

FROM PROCRASTINATION TO ACTION

How to Stop Using Busyness as a
Proxy for True Productivity



Content

What is True Productivity?	2
What is the Difference Between Busyness and Productivity?	2
What is Procrastination?	3
Passive Procrastinator (Classic Procrastination)	4
Active Procrastinator – Type I (Strategic Procrastination)	5
Active Procrastinator – Type 2 (Structured Procrastination)	6
Active Procrastination: An Oxymoron?	7
Busy Procrastinator	7
Productivity Systems to Stop Busyness + Be Truly Productive	8
Productivity Habits and Skills to Stop Busyness + Be Truly Productive	10
Productivity Habits and Skills to Minimize Busyness	11
Productivity Habits and Skills to Optimize True Productivity	14
Busy vs. Productive Quiz	19
Recommended Books	20

What is True Productivity?

Productivity is not an end goal, but a means to end. True productivity means aligning your daily, weekly and monthly actions with your values, priorities and desired outcomes. It allows you to accomplish the most significant things, weed out the trivial, small stuff, and integrate your top areas of focus, such as family/relationships, health, wealth, work, and personal development.

Being productive does not necessarily lead to success. There are people who can produce high-quality work and get things done at the last minute. But implementing productivity systems and honing productivity habits or skills make your journey less stressful and more enjoyable.

Productivity is not just about systems, apps, tools and tricks (although these can help). It has more to do with your ability to focus, with laser-like intensity, on important and meaningful tasks that need to get done, even when you don't feel like it. Productivity is the opposite of procrastination, which is putting something off that needs to be accomplished.

What is the Difference Between Busyness and Productivity?

Busyness involves an emphasis on taking action on many things, without first making deliberate choices about what matters most. When you're busy, you can feel productive in the moment, but upon reflection, realize you put most of your efforts into trivial, low-value things.

True productivity involves seeking clarity on your top priorities before taking action. You use the limited time you have on the tasks and activities that truly make a difference. You expend efforts on significant, high-value projects while you delete, defer and delegate the rest.

Busy people:

Get many things done, except the most important thing(s)

Say yes habitually and quickly

Are unclear about their values or frequently act out of alignment with their values

Generally feel overwhelmed, stressed out, and constantly busy

Productive people:

Get the most important things done

Say yes deliberately and slowly

Have clear values and align actions with their values

Generally feel accomplished, have optimal stress levels, and are routinely effective

What is Procrastination?

Procrastination is the act of delaying or postponing action to a future time. Neil Fiore, author of *The Now Habit*, defines procrastination as “a mechanism for coping with the anxiety associated with starting or completing any task or decision.”

Simplified, Biological Explanation for Why We Procrastinate

The human brain is wired to procrastinate. When faced with a tedious or difficult task, the two parts of our mind - the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex – battle with each other.

The limbic system is the unconscious zone that runs on autopilot. It is the oldest and most dominant part of the brain. Commonly referred to as the “emotional brain,” it prompts us to flee from unpleasant tasks or perceived threats (real or imagined).

The prefrontal cortex is involved in complex processes like reasoning, problem solving, analyzing information, and decision making. It does not operate automatically and must be actively engaged. It is the newer and weaker part of the brain. Referred to as the “internal planner,” it leads us to complete a task even when we prefer to do something more pleasant.

When you are not focused on a task, the limbic system dominates and causes you to delay until tomorrow what you should do today.

Common Reasons to Procrastinate

Procrastination occurs for various reasons, including:

Aversion to the task at hand

Fear of disapproval or failure (or success)

Fear of making decisions that could lead to failed results if they are carried out

Fear of being exposed as unqualified or inexperienced

Perfectionism, which involves setting unreasonably high standards and attending to minute details

Desire to feel adrenaline rush of racing to meet a deadline or finishing a task at the last minute

Being overwhelmed with too much to do

Passive Procrastinator (Classic Procrastination)

Passive procrastinators delay action in the traditional sense, i.e. their self-regulatory problems trigger delays in the intended course of action.

