

A RAPITUDE GUIDE

HOW TO DO THINGS

**PRODUCTIVITY FOR THE
PRODUCTIVITY-CHALLENGED**

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How to Do Things: Productivity for the Productivity-Challenged – v0.91

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What This Guide Is, and Who It's For

How to Do Things is a concise resource designed to help people who struggle to get things done.

This guide is not aimed at high achievers looking to get an edge. It's aimed at people who are currently struggling with productivity, or have always struggled. Specifically, it is designed for:

- People who know they use their available work time poorly
- People having difficulty working from home
- People with ADHD or other executive function issues
- People who haven't had success implementing the methods in popular productivity books, such as *Getting Things Done*, *Deep Work*, or *The Pomodoro Technique*

If this sounds like you, the Guide will help you become much more productive in a very short time. It should be said that it won't necessarily solve the core issues beneath your productivity struggle -- it cannot cure your ADHD or make you a natural type-A go-getter. However, it will help you be as productive as you can be in spite of your challenges, which is almost certainly far more productive than you're used to.

How to Do Things was created with a highly specific goal for its readers:

- 1. Dramatically increase your productivity**
- 2. Create this dramatic increase in a week or less**
- 3. Provide this know-how in a resource you can read in one sitting and implement today**

What's a dramatic increase? Somewhere between 50% and 200%, depending on how much room for improvement you have. If your current way of working is far from optimal, the method in this book can help you make a major leap quickly, and as you practice it you will continue to improve beyond that.

To save time, throughout *How to Do Things*, I will refer to the book simply as the Guide.

One more thing before we begin. The Guide is concerned with how you can be more productive, not *whether* you should be. We will leave aside all debates about work-life balance, office culture, burnout, capitalism, or any of that.

The Guide also makes no comment on what is worth producing. Whether you're writing poetry, cranking widgets, or studying chess openings, it assumes you regard your own productivity as a good thing and that you want more of it.

Why This Guide is Necessary

I've always struggled enormously with productivity. I've read all the popular books and tried to implement their techniques. I know the most famous system, David Allen's *Getting Things Done*, inside and out, but I've never been able to keep it going for long. It's a wonderful book, but like almost all productivity books, it's designed by a high achiever, and so that's who it suits.

The popular productivity books tend to focus on managing a complex, airtight workflow systems -- they assume that you don't have trouble actually *doing* the tasks you've so perfectly slotted into your immaculate system. The act of doing itself always seems to be an afterthought. It's taken for granted that you can get yourself do everything you need to do as long as you're organized.

At age 40, an ADHD diagnosis shed some much-needed light on my productivity struggle. It was finally clear why I've never been able to implement the complex systems of lists and procedures that apparently work for other people.

In the meantime, I had gradually pieced together what I always needed: a system with almost no moving parts. For me, and maybe you too, if a system involves maintaining a fleet of interconnected lists and worksheets and file folders, it will all fall apart in less than 48 hours.

In my life today, and in this guide, I employ a few doing-focused principles from some of those popular books, namely the 25-minute working sprints popularized by *The Pomodoro Technique*. I leave out, however, the extraneous structures these books tend to build around their best ideas.

The philosophy of The Guide is **brevity and implementability**. If advice is too long you won't remember it. If it's too complex you won't implement it. I have tried to distill my method of getting things done into a very simple system, conveyed in the fewest words possible.

Unlike systems found in 250-page bestselling books, the method in this guide is designed to fit every lifestyle and temperament. It doesn't matter whether you keep your to-do list on an iPad, a chalkboard, or on a crumpled napkin. This method doesn't care whether your workspace is a desk in a corporate office, or on a bunkbed in a submarine. And it will work even if you're the least productive person you know.

What Productivity Is and Why We Should Want It

You already know you want to be more productive, but it's worth thinking about what "more productivity" might actually do in your life.

In the material sense, becoming more productive generally means you will have more time and more money. You will be taking more useful actions per hour of work, which translates to more value for your employer or customers. They will want to compensate you for that value, so that you keep creating it for them instead of someone else. More productivity means needing less time to meet your obligations to yourself and others.

