

How to Get Things Done: The Task-Appointment

SUMMARY: Accomplishing a task requires action, not just good intentions or checklists. The Task-Appointment is an appointment with yourself to work on a specific task, at a designated date and time.

- A *Must-Do* or *To-Do* is just a concept – until it is assigned a date and time and entered into your calendar. Only then does it become a **Task-Appointment: An appointment with yourself to work on a specific task at a specific time**. This is the difference between setting an intention (“*I want to... I plan to...*”) and making a commitment (“*I will, and this is when...*”).

- **A task is NOT a project – it is a single step** that may be:

- One component of a larger project: *Check with hotel for meeting room availability*
- An isolated To-Do: *Make appt with Dr. Bones, 212-555-8000*
- A time-sensitive Reminder: *Cancel delivery from HomeMeals – www.HomeMeals.com*

NOTE: Including details like the phone number or website makes it easier to accomplish.

- A Repetitive Reminder to do something at a specified time, such as: *Pay Bills (monthly on the 15th and 30th)* or *Call Grandma (Sundays at 7pm)*.

- **The first Task-Appointment of any project should be a planning session** to create a *Project Plan* (see separate *InfoSheet on Project Planning*). The *Project Plan* includes breaking down the project into specific, do-able tasks. This is also called ‘chunking it down’ or creating ‘baby steps.’ Each of these steps becomes a separate item that may go on your calendar as a *Task-Appointment*.

- **Tasks:** A task is a singular activity that can usually be accomplished in a single session, but may, depending upon the length, take several working sessions (or separately assigned *Task-Appointments*) to complete. I’ve identified three different approaches to completing tasks:

- **Time-Based** – *Read a book for 30 minutes.*

This is the basic *Task-Appointment*. You allocate a certain amount of time to complete the task. Sometimes it will take less, so enjoy the unexpected time off or move on to another task. Sometimes it will take more time than allocated. Either move on, but set another session to continue, or keep working if you have available time and energy.

- **Completion-Based** – *Read the entire book.*

Work on the task until it is completed. The required time may vary. You either cannot, or would not, want to leave this task partially done (*think of a haircut!*).

IS IT A TASK OR A PROJECT?

If you are not sure where to start, it's a **Project**, not a **Task**.

The concept behind the **Task-Appointment** is to break each Project down into baby steps, or chunks. Each step represents a unique action that can often, but not always (see the section on Tasks), be accomplished in one sitting.

The **Task-Appointment** allows you to focus on one step at a time. When you separate a Project into Tasks (chunks... baby steps... components), it is easier to understand and plan for the different steps needed to complete the Project. **Task-Appointments** minimize confusion and procrastination by clarifying:

- What you need to do (distinct actions)
- When you plan to do it (prioritization, commitment)

Depending upon the task, it may be unrealistic to complete it in one session, so the Completion-Based approach would not be an option.

o **Productivity-Based** – *Read 3 chapters of the book.*

Determine the task limits you want to achieve, and work until they are done, setting a Productivity Quota. You can guesstimate but won't know exactly how long this will take.

The book has twelve chapters. You have four days until a book club discussion. You will therefore read three chapters per day to finish on time. -OR-

You are painting a room. It will take too long to do the entire room, but setting a time limit might result in a partially painted wall, so you decide on a productivity quota of painting two walls. Then, if you have the time and energy, you can continue to paint. If not, schedule another task-appointment.

SCHEDULE “SELF-CARE APPOINTMENTS”

It is important to take care of yourself, but self-care is usually a low priority. *Change the pattern.*

Schedule Task-Appointments to plan, shop, prepare and eat healthy meals, to exercise, enjoy a hobby, take a leisurely bath, spend quality time with your children or significant other, etc.

How well you take care of yourself directly impacts your mental and physical health, which in turn determines your productivity level.

Don't forget this!

- **Schedule *specific* tasks (date and time) on your calendar**, just as you would schedule a meeting or activity. This turns a passive *Must-Do* or *To-Do* into an action step.
- **Include any information that will make doing the task *easier*** (*contact name, phone number, web site, order confirmation, etc.*).
- **Assign both a start *and* a stop time – this is critical:**
 - o Knowing you only have to work on a task for 20-, 30- or 40-minutes (*even 10 minutes!*) makes it **easier to start on something you are otherwise inclined to avoid**.
 - o This time-limited scheduling also makes you **less likely drag out a task or hyper-focus** (spend most of the day) on one task, to the detriment of everything else.
- **Use a timer** (computer, phone, calendar, watch, desk alarm – even Alexa or Google) to keep track of both appointments *and* breaks. **Don't rely on your 'sense of time.'** Consider a count-down timer (like the *Time-Timer*) to 'see' the passage of time. A band of color indicates the time and shrinks as time passes. This is terrific when it is a task you'd rather avoid, since you can easily see how much time is left.
- **Allow for 5-10 minute breaks** between scheduled Task-Appointments or Meetings. Avoid back-to-back appointments. **Use these breaks to help keep your energy balanced and your work in focus.** Take a *Movement Break* (walk, stretch, visit the restroom or snack area, etc.) and/or a *Relaxation Break* (close your eyes and rest, make a personal call, read non-essential material, etc.). **Anxiety makes *everything* more difficult**, so make a habit of including stress-relieving activities in your day.