They steer away from the discomfort of completing a tedious, boring or high-stakes action. They avoid tasks that need to be done in favor of more pleasurable activities, even when the inaction leads to negative consequences, such as late fees, missed deadlines, subpar work, and many mistakes.

Passive procrastinators wait to do important things because they don't feel like it.

Consequences of Classic Procrastination

The negative consequences of procrastination include health problems and compromised immune system due to long-term stress; insomnia or sleep disorders; depression or anxiety; impaired relationships; and damaged reputation.

Active Procrastinator – Type I (Strategic Procrastination)

Active procrastinators delay action while they brainstorm approaches and develop solutions for tackling a project.

In his book *Originals*, Adam Grant, a professor at the Wharton School of Business, discusses how Martin Luther King Jr. waited to write most of his “I Have a Dream” speech until the wee hours of the morning. He also notes that Abraham Lincoln didn’t write the closing paragraph of his Gettysburg Address until the night before the speech. He points out that Leonardo Da Vinci started painting the Mona Lisa in 1503 and didn’t finish it until 1519.

In a January 16, 2016, *New York Times* op-ed piece, titled *Why I Taught Myself to Procrastinate*, Grant writes that “pre-crastination,” which is the urge to start a task now and finish it as soon as possible, has drawbacks. The term was introduced by Pennsylvania State psychologists in a study published in *Psychological Science*, which defined pre-crastination as “the tendency to complete, or at least begin, tasks as soon as possible, even at the expense of extra physical effort.”¹

Grant states, “But while procrastination is a vice for productivity, I’ve learned – against my natural inclinations – that it’s a virtue for creativity.”

Active, strategic procrastinators wait to do important things while they work toward more creative, effective solutions.

Benefits of Strategic Procrastination

In certain situations, procrastination – when done purposefully and strategically - can work to your benefit. Sometimes you do need to reflect on things, allow ideas to percolate, gather and synthesize information, clarify your intentions, and determine your ultimate goal before you take action.

To be effective with strategic procrastination, you must remain mindful of the unfinished project and make space for creative ideas. Your subconscious continues to work when you are taking a walk, exercising on the treadmill, meditating, cleaning your office or doing the dishes.

¹ Rosenbaum, D. A., Gong, L. and Potts, C.A. (2014). Hastening Subgoal Completion at the Expense of Extra Physical Effort, *Psychological Science*.

Active Procrastinator – Type 2 (Structured Procrastination)

Active procrastinators delay action on an important task while they work on other tasks to build momentum.

Dr. John Perry, a philosopher at Stanford University and author of *The Art of Procrastination*, notes that despite being a habitual procrastinator, he is very productive most of the time. He notes:

The key to productivity is to make more commitments – but to be methodical about it. At the top of your to-do list put a couple of daunting, if not impossible tasks that are vaguely important sounding (but really aren't) and seem to have deadlines (but really don't). Then further down the list, include some doable tasks that really matter. With this appropriate task structure, the procrastinator becomes a useful citizen. Indeed, the procrastinator can even acquire, as I have, a reputation for getting a lot done.

Perry suggest that instead of working on your most important task first, you start a different task on your list that needs attention. By making other tasks just as important, we make it easier to tackle the most significant. Structural procrastination is supposed to motivate you to do difficult, important and time-sensitive tasks, as long as they are a way of *not* doing something more important.

Active, structural procrastinators wait to do important things while they work on making them more palatable or alluring by doing other things.

Benefits of Structural Procrastination

Perry suggests you take advantage of the urge to procrastinate by mixing your most important task (the thing you should really do, but conjures up feelings of resistance) with other tasks. American humorist, Robert Benchley, once wrote, "Anyone can do any amount of work, provided it isn't the work he is supposed to be doing at that moment."

To be effective with structural procrastination, you must eventually do the very important task. You cannot allow lower-priority tasks to perpetually lead you astray from high-priority tasks.

Active Procrastination: An Oxymoron?

In a June 23, 2009, Psychology Today article, *Active Procrastination: Thoughts on Oxymorons*, Professor Timothy Pychyl notes that *active procrastination* is “not just apparently contradictory, the term reveals a problem in understanding the difference between procrastination and delay.” In his January 18, 2016, Psychology Today article, *Procrastination As A Virtue For Creativity, Why It's False,* he further states that while all procrastination is delay, not all delay is procrastination, and that delay is not necessarily negative, but procrastination is.