Greater productivity will probably also make you happier and more confident, on top of any gains in wealth or time. When you're more productive, the future looks brighter and safer, because you can take advantage of more opportunities, and more easily handle unexpected challenges. You also lose much of the guilt and shame associated with *not* getting much done, which as you probably know can be an enormous daily burden. You feel like a stronger person, and probably seem so to others, because you are.

The rewards of productivity have compounding effects. To name only a few examples:

- More time and money allow you to better optimize your productivity, by outsourcing some of your workload, buying better tools, and taking the time to refining your workflow and workspace.
- Producing more value for others leads to increased recognition and status, which unlocks more options for how to work and what to work on, and strengthens your confidence further.
- Being happier will improve almost all of your relationships, at work and at home.

Your productivity skills also apply directly to leisure pursuits and hobbies. You can accelerate your progress at learning piano, Spanish, chess, painting, dancing, video production, Zen meditation, Stoic philosophy, programming, vegetable gardening – whatever pursuits you enjoy for their own sake.

You can also, of course, just enjoy these activities without worrying about progress. The point is to have the option of getting really good – you'll no longer be stuck at beginner level.

Whatever it is you love doing, the freedom to do more of it might be the greatest reward of productivity.

How We Will Work

The core of the Guide is a simple method for getting more done in less time. I'll summarize it here first before presenting it in strict steps, so you know where we're going with it.

- **You will work from a simple to-do list.** This only needs to be a list of things that might make sense to do today. It can be written on a piece of scrap paper, typed into an app, scrawled in the margins of your morning newspaper -- it doesn't matter.
- **You will complete tasks one at a time, by working on them in timed 25-minute blocks,** as with the pomodoro technique. Each of these periods is dedicated entirely to moving towards the completion of the current task. No interruptions are tolerated. Before starting, you will make the finish line of the task clear in your mind, to keep you focused on finishing.
- **We will think of these blocks as physical building materials:** tidy rectangular wooden boxes that your work goes in. It sounds strange but it works. These boxes sturdy and well-constructed, sanded and finished. Because they're well-made and all the same size, they look great when you stack them neatly. I picture mine as being made of a rich walnut, but you may prefer pine, oak, or mahogany.

Every task on your list can be made into Blocks. Some take one Block, some take two or three, some take five or six. Many tasks are small enough to fit into a single box with other small tasks. By making and stacking these metaphorical Blocks day after day, you will be building things – *real* things -- that permanently improve your life, such as degrees, promotions, vehicles, homes, followers, skills, knowledge, and financial assets. Your Blocks will also build less tangible assets like confidence, acclaim, equanimity, and a sense of abundance. We'll keep this building-block mentality close to mind. Working should be thought of as like laying bricks, rather than treading water.

Working this way will immediately eliminate a lot of productivity-defeating habits --- such as haphazard quick email checks, or working without a finish line in mind -- precipitating an immediate jump in daily productivity. Once you're stacking some nice, full Blocks, we will then increase productivity in three ways:

- Creating more of these Blocks per day (Quantity)
- Making denser, sturdier Blocks that do more for you (Quality)
- Refining your Block-making routines so that the quality and quantity remain sustainable (Consistency)

Doesn't Everyone Know This Already?

Isn't "time boxing" the most obvious thing in the world? Doesn't everyone know the thing with the 25-minute chunks of work?

Everyone knows about it, sure, but that's very different from doing it. Everyone also knows that physical exercise can transform lives, but most people never find a consistent exercise routine they are able and willing to do, which is where all of these life-changing benefits come from.

What unlocks the power of good ideas is the implementation, not the information. Good ideas and techniques are common. Human beings have been struggling with the same challenges forever, and we've inherited a lot of ideas about how best to respond to them. What we do not inherit are the habits and specific know-how that allows us to change our lives with these ideas. Having books by Plato or the Dalai Lama on your bookshelf doesn't make you wise, and neither does reading them. Implementing their ideas does.

If you have tried working in 25-minute blocks, and it did not drastically improve your productivity, I contend that you didn't find a way to implement it that worked for you. The Guide is designed to get you precisely there.

The idea of working intently in short chunks is widely known, and as old as work itself. In fact, it seems to be a central part of *most* productivity systems, which tells us something. Francesco Cirillo, author of *The Pomodoro Technique*, insists that 25 minutes is the perfect size for them. (I agree, and later on we will get to why it's so perfect.)

