

*Learning on Steroids:*

# Close Open Loops



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## Close Open Loops

Occasionally in the implementation guides, I like to share more general productivity advice instead of just learning tactics. These are often more helpful as a learner, because it doesn't matter how well you visceralize or how quickly you can link ideas together if your constantly mired in procrastination.

This guide is another productivity guide and I'll be focusing on the tactic of closing open loops.

### What is an Open Loop?

An open loop is any activity that you do that doesn't have a defined end-point. When you think about it, most of the activities we do are open loops:

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- Exercising
- Studying
- Reading
- Practice Problems
- Work on Projects
- Editing for Essays
- Revising
- etc.

The list of closed loops is comparatively shorter:

- Filling out forms
- Completing short assignments
- Brief tasks

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Closed loops have the virtue of being finishable. While you can technically “finish” an essay, it’s an open loop because you could continue writing, revising and editing forever. Even the research step of essay writing could go on forever if you let it.

Closed loops also are the easiest tasks to beat procrastination on. While there might be some chores you routinely put off, for the most part closed loops get finished. They are easy to check-off your to-do list and they don’t occupy your mind once you’ve completed them.

## Why Open Loops Cause Procrastination

Open loops result in you procrastinating for two reasons. The first is that, without a defined end-point, there is no satisfying

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sense of accomplishment. When you “study” a subject for a few hours, there isn’t the same sense of completion, than when you hand in an essay, for example.

No sense of completion means less urgency to start.

The second reason is that open loops often work as a matter of degree. Studying for an exam is an example. Rarely are you in the position of complete ignorance before studying and ending in complete enlightenment. Instead, you maybe move yourself from 40% knowledge to 80%.

A shift in degrees also robs open loops of motivation because there isn’t the same urgency to do something. While we may know researching is important as a whole, incrementally another hour of research only pushes us a little bit forward, asymptotically to our goal.

Both of these problems—a lack of completeness and a shift only in degree, make most open-loops big sources of procrastination.

## Closing Your Open Loops

My major weapon against procrastination is to close these open loops. Closing means two things:

1. **Defining a clear end-point.** Knowing what finished looks like exactly so you can be satisfied when you've reached it.
2. **Setting up a clear goal.** Knowing what degree of success you need to move forward.

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Both of these steps help suck away some of the procrastination power from common open-ended tasks.

How can you apply it to the tasks you might face as a learner?

### Example One: “Studying”

One reason I hate “studying” is due to the vague, open-ended nature of the task. It rarely has a clear end-point and it often doesn’t have a clear goal.

If you have a big exam coming up, you can close this open loop first by defining it in terms of discrete sub-tasks. Each of these tasks should be achievable in one sitting and have an obvious end point.

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With an exam in calculus, you could have tasks such as:

- Complete problem set from chapters 3-5
- Review past quizzes and correct mistakes
- Create a notes compression of all lecture material
- etc.

This accomplishes the first goal of making the open-ended task a series of closed loops.

The next goal would be to define exactly what your success rate on practice questions or self-quizzed recall must be to consider yourself ready. If you've decided you need an 80% to get the grade you want on the exam, then run self tests until you can fill this benchmark.



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The point of closing open loops isn't to shrug off excess work. Simply defining studying in terms of a couple tasks, checking them off and declaring yourself done might not work. Without benchmarking yourself against some standard of results, you won't feel as confident that your closed tasks accomplished the hard work, and you'll probably resort to open-ended studying again.

### Example #2: Researching an Essay

Let's say you have a big paper coming up and it requires a significant amount of research. This again is an open-ended task since it has no clear end-point and the standard you want to hold your paper to isn't clear from the outset.

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You can close this loop by first breaking it down into concrete tasks that are finishable in one sitting. If you have a big paper on Greek mythology, your tasks could start off as:

- Conduct an article search for existing articles
- Search for books
- Read from at least 12 books on the subject
- Gather information from at least 30 articles
- Craft thesis statement
- Create skeleton outline of essay

Sometimes your tasks won't be immediately clear from the beginning, but you can leave them less defined and wait until you gather more information. In this case, you don't know which books you'll need to read in-depth or articles you'll want to source

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until you've done the searches on the topic. You also won't know how the outline will look until you've read enough to form a thesis.

You can also set the standards of the research task by allowing yourself to continue researching until you have at least 2-3 references for each argument you want to make in your essay. That closes off the loop, so instead of having a terrifyingly open task like "research" you have a series of achievable tasks you with a clear standard.

## Closing Continuous Loops

Some open-loops have relatively short duration. Researching an essay needs to reach a conclusion some time before the hand-in date or you'll fail. Same for studying before an exam. Both of

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these have natural end points in time, even if the tasks could be worked on forever.

Continuous loops are the tasks that never close, never have hard deadlines and you'd like to continue working on them into the future. Learning a foreign language might be an example. There isn't an easy checkpoint where you can declare yourself finished with a language and move on.

Similarly, exercising is another continuous loop. Fitness takes years and can rarely be broken down into a specific steps with a specific benchmark the way I described with normal open-loops.

Still, I think you can tackle these types of open loops by closing them in a different fashion: making them a part of your routine.

## Using Routine to Close Open Loops

Exercise may be an open loop, but going for a 5 km run isn't. Improving your Spanish may be an open loop, but having a 30 minute conversation isn't. While the main goal may be nebulous and hard to reach, you can still attack it with closed loops, so long as you make them routine enough that you won't procrastinate or forget them.

There are two ways you can make a routine. The first is by making a 30-Day Trial and practicing the same routine consistently. I've used this frequently in the past to start exercising, wake up earlier, change my eating habits, read more or study a difficult subject.

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The second way is to immerse yourself completely in the task so that it becomes a part of your life. For example, I can immerse myself in exercise by trading my car for a bike, or forcing myself to take the stairs instead of the elevator. I can immerse myself in a language by spending more time with native speakers or doing my daily life within the language.

## Closed Loops and Weekly/Daily Goals

Another reason I prefer working with closed loops is that they fit into a weekly/daily goals system. Every to-do item I put into my work routine must be a closed loop. If not, I need to close it. Instead of putting up “study for marketing” I’ll put, “take notes from all marketing slides” as an example.

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Closed loops allow you to check off items within your list and sleep without the guilt of feeling like there is work undone.

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