You often need to delay action to let ideas percolate and to gather necessary information. For example, if you draft an article too early before the deadline, you might have to do rework when the situation changes or your conclusion becomes outdated. But Pychyl notes this is just a purposeful delay in action and not procrastination, which (by classical definition) is a self-regulatory failure.

Side Effects of Active Procrastination

Strategic procrastination works only if you start the project early and give yourself time to develop and test ideas. It should not be used to complicate simple things that can be done quickly and doesn't require a lot of thought. Preparation, which includes building expertise on the topic and mindfully reflecting on ideas, is key.

Structural procrastination works only if you eventually get around to doing your most important task. It should not be used to permanently avoid your main priority by un(consciously) engaging in low-leverage, shallow work instead of high-value, deep work.

They are ineffective as overall productivity strategies. Relying on strategic procrastination or structural procrastination benefits you in only some situations. You are not always creative under pressure, especially when all or most of your work occurs when the deadline looms. You are likely to end up with mediocre results, high stress, and undeveloped solutions if you start the work too late and don't have an adequate incubation period to develop ideas and insights.

Busy Procrastinator A common way to procrastinate is through “busyness.” Procrastinators dabble in less productive tasks and tell themselves and others they are too busy to tackle the most important thing.

When you respond to every request, accept every opportunity, and struggle with a growing to-do list, you often end up feeling overwhelmed and overcommitted.

Having too much on your plate and keeping long to-do lists steer you away from intended outcomes and your highest priorities. If everything seems to be a priority, you can be left stuck and undecided about what to do first. Instead of being on the top of the most important task, you crumble under the weight of many tasks.

Productivity Systems to Stop Busyness + Be Truly Productive

Time marches on regardless of what you do. We all have 1440 minutes in a day. 24 hours in a day. 168 hours in a week. 365 days in a year.

Time cannot be managed. Here's what to do instead: Implement a productivity system that is customized to your own personal needs, individual circumstances, natural rhythm, and work style.

Below are three popular productivity systems to use as a starting point and to develop your own:

1. Getting Things Done (GTD) (introduced by David Allen in 2001)

The GTD system covers six areas of focus: current actions; current projects; areas of responsibility; 1-2 year goals; 3-5 year goals; and life goal. It has you put all your tasks into one of these six categories. You also end up with the following lists: the in-basket; next actions; waiting for; projects and project plans; and someday/maybe.

The in-basket captures ideas and tasks as they come up. The next actions list breaks down big projects into actionable items to do. When the task is actionable and takes less than two minutes, you do it as soon as it's defined. When the task takes more time and is actually a project, you break it down and then you delegate it (which leads to the waiting for list) or defer it (which ends up on your next actions list and calendar, where you record date or time-sensitive tasks and events).

2. Priority Matrix (introduced by Stephen Covey in 1989)

The Priority Matrix is also known as Eisenhower’s Urgent-Important Principle, which distinguishes between importance and urgency. Important tasks contribute to goal accomplishment. Urgent tasks require immediate attention.

The system includes four different quadrants that enable you to prioritize tasks based on their importance and urgency. It reminds you that not every task is created equal and you may decide whether to tackle it now or defer it.

The Priority Matrix involves putting your tasks in one of four quadrants as follows:

<p>QUADRANT 1 Both important and urgent.</p> <p>Examples: managing a crises, working on deadline-driven projects, answering questions from an important client</p> <p><i>Important and urgent deadlines</i></p>	<p>QUADRANT 2 Important but not urgent (at least not yet)</p> <p>Examples: preparing for a presentation, getting a dental checkup, having dinner with your family</p> <p><i>Long-term planning and strategizing and relationship-building</i></p>
<p>QUADRANT 3 Urgent (to someone else), but not important (to us).</p> <p>Examples: dealing with your boss’ last-minute request, attending an impromptu meeting, handling an unsolicited sales pitch from an acquaintance</p> <p><i>Time-pressured distractions and interruptions</i></p>	<p>QUADRANT 4 Not urgent and not important or urgent</p> <p>Examples: checking social media, surfing the web, binge watching TV</p> <p><i>Mindless activities and time wasters</i></p>

