

Using Daily Task Lists to Accomplish Your Goals

By Michael Masterson

I didn't always plan my days. For most of my career, in fact, I didn't.

I had written goals. And I referred to them regularly. My goals kept me pointed in the right direction, but I was always moving back and forth. Often for no good reason.

Driving to work in the morning, I would think about my goals. That helped motivate me and often gave me specific ideas about what tasks I should accomplish that day. I'd walk into work meaning to complete those tasks ... but by the end of the day, many of them were not done.

What happened? The same thing that may be happening to you right now. You sit down at your desk, and there is a pile of new mail in your inbox. You pick up the phone, and 15 messages are waiting for you. You open your computer, and find that you've received 50 new e-mails since you last checked. You tell yourself that you will get to your important tasks later. Right now, you have to "clean up" all these little emergencies.

Before you know it, the day is over and you haven't taken a single step toward achieving your important goals. You make an effort to do something, but you're tired. Tomorrow, you tell yourself, you'll do better.

Does that sound familiar?

If so, don't feel bad. You're in good company. Most people deal with their work that way. Even people who set goals and achieve them. Over the long term, they get everything done. But on a day-to-day basis, they are constantly frustrated.

You *can* be successful without planning your days ... but you will have to work a lot longer and harder. The reason? When you don't plan your days, you end up working for other people – not just for yourself. You feel that before you get to your own work, you should first deal with their requests.

Starting your day by clearing out your inbox, voicemail inbox, and e-mail inbox is just plain dumb. Most of what is waiting for you every morning has nothing to do with your goals and aspirations. It's work that other people want you to do *for them*.

If you want to be the captain of your soul and the master of your future, you have to be in charge of your time. And the best way to be in charge of your time is to structure your day around a task list that you, and only you, create.

As I said, simply writing down my goals helped me accomplish a good deal. But my productivity quadrupled when I started managing my schedule with a daily task list. If you use the system I'm going to recommend, I'll bet you see the same improvement.

I have used many standard organizing systems over the years, but was never entirely satisfied with any of them. The system I use now is my own – based on the best of what I found elsewhere.

At the beginning of the year, I lay out my goals for the next 12 months. I ask myself "What do I need to achieve in January, February, etc. to keep myself on track?" Then, at the beginning of each month, I lay out my weekly objectives. Finally, every day, I create a very specific daily task list.

Here's how I do it ...

I begin each day the day before.

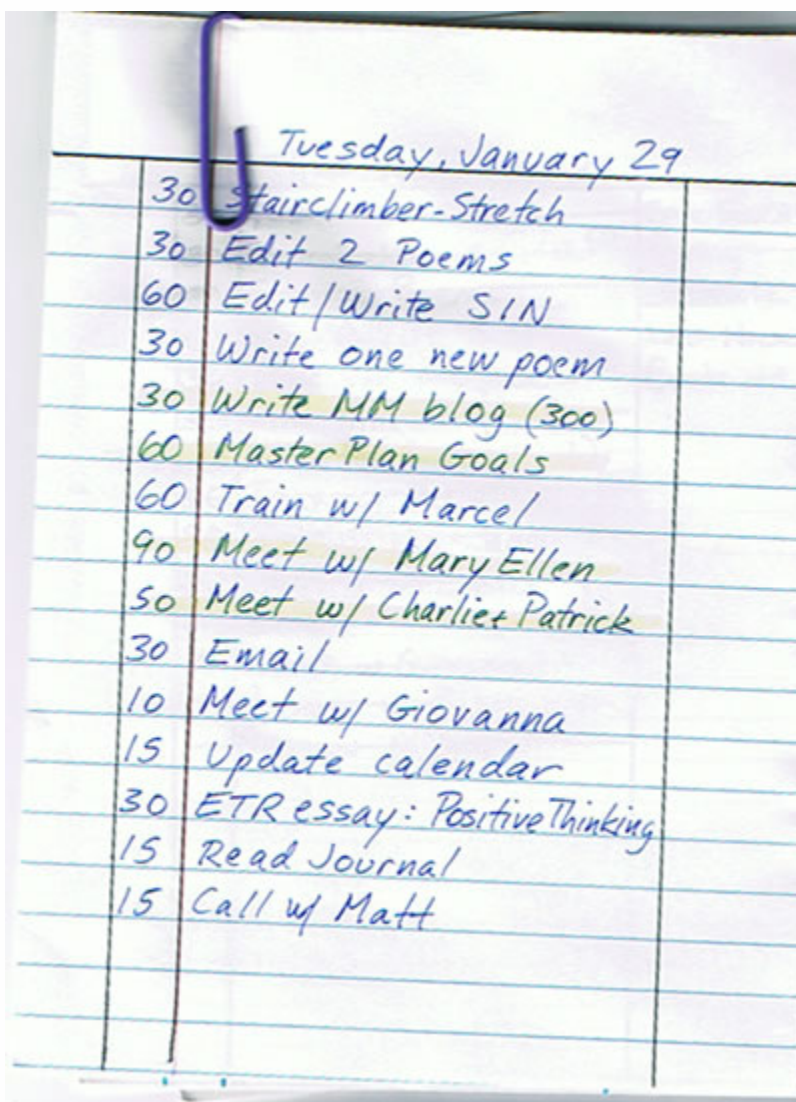
What I mean by that is that I create my daily task list at the end of the prior day. I create Tuesday's task list at the end of Monday's workday. I create Wednesday's at the end of Tuesday's workday.

