held in high esteem on the internet, but rarely implemented completely by regular people.

The reason to use a system is simple: everyone already uses a system, but, in most cases, it is terrible.

That system is a delightful mix of guilt, procrastination and cramming.

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Yes, procrastination and guilt is a system. It's a system that uses guilt to motivate you when you're lazy and procrastination to let you relax when you want a break. The only problem is this system usually accomplishes little and results in a lot of self-loathing.

Creating a productivity system means upgrading from the old guilt/procrastination operating system you've been using to a more effective one.

Why Use Weekly/Daily Goals?

The truth is, most systems, if followed reliably, will outperform the combination of guilt and stress most students use to get work done. Weekly/Daily goals happens to be my favorite manifestation of such a system, but that's just my opinion.

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Cal Newport uses an alternative system he discussed in our audio interview: **fixed-schedule productivity**. This system is based on scheduling particular tasks to certain hours of the day, with an important caveat: you must fit it all into a particular time of day. This method has allowed him to end his day by 5pm, when most of his peers work late into the night.

Leo Babauta uses a system which emphasizes Most Important Tasks within a simplified GTD structure.

So the question isn't, why weekly/daily goals is the best, but rather—is it the best for you?

I think this system could be ideal for students for a number of reasons:

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1. **It is incredibly simple.** GTD in its full-blown form is complex, even Cal's system requires more complexity as tasks must be scheduled in advance.
2. **It is ideal for working from home.** Aside from classes, students typically work on their own clock.
3. **The rules of thumb are easy to follow.** I have a few tricks for using this system properly and that's about it. Add in the ones you'll discover after implementing it, and it shouldn't take more than a month to get a feel for the system.

If you already have a refined productivity system, I don't advocate switching unless you feel your current system is unmanageable. Instead, look for aspects you like about the system and see if you can merge them into your own, that's the method I've used to develop this system.

What is Weekly/Daily Goals?

Weekly/Daily goals, in its most basic form, consists of 3 rules:

1. Each week, create a weekly to-do.
2. Each night, create a daily to-do, based on the weekly to-do list.
3. When you finish your daily to-do list, your workday is finished.

For example, I have a weekly goals list right now which specifies a number of things I planned to do and have finished:

Weekly Goals

30 Minutes of Audio/Reading in French

- Get Calculator for Finance |
- Write Weekly/Daily Goals I
- Backup Computer Files
- Backup Website
- Inquire at LCL About Insura
- Setup Learning on Steroids
- Buy Better Bike Lock (One
- Article for TSN (February)

[Add another item](#)

- Get Attestation de Vol from Police Comm
- Pay Bike Fees |
- Review Cal's Curriculum and Send Feedb

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I also have a daily goals list for the tasks I wanted to accomplish today:



[My Lists](#)

This list:

[Edit](#)

[Reorder](#)

[Share](#)

Thursday Goals

- Write Weekly/Daily Goals Implementation Guide
- 15 Minutes of French Audio
- Gym
- Fully Test Forum/Membership System

[Add another item](#)

- 15 Minutes of French Reading
- Finance Class (Bring Computer)

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The only thing I focus on during my working time is the finishing that daily list. It is usually between 5-10 items, and that's it.

This contrasts the infinite to-do list approach, where you have a long list of action items. This infinite to-do list can become a source of procrastination because there is no reason you must do something today and not tomorrow. Chunking down to a daily level encourages action.

Another difference is that this system automatically creates time for rest. Because you aren't allowed to add tasks to the list after, there is a practical limit to burnout. I've frequently set up what I thought was an ambitious list, only to complete it by noon because I was so focused on working in the morning.

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When you aren't getting the success you want academically, the tendency can be to force yourself to work non-stop because you "should". However, in a traditional system, that only amplifies the forces of guilt and procrastination.

A weekly/daily goals system reduces that urge and allows you to accomplish what needs to be done without guilt or burnout.

Add a Calendar

The only other element of my system (which in turn feeds into my weekly and daily to-do lists) is a calendar. This allows me to save date-sensitive tasks that must be done on a particular time, on a specific day. Many students use agendas for this purpose, so that also works.

Why a Weekly List?

So far, most of my focus has been on the daily goals. That's the list you can't add more work to. That's the list you look at when working. That's the central piece of the puzzle.

Why bother with a weekly list?

The addition of a weekly list allows you to schedule larger projects and infrequent tasks. If I only made a daily list, that creates the opportunity to procrastinate within the system. It pushes big projects further down in order to create an easier daily goals list.

For example, look at my current list and you'll see two items:

Weekly/Daily Goals

- Inquire at LCL About Insurance Coverage for
- Setup Learning on Steroids Membership Site/
- Buy Better Bike Lock (One with Chain)
- Article for TSM (February)

One is “Setup Learning on Steroids Membership Site/Forum” that’s a project that has taken me a few days of work and I’m still not finished. It’s exactly the kind of larger task that gets missed in a daily list but emphasized in a weekly list.

- Get Attestation de Vol from Police Commisariate
- Pay Bike Fees |

Another is “Get Attestation de Vol from Police”. I’ll save the story behind that for another day, but I needed to fill out some paperwork over a stolen bike. That’s an irritating task I’m likely to procrastinate on, and one that doesn’t need to be done immediately.

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Without having a weekly list, I would probably have kept pushing it to tomorrow's goals, without having it ever reach my daily list.

Why not a monthly or annual list?

This addition of a weekly list raises a point. If longer lists are helpful for capture, why not add a monthly or annual list? In my case this is because for tasks that span greater than a month tend to fall into two categories:

1. Date-sensitive tasks, which are better for the calendar.
2. My grand projects, which are usually only 1-3 at a time, making them hard to ignore.