3. Pomodoro Technique (introduced by Francesco Cirillo in the late 1980’s)

The Pomodoro Technique is one way to develop the skill to concentrate on one task at a time. First, you identify the task to do. Second, you set a timer (typically 25 minutes). Third, you work on the task only until the timer goes off. After the timer rings, you check off your task. And if you give in to interruptions and distractions (e.g. checking emails, getting a snack), you reset the timer. If you have fewer than four checkmarks, take a short break (5 minutes), then go to step 2. If you have at

least four checkmarks, take a longer break (15–30 minutes), reset your checkmark count to zero, and do the steps all over again.

Productivity Habits and Skills to Stop Busyness + Be Truly Productive

Moving from procrastination to action requires you to develop productivity habits and skills to stop busyness and create more time.

Keep the following two concepts in mind at the outset and throughout the process of developing your productivity habits and skills:

The Pareto Principle

The Pareto Principle, which is called the 80/20 Rule in the productivity arena, states that 20% of your inputs and activities account for 80% of your outcomes and results. The 80/20 ratio simplifies the concept because in some cases it can really be 99/1, 95/5, 90/10 etc.

The 80/20 rule encourages you to prioritize the few, more important items that lead to the most significant benefits. It reminds you to avoid or minimize busywork that adds limited value. Doing the right tasks spares you from killing time on things that don't really matter or provide significant benefit.

Parkinson's Law

Parkinson's Law states that work expands to fill the time allotted. Simply put, you will use up all the time to complete a task when given a certain amount of time to do it.

Think about a lawyer billing by the hour with no deadlines. Compared to a lawyer who charges a fixed fee for a specific matter, a lawyer who bills by the hour will likely do more work than is necessary to fill or exceed the minimum billable quota, as long as the client is willing to pay for it and remain a client.

Productivity Habits and Skills to Minimize Busyness

Minimizing busy work that drains your energy, depletes your attention span, and wastes your time is critical to move from procrastination to action on important things that need to be done now.

1. Track how you use your time

Keep a time log (for both your personal and professional life) to learn exactly how you spend your minutes and hours in a day, during the week, over the course of a month, and throughout the year. After tracking your time, you might be surprised to see how much time you spend on mindless activities as well as interruptions and distractions that involve other people's agendas. You will also gain insights on how well you estimate the time it takes to complete tasks and how much time you actually spend on them.

Accurate, consistent time tracking keeps you accountable to whether you spend your time procrastinating on high-level tasks and attending to trivial tasks. An analog tool like a journal, notebook or timesheet is enough to track your time. But if you want to go digital, you can try Evernote, Toggl or ATracker.

2. Choose results over hours

The hours you put in does not necessary correlate with the body and quality of work you produce. And more busyness doesn't usually lead to more effective results or more successful outcomes. Getting two major tasks done has greater long-term impact than firing off a bunch of response emails in a day.

3. Reduce information overload

We live in the age of distraction and new technology where 24/7 information is available on our smart phones, computers, TVs, etc. Meanwhile, our attention span remains limited.

Go on a media diet by restricting your use of social media and the Internet to low-energy periods of the day, blocking mobile distractions, and watching only a few TV shows that you really love, instead of binge-watching many.

We are addicted to dopamine, which is produced by pleasurable experiences, and so long as a task has a higher likelihood (or perceived future likelihood) of producing dopamine, our brain is addicted to perform these activities while actively avoiding the others. Realize some problems take care of themselves if you stay out of them. And Some circumstances improve over time and with little or no effort on your part if you just let them be.

4. Practice mindfulness

Checking emails, interacting with social media, watching TV and engaging in other mindless activities are common ways to cure boredom, avoid difficult tasks, and get immediate gratification. Being mindful of the present moment – without reacting to the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise – helps you to sit with discomfort.