The Pomodoro Technique is an excellent book as such books go, but I found its system to be a tad too complex for my ADHD brain to maintain. I suspect there are millions of other people out there who struggle with productivity, and who, like me, need a simpler system than will ever be found in a 150+ page nonfiction book.

So yes, you probably already know that working in short chunks is a good thing to do. But that knowledge isn't the knowledge that brings the benefit. The real, life-altering knowledge comes only from the consistent doing of it, and by the end of today you will already have gained some knowledge of exactly this type.

The Three Things You Will Need

Making Blocks requires very few tools.

1. A timer with an alarm. You need a timer of some sort that will ring, buzz, or beep when time runs out. Your phone's stopwatch app, or a web-based one, will work in a pinch. A simple, portable cooking timer is much better, because it isn't attached to an entertainment device and its controls are already right in front of you. The easier it is to use the better. A good timer might be the most profitable \$20 you ever spend. For now, go with what you have.

2. A list of tasks to do. Don't fuss over this list. It doesn't have to contain exactly one day's worth of work, and it doesn't have to be in any particular order. You just need a list of tasks you'd like to get done today if you could.

A paper list is generally superior to one stored on an electronic device, for the reasons mentioned above. You want to be able to see it without clicking, opening, or moving anything.

3. A place to mark down your completed Blocks. Completed Blocks are the raw building materials of a happy and interesting life. You will harness the power of short-term rewards by marking down each block you complete in a session.

Again, paper is usually better here. Your scoresheet can be as simple as a sticky note on the corner of your desk, with ticks representing the day's Blocks, or as elaborate as a wall-mounted grid chart whose boxes you fill in with pencil crayons. Start with the sticky note version, and once you get used to the method you can decide what's most rewarding to you.

The Block Method

Our method can be distilled into six steps, five of which take only a few seconds.

For each Block, you're going to:

1. Choose a task from your list
2. Briefly picture reaching the finish line of that task
3. Make a Block -- using a timer, work towards the end of the chosen task, practicing unwavering intention, for 25 minutes
4. Mark down one completed block on a simple scoresheet, with gratitude and care
5. Consider taking a short break
6. Repeat and refine the process

This list of steps might seem underwhelming. That's the point. We're going to get a lot done by mastering something very simple that works.

As pedestrian as this procedure may seem, there is a bit of an art to it. Each step has a few nuances we will cover.

STEP 1: Choose a task

Choose without worrying about which is the “right” next task. As you practice this method, you’ll discover what sort of task-order strategy works best for you -- tackling tough tasks first, warming up with some easy ones, or some other approach. For your first few Blocks, pick a task that isn’t likely to overwhelm you.

If you have multiple tasks on your list that will only take a few minutes, you might select a small batch of them to tackle in this Block. In this case, you might want to make a tick mark next to them on your to-do list to identify the batch at a glance.

STEP 2: Briefly picture the finish line of the task

Take five or ten seconds to picture what completing the task might look like. We all know the glorious feeling of a finishing a task. Just for a moment, think of what the end of your chosen task might look like:

- Saving the finished document as “Budget Report – FINAL”
- Submitting the booklet to the printers
- Holding a stack of letters ready to be mailed

It doesn't matter whether you expect to complete your chosen task in a single Block. Picture its last moments anyway.

This step may sound trivial, but it is an extremely productive few seconds. By doing this we are making contact with the part of each of us that knows the exhilarating feeling of *doneness*. When you get something truly *done*, even a small thing, you feel amazing and you advance to a slightly better position in life. Creating a hint of that feeling at the beginning of a block boosts your motivation and clarifies your intentions.

Don't worry about getting this “right.” Just imagine finishing your task and see what comes to you. A single gratifying image will do wonders. A complete spreadsheet. A tidy workshop. A “Your appointment is booked!” confirmation email.

A word about task size

In this method I don't split hairs about what constitutes a “task.” If it's on your to-do list, it's a task. However, we do want tasks to be small enough that you'll reach a finish-line point in a Block or two, three at most.

If you find your tasks are taking so long that you're picturing the same finish line several Blocks in a row, then divide the task into smaller pieces on your list. Instead of chapters, go by subsections or pages. Instead of “clean the house,” make each room a task. Make the finish lines closer together so you can feel the progress you're making.