I've experimented with monthly lists and found the extra capture ability isn't worth the increased complexity of the system.

Rules of Thumb

By now, you should have a basic understanding of the weekly/daily goals system. The idealized version of the system works pretty close to reality. However, after over two years of using the system in its current inception, I can say that theory and practice aren't always the same.

I hesitate to write these rules of thumb for two reasons:

1. They complicate an otherwise brainlessly simple system.
2. You're inevitably going to come up with your own modifications, so mine aren't necessary.

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Keeping those two points in mind, I'd like to make two suggestions:

Don't try to implement these rules of thumb. *Only* use them if you're having trouble using the system for a reason covered by one of the rules. Your implementation should focus on the simple system, not minutia I'll describe.

Second, feel free to ignore these suggestions. They work for me because of my personality, weaknesses, strengths and workload. They may not work for you.

That said, here are some of the rules of thumb I use to keep the system in top shape:

Rule #1: Adding Work is Worse than Not Completing

This goes against the grain of most student's thinking. How can doing more than you expected be worse than doing less?

The problem is that adding work defeats the system. When you add more work to your daily goals list, it ceases to be a daily goal list. Instead it is just another infinite to-do list which loses its ability to keep you from procrastinating.

Not completing all your daily goals work should be avoided, but it is often impossible. Sometimes, you plan to do more work than is possible. Other times, life will come up and prevent you from finishing one of the tasks.

I can't say you'll always be perfect with the system, I'm certainly not. But once you get into a rhythm with it you'll be more likely to write daily goals list that are achievable and actually finish them the next day.

Rule #2: Avoid Switching Tasks Whenever Possible

Another bad habit is to want to switch particular tasks in your daily goals list with something else. So instead of writing this guide I could write a blog article. Or instead of backing up my website, I could back up my computer.

Task switching should be avoided for the same reason you should avoid adding work. It undermines the value of having a daily list.

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The only times I switch tasks is when an unforeseen obstacle or opportunity allows me to work on another task or prevents me from working on a list item. For example, if I wanted to go to the gym today, but forgot it was closed, I might take a task of similar length from my weekly goals and substitute.

Rule #3: Keep the Lists Under 20 Items

For the weekly goals, this often means I don't explicitly spell out every task for the week. You may have noticed that my daily tasks of reading and listening in French were just a note on my weekly list, instead of a task. That's because if I added every task: going to the gym, doing laundry, etc., the list would become unwieldily.

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The same is true of daily goals lists. Find a way to batch your tasks so that you have only 5-10 items on a given list. This gives the list the power to focus. When your to-do list has 6 items, you don't waste much time deciding what to do next, it is often obvious. When your to-do list is 25 items, you may procrastinate just deciding which of those tasks to tackle next.

Rule #4: Use Fixed-Schedule to Rein in Your Time

I don't use time limits within my day. If I finished at 7pm or 9pm, I'm not particularly concerned unless I had already made plans. Of course, many days I finish much sooner, but the possibility of late hours is always there. But that reflects my reality of being single and relatively unencumbered.

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If you have a family, even when you don't have prior plans, finishing at 10pm every day might not be ideal. For this, I suggest integrating a finishing time-limit. This is the latest possible time you can work.

So, for example, I could have 10 daily tasks and a time limit of 6pm. So my day ends in one of the two scenarios:

1. I finish all my tasks.
2. It's 6pm.

I'll admit, this complicates the system somewhat. But, I think it is a simple fix if you find your daily goal pushing too far into the evening.

Implementing Weekly/Daily Goals

Now that you understand the theory behind it, how can you put it into practice?

I'll go over two ways: one on paper, one on the computer and finally how you can train it so that this system reliably works for you.

Paper Method

This is simple. Just write a master weekly list every week and keep it on your desk. From that, write a smaller daily to-do list on paper and carry it around with you, checking off items as you finish them.

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I used paper as my method during the first 4 years of daily goals, and I can say it works. Although online gadgets are sexy, they tend to be more confusing and less reliable. Paper is the killer app.

Online Method - With TadaList

The current method I use is on the computer. This is a function of the fact that the majority of my work is done on my computer or near it. If you use your computer less frequently, I suggest going with paper since it will make the system more present in your life.

TadaList is a free to-do list software you can use online [here](#).

It is the software I've used for over two years and the software featured in the pictures I displayed. The method is

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exactly the same as with paper, except you need to check off items when you're at your computer, and need to be online to refer to your list.

The main advantage of an online method is that you can quickly keep track of more tasks. The main disadvantage is you need your computer (or cellphone) and must be connected to the internet. When I've gone without internet during travels, I've sometimes found it irritating to switch to a different desktop application.

Ultimately the specific installation you use won't matter as long as it works for you. Online, paper or something else, you decide.

Training Weekly/Daily Goals

You understand the system, so it will start working automatically, right?

Unfortunately nothing is ever that simple. I find it usually takes a full month to adapt to a new type of system. This is for a number of reasons:

1. When it's new, it's easy to forget to use it.
2. You don't fully trust the system so continue to use guilt and procrastination.
3. You haven't found all the rules of thumb to make the system work for you.

However, as far as methods go, weekly/daily goals is pretty straightforward. I suggest taking a 30 Day Trial where you commit

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to using the system as your primary productivity tool for one month. That means every single day making a daily goals list and every single week making a weekly goals list.

Only after a month do you overcome some of the hiccups in the installation process and really get to see whether a productivity tool is worthwhile.

If you aren't sure whether this method is right for you, try a 7-Day Experiment, just go with one weeks worth of daily to-do lists and one weekly list. See if it fits into your working rhythm.

One week isn't enough to see the capacity of a tactic. But it gives you an out if you find the technique completely incompatible with your life.

Good luck with this tactic, and I'll see you on the other side!