Mindfulness increases your ability to focus intensely and to concentrate for longer stretches. It also develops your awareness of when fatigue sets in and willpower or self-discipline begins to fade. It encourages you to take a walk or drink water, rather than indulge in social media and load up on caffeinated coffee, when you need a break.

5. Organize your environment

Disorganization and disorder fuel distractions. Clutter -- such as excess stuff on your desk, piles of unfiled paper, overflowing inbox, and multiple apps on your smartphone -- make it hard to hone in on the essentials and your important work. A chaotic workspace is a visual reminder that you're not on top of things.

Create a distraction-free work environment so you can think clearly, minimize stress, reduce the time it takes to find the resources you need, and lower the likelihood of getting side-tracked.

6. Say "no" gracefully when it's not a resounding "yes"

When you're a people-pleaser, it can be very uncomfortable to say no. You end up saying yes to projects that are stressful to you or don't capitalize on your strengths and interests. You agree to commitments that aren't in line with your priorities because you want to be of service.

Your time and attention span are limited. Say no to requests gently, directly and compassionately, while nixing the guilt. Consider moving goals off your someday list

if they have lost their luster and reflect an old version of you. Instead of adding items to your to-do list, start building a not-to-do list. Cutting out non-essentials reduces decision fatigue and saves your energy for important decisions.

Even when it's your boss, top client or another VIP making the request, you can renegotiate when the thing gets done, ask for more resources, point out the higher priorities you're attending to on their behalf, or delegate or refer the work. When you habitually say yes without any filtering system, you might do everything okay, but struggle to make the most important thing great.

7. Set boundaries

Having clear boundaries sets realistic expectations with others. If you habitually reply to emails and text messages within 5 minutes of when you get them, the sender will come to expect the same or similar response time for all correspondence. If you answer every telephone call regardless of what time they come in and what you are doing, you teach the caller that their problem always matters more than your own. If you keep an open office so anyone can walk into your office at any time, observers will conclude it's fine to interrupt you regardless of what's on your own agenda.

Being highly responsive makes you procrastinate on taking action on your own, highest priorities. Set appropriate boundaries that allow reasonable access to you without compromising your most important work.

Here are a few examples of how to set boundaries so your day doesn't get hijacked by other people's needs and demands: Close your open door policy and schedule office hours. Wear noise-cancelling headphones if you work in a cubicle or open office space. Reserve your evenings for winding down, not checking emails.

8. Plan your day with your areas of focus in mind

Knowing your areas of focus and where your daily activities fit in will help you prioritize, reduce busywork, and take action on your most important tasks. Areas of focus include work/career/business; home and family life; physical health and mental wellness; financial health; creative pursuits; personal development; spirituality and spiritual growth; relationships and community; and miscellaneous activities that require attention (e.g. emails, telephone calls, errands, chores).

Plan your day to include your highest priorities, including the one to five most important tasks that (if completed) will bring a deep sense of accomplishment. When

you don't have a plan, you are more likely to give in to unproductive habits , such as waste time on low-leverage work that doesn't move you closer to your major goals.

Although it's fine to plan your day in the early morning, it's better to do this the night before. Avoid underestimating the time or attention a task will need. Leave white space on your calendar to deal with unexpected situations, attend to personal matters, and take breaks.

Productivity Habits and Skills to Optimize True Productivity

1. Match tasks with energy level, natural rhythm, and personal circumstances

Not all hours are not made equal for getting things done. Certain times of the day bring fewer distractions and more opportunities for deep focus. Arrange your day so activities that require deep concentration (e.g. research, writing) are done when you have fewer distractions, higher energy, and more willpower. By doing your most important work at ideal times (e.g. in the early mornings), you can reduce the total hours you spend on the problem without compromising results.

Administrative tasks, such as running errands, scheduling appointments, and returning telephone calls can be done in the middle of the day, when your energy or attention span has dipped. Relaxation activities, such as reading a book, playing a musical instrument, and chatting with friends, are best done in the evening, after you have completed your most important work and called it a day.

Scott Adams, creator of the Dilbert comic strip, writes in *How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big*:

One of the most important tricks for maximizing your productivity involves matching your mental state to the task... At 6:00 A.M. I'm a creator, and by 2:00 P.M. I'm a copier... It's the perfect match of my energy level with a mindless task.