I begin by reviewing the current day's list. I note which tasks I've done and which I have failed to do. My new list – the next day's task list – begins with those uncompleted tasks. I then look at my weekly objectives to see if there are any other tasks that I want to add. Then I look through my inbox and decide what to do with what's there. I may schedule some of those items for the following day. Most of them, I schedule for later or trash or redirect to someone else.

I do all this in pen on a 6" x 9" pad of lined paper. I divide the paper vertically to create columns for the tasks, for the time I estimate it will take to do each one, and for the actual time it takes me to complete it. I also create a column for tasks I will delegate to my assistant.

On most days, I end up with about 20 15-minute to one-hour tasks.

Here is a typical daily list.



Tuesday, January 29	
30	Stairclimber-Stretch
30	Edit 2 Poems
60	Edit/Write SIN
30	Write one new poem
30	Write MM blog (300)
60	Master Plan Goals
60	Train w/ Marcel
90	Meet w/ Mary Ellen
50	Meet w/ Charlie + Patrick
30	Email
10	Meet w/ Giovanna
15	Update calendar
30	ETR essay: Positive Thinking
15	Read Journal
15	Call w/ Matt

I like doing this by hand, in pen and ink. You may prefer to do it on your computer. The point is to enjoy the process.

Because longer tasks tend to be fatiguing, I seldom schedule anything that will take more than an hour. If you have a task that will take several hours, break it up into pieces and do it over a few days. It will be easier to accomplish. Plus, you will probably do a better job because you'll be doing it with more energy and with time to review and revise your work as you go.

A typical day for me includes two or three one-hour tasks, three or four half-hour tasks, and a dozen or so 15-minute tasks. The kind of work you do may be different, but I like that balance. It gives me flexibility. I can match my energy level throughout the day to my task list.

Ideally, you should get all of your important tasks and most of your less important tasks done almost every day. You want to accomplish a lot so you can achieve your long-term goals as quickly as possible. But you also want to feel good about yourself at the end of the day.

You may find, as I did, that when you begin using this system you will be overzealous – scheduling more tasks than you can possibly handle. So set realistic time estimates when you write down your tasks. And double-check them at the end of the day by filling in the actual time you spent on each one.

When you complete a task, scratch it off your list. One task done! On to the next one!

I've been doing this for years, and I still get a little burst of pleasure every time.

Creating each daily task list should take you less than 15 minutes. The secret is to work from your weekly objectives – which are based on your monthly and yearly goals.

This system may not work for you, but I urge you to give it a try. I think you'll like it.

Before your colleagues, competitors, and coworkers are even sipping their first cup of coffee, you'll have figured out everything you need to do that day to make you healthier, wealthier, and wiser. You'll know what to do, you'll know what your priorities are, and you'll already be thinking about some of them. You'll not have to worry about forgetting something important. And you'll have a strong sense of energy and excitement, confident that your day is going to be a productive one.

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8 Responses to "Using Daily Task Lists to Accomplish Your Goals"

Hei from the fjord Michael,

Thank you for sharing this post.

It's a wonderful reminder that simplicity can add to both clarity and confidence, measuring progress to chosen goals.

Putting your suggestions to the test for myself as soon as I finish this comment.

As continuing to learn from you is one of my goals I look forward to sharing with you the difference it makes in the future.

All our love to you and yours from your friends in Norway Michael!

Timothy Bert Owen – over a year ago

I became a widow in March of 2009 and then retired from over 30 years of teaching. I have been a member of ITWAA for several years. I began following my dream as a travel writer in May of 2009 and began working for Examiner.com as a national Examiner.

I really enjoyed your article and will use the suggestions to help me to following my dream with quality assignments.

I am finally over the difficult part of my grief and want to pursue writing/photography full time now. Thanks!

Travelwriter2009 – over a year ago

Michael,

It is a pleasure to read your work.

Your tips are timely and useful.

This is a more productive system to get work done.

And it helps on a daily basis and allows you to stay focussed on your goals.

You also learn by doing and learning on the job is a key factor.

However, an alternative is also to write down a schedule in real time.

For example, what you are planning to accomplish between 6 to 7 in the morning.

There is an awful lot we can learn from you, that's for sure. Cheerio.

Archan Mehta – over a year ago

As for me, your heading was so attractive that I could'nt hesitate to read your ideas.It sounds great.

I will sure consider your suggestions. I think the benefits may outweigh the cost of self discipline.

You sound like an inspirational teacher, because words are meaningful and persuasive.

The intellect of the wise is like glass: it admits the light of heaven and reflects it Hare.

I've come to a an understanding that the importance good application in time management cannot be overemphasized, after struggling through diverse method of time usage.

Your tips seems to me a done deal.

Guest (Emmanuel) – over a year ago

Michael,

Thank you very much for sharing this valuable information. I already know that in order for me to(one day)become a master copywriter that I must first learn to do what the masters do. So, I will certainly implement this as part of my daily routine to get the most out of my day. So once again, thanks again for sharing this great nugget.

Guest (BLiggins) – over a year ago

Merci Michael, appreciating you sharing this way of staying organized on your day to day adventure. Short and long range goals are so important for staying on track.

Thank you,

Jean-Paul 2012 – over a year ago

Good Morning:

I have just joined this exciting group with the hope of working from home in order to be available to take care of my husband at home--he is a cancer survivor and has had several medical issues over the past five years. My goal is to work as a medical writer...and I would appreciate feedback on how to get started. I live in Idaho, but know that I can submit my work anywhere.

Karen-Medical writer-60

Medical writer-60 – over a year ago

I used a daily list every day this week and my productivity doubled. Amazing !!

Thank you Michael, just love everything you share. (I recently read Great Leads, couldn't believe the value that was packed for just 9 bucks)

Guest (Matthew) – over a year ago

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