- **Avoid overscheduling.** Be realistic and leave “unassigned white space” periods for catch-up, unexpected tasks, naps, etc.
- If the task will take longer than an assigned period, schedule additional Task-Appointments to complete it. Consider whether your definition of ‘task’ is too broad (which is why it can’t be completed within a limited time period). **Or perhaps the ‘task’ is really a ‘mini project,’** which should be broken down into multiple ‘baby steps,’ or component tasks.
- Try to **schedule like tasks at the same time** (i.e., *10-10:30 Return phone calls; 2-2:30 Check emails; 5:30-6:15 Run errands at stores en route home*). Avoid continually shifting from one type of task to another – **transitions consume time and energy.** Plan ahead for efficiency, especially when doing outside errands. (*If the library is near the Goodwill Store, remember to bring both your books to return and your donations.*)
- **Schedule different types of tasks within the day.** If you’re spending most of the morning on writing-type assignments, spend the afternoon on more social or physical tasks.
- **Take your time-of-day energy-level into consideration.** Schedule tasks that are more complex during higher-energy periods. Open mail, browse catalogs, or return emails during a mid-morning slump, rather than first thing in the morning when you’re fully awake and ready to go.
- **Work on the more difficult assignments first,** both for the sense of accomplishment, and so you don’t feel pressured while you do other things. **Work on the easier assignments first** if you need a ‘win’ to get going!
- If something else must take priority over a task; **just reschedule the task, as you would a meeting** or assignment that has been postponed. (Stay aware of any related deadlines, and work backwards to ensure you devote enough time to complete the project on time!)
- Stay on track. **If something comes up that does not require your immediate attention – don’t allow it to throw you off-track!** Consider what needs to be done, and by when. Then *consciously* schedule this new activity/interruption just as you would *any* timely Task-Appointment. **NOTE: It is very easy to allow distractions to take priority,** especially when you’d like to avoid your already-assigned tasks... when the new activity is more stimulating (as new often is)... or when someone else is applying the pressure.
- **Reinforce task completion.** Check it off as done in your planner or on your task-management software. You might even want to add tasks you did that weren’t originally on the list to your ‘What I Did’ or ‘Ta-Dah’ list. **Schedule ‘Reward Time’** for later that day, evening or on the weekend – especially when you’ve completed difficult, boring or stressful tasks. **You need ‘down time’ to recharge,** and would probably take it anyway, but feel guilty and pressured. Use your **Reward Time to indulge in something you enjoy** (reading, TV, computer games, a movie or dinner out with friends, a long bubble-bath, etc.) **without guilt!**

- Be realistic about what you can actually accomplish within a given time frame. **Before you say Yes' to something, decide if it is really something you want/need to do.** Think about whether the way you would be spending your time is how you *want* to spend your time. Consider the cost of lost opportunity. Practice saying 'No.' Decide if you can eliminate or delegate certain activities or projects that are non-essential and stress-evoking. Sometimes, taking on 'too much' is compensation for the guilt we feel at doing what we consider 'too little.'
- Wanting to do something is not the same as getting it done. Working on something is not the same as being able to finish. Finishing isn't as meaningful if you don't get it done on time. **Doing less, but accomplishing the things you do, is more fulfilling** than doing more and never feeling you have things under control.
- **Free yourself from the "I SHOULD HAVE/COULD HAVE/WOULD HAVE" trap.** There will *always* be 'more' to do (if not, consider taking on some interesting projects!). The benefit of the Task-Appointment approach to time management is that you clarify priorities and set *realistic* daily productivity goals. **When you achieve these goals, you can give yourself permission to feel good, despite the backlog of things you haven't yet accomplished.** Realize that it is often easier to follow the non-productive pattern of being critical of yourself for what you (or others) think you *should* have done, then it is to recognize what you *have* accomplished, and give yourself a well-deserved pat on the back!