Early mornings tend to be the quietest, most distraction-free times of the day. Thus, many productivity experts recommend a 5 a.m. wakeup time, assuming you had 7 to

9 hours of sleep. Your personal chronotype or individual circadian rhythm could make this very tough.

Night owls and others who don't want to endure the effort it takes to rewire the brain may simply create a schedule around their productivity levels. Dr. Michael Breuss, author of *The Power Of When: Discover Your Chronotype*, advises you tweak your schedule and determine the best times to do certain things to match the rhythm of your day with the rhythm of your biology. He notes, "Animals heed their inner clocks. Humans, with our big, superior brains, willfully ignore ours, cramming our cardiac rhythms into a 'social rhythm,' often in direct opposition to what our bodies are supposed to be doing at that time."

2. Time block your most important work

Each day, mark time blocks on your calendar or schedule for when you will do focused work. If you don't reserve chunks of time for your most important tasks and to-dos, you are more likely to procrastinate on them. But with pre-decided time blocks for certain activities, you reduce the urge to switch from one task to the next or engage in mindless activities.

You can also time block when you will do your reactive work, like check emails only three times per day instead of when they hit your inbox, enable your voice mail or personal assistant to screen telephone calls, and schedule meetings only in the afternoon.

3. Eat that frog

In *Eat That Frog*, author Brian Tracy writes, "Your 'frog' is your biggest, most important task, the one you are most likely to procrastinate on if you don't do something about it." He notes:

The first rule of frog eating is this:
If you have to eat two frogs, eat the ugliest one first.

The second rule of frog eating is this:
If you have to eat a live frog at all, it doesn't pay to sit and look at it very long.

In other words, if you have two important tasks, start with the more difficult one. And take immediate or prompt action rather than mull over it for too long. Tackle your major task – the one that’s high-value but you’ve been postponing – first thing, when your willpower is at its peak.

4. Single task

The ability to multitask is generally viewed as a valuable skill in our pseudo-productive world. Performing two or more tasks at one time seems to be the way to go when time is short and you have many things to do. But as Dave Crenshaw points out in the *The Myth of Multitasking*, the most you can do is “switch tasking” (switch back and forth between two or more tasks) and “background tasking” (do two or more mundane tasks like listen to the radio while you drive or watch TV while you exercise.)

The human brain is a sequential processor: It cannot pay attention to more than one thing at a time. Multitasking is not possible when (1) at least one of the tasks requires focus or effort to complete, and (2) the tasks involve similar types of brain processing.

Constantly shifting your attention makes you feel busy, but actually makes you less productive. When you stop what you’re doing to attend to an interruption, distraction or another completely different task, you are left with a cognitive residue that takes about 15 to 25 minutes to clear up so you can refocus on the initial task.² Multitasking (or switch tasking) is very different from taking deliberate breaks for necessary rest or taking time to let ideas percolate and incubate.

Background tasking is fine when you couple a primary task with a low-concentration or mindless activity. You can take a walk with a colleague while you discuss a work issue during your lunch break. You can listen to classical music while you organize your receipts for tax filing. You can catch up on the latest episode of your favorite podcast while you do the dishes.

But when it comes to your high-concentration, most important tasks, the best way to complete them in less time and with greater ease is to single-task. Focusing on one task at a time typically leads to better results.

² Leroy, S. and Schmidt, A.M. (2016). The effect of regulatory focus on attention residue and performance during interruptions. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Process*.

5. Batch small tasks

To increase productivity, you can batch similar, low-level tasks and complete them in one time block. Pick specific times of the day or specific days of the week to perform them in one session so the process becomes habitual. Examples are: focused writing on Monday and Wednesday mornings, responding to all emails at 2 p.m. each day, and posting updates on social media on Thursday evenings. Although you don't have to be this rigid, any form of batching reduces task switching and promotes single tasking.

6. Take necessary breaks

Working in 60, 90 or 120-hour blocks, followed by 10, 15 or 20-minute breaks, is more effective than working non-stop with no time to recharge. The marathon approach to work depletes your energy and reduces your attention span at a faster rate, compared to focusing intensely for a set period. When you have a challenging task to tackle, set aside an hour or so to focus on it and make real progress, rather than spend too many consecutive hours reworking the problem. Compared to prolonged sessions of diluted focus, short bursts of intense focus leads to higher productivity.

7. Amp up your energy

Building your energy reserves is crucial to staying focused and improving true productivity. When you're overwhelmed with work, it is often tempting to skip lunch, skimp on sleep, and forget about exercise. But unhealthy diets and eating patterns create detrimental effects on your energy, focus and cognitive performance. Lack of sufficient, high-quality sleep causes long-term fatigue, impaired memory, and inability to make difficult decisions. If you don't take advantage of the power of exercise or physical activity, your brain has fewer opportunities to release endorphins, serotonin and dopamine, which nudge us to focus and take action. Your physical health and fitness also suffers, which leads to reduced productivity and a higher number of sick days.

8. Practice a morning ritual and evening ritual

Practicing a morning ritual after you wake up helps you set yourself up for a productive day. The activities you include, the length, and how consistently you follow it depends on your individual preferences and personal circumstances. Ideally, morning rituals should be no more than an hour (so treat extended morning workouts, for example, as separate). Key components of a morning ritual include hydration (preferably water), physical movement (e.g. stretches, jumping jacks), and an inspirational or motivational activity (e.g. meditation, gratitude journaling, positive affirmations, poetry reading).

An evening ritual is crucial for deep sleep and relaxation. Start winding down 45 minutes to 1 hour before you go to sleep. Shut down your electronic devices and keep them away from your bed. Move into a calm mood by doing gentle yoga, listening to relaxing music, or reading uplifting literature, for instance. Turn off the lights and notice your breath as you fall asleep.

Rituals can be a part of your routine, but they require more deliberate thought and mindful attention. Having a morning ritual and evening ritual enhances your ability to distinguish between busywork and real work and focus your attention accordingly.

By developing these productivity habits and skills, you'll be better able to move through your day with ease and contentment, attend to your highest priorities, and beat distractions that stop your flow.

Busy vs. Productive Quiz

How well do you move from procrastination to action?

Say "Yes" or "No" to the following statements based on what is truer for you. Your answers do not have to be 100% true all the time, but just more representative of your usual tendencies.

1. I engage in trivial tasks like clean my desk to avoid tackling important and challenging projects like finish an article.
2. My to-do list just keeps getting longer and longer and pushed to the next day.
3. I check my emails instead of listen to others speak during a boring conference call.
4. I make things more complicated so I can have an excuse for not finishing them.
5. If I were asked – "*Are you making the best of your time right now?*" - I would be lying if I said yes.
6. I frequently binge watch TV or engage in other non-essential activities and then complain about how I don't have enough time.
7. When I get bored with my work or frustrated with a problem, I seek out distractions by surfing the web, using social media, etc.
8. I take telephone calls and answer emails as soon as they come in, even when I'm in the midst of doing a high-value task that requires concentration.
9. Even when I put in long hours at the office and get many things done, I still don't achieve anything meaningful or create significant work.
10. I find it hard to focus on my own priorities when I get interrupted by others with different agendas.

A higher number of "yes" answers mean you're more likely to use your time and energy on low-value , trivial tasks rather than high-value, important activities. Start creating productivity systems and honing productivity habits and skills that move you from procrastination to action.

Recommended Books

Eat That Frog: 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time (Brian Tracy)

First Things First (Stephen Covey with A. Roger Merrill and Rebecca R. Merrill)

Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity (David Allen)

How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big: Kind of the Story of My Life (Scott Adams)

Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World (Adam Grant)

The Art of Procrastination: A Guide to Effective Dawdling, Lollygagging and Postponing (John Perry)

The Myth of Multitasking: How "Doing It All" Gets Nothing Done (Dave Crenshaw)

The Now Habit at Work: Perform Optimally, Maintain Focus, and Ignite Motivation in Yourself and Others (Neil Fiore)

The Power of When (Michael Breuss)

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