If your Block will comprise a batch of very small tasks, rather than envisioning that many different finish lines you can simply picture yourself crossing them off your list one by one, with strong, triumphant pencil-strokes. That image is gratifying enough. All we're looking for is a spark of positive feeling from remembering the ever-available thrill of doneness.

STEP 3: Make one Block

In this method, you get things done by making Blocks – 25-minute pieces of quality work, which accumulate into all sorts of real-life prizes and advantages. Since we intend to build great things out of Blocks, we need to exercise quality control.

Recall that Block is always made of:

- 25 minutes
- of uninterrupted work
- directed towards the completion of a task

All three of these ingredients are necessary for each block, or else we're building with shoddy materials. We always want smooth, sturdy, tight-fitting blocks, to optimize our ability to build what we want.

If a Block isn't 25 minutes of work, or if we're tolerating interruptions, then we're just starting and stopping arbitrarily, which is the death of productivity for those of us to whom productivity doesn't come naturally.

A more insidious problem happens when you try to work without having a completed task in mind. It's easy to slip into a state of activity that doesn't bring anything closer to completion. You can research best gardening practices for hours without coming any closer to actually planting anything. An essential part of learning to work this way is learning to keep completion in mind as you work.

Having chosen a task, and having pictured its completed state, start your timer. With a sense of mild urgency -- not panic -- begin taking action towards the end of the task. Open the appropriate application. Take out the appropriate tools. Do what seems to make sense and don't worry about being perfect. Try to finish the task with the time you have, or at least reach some concrete milestone on the way to the finish.

While you're making a Block, renounce all diversions. No texts, no 10-second email checks, no daydreaming. Because you've only got 25 minutes, everything else in life can almost certainly wait, except true emergencies. You are declaring yourself free to do just this one thing, for this small but significant stretch of time.

Succumbing to diversion will happen, and that's okay. However, if you do, then the Block doesn't count. That might seem harsh, but it is actually extremely liberating -- I will explain why in an upcoming section.

STEP 4: Record the completed Block somewhere

When the timer goes, if you worked towards the end of a task the whole time without succumbing to distraction, you have completed a Block. Mark it down on the piece of paper you've designated for this. Draw a line or a little circle -- whatever looks best to you.

There are two reasons to tally the number of Blocks you complete in a day.

The first is to remind you that Blocks are permanent creations, not ephemeral periods of toil. They are building materials being laid down to create a stronger and happier life.

The second reason to tally your Blocks is to gauge your productivity. Once you're in the habit of working in Blocks, you'll learn how many is reasonable or desirable given your schedule. It's fun to see how many you can do in a day, or a half day.

There's no need to make this step complicated either. I use a sticky note in the corner of my desk. I write the word "Blocks" neatly at the top and underline it. Each time I complete a Block, I make a nice vertical stroke, which feels good. I avoid elaborate scoresheets because that's just another thing to maintain.

You don't need to keep an ongoing total of Blocks day after day. We're only concerned with learning how many you tend to make in a day, and how many Blocks certain kinds of tasks usually take. You can discard the sticky note at the end of the workday.

STEP 5: Consider taking a short break

Once the timer goes and the Block is made, sealed, and stacked, you might want to take a short break before making another.

I say *might* because breaks aren't always necessary, or helpful, depending on the situation. A mandatory 5-minute break policy, as is often suggested, probably doesn't suit productivity non-naturals like ourselves, because of two ever-present dangers: letting the break go on longer than 5 minutes, and shutting down your momentum right when you're finally being productive.

Big caveat here, however: you need to at least stand up from your seat after completing a Block. If you launch immediately into another one, the whole sense of making Blocks quickly falls apart. You slip back into busyness without aiming at *doneness*, as you simply reset the timer meaninglessly every 25 minutes.

So when you finish a Block, *always* – at the very least -- stand up, take a breath, and reassert your intentions for the next Block. It is very tempting to skip Steps 1 and 2, especially once you're on a roll. Don't! Learn to enjoy this act of consciously aiming your intentions before you pull the trigger.

In other words, don't begin making another Block until you're ready to make a good one. You might only need twenty seconds to stand up, recollect your intentions and set your mental sights on your finished task again. If you can't seem to locate that kind of intentionality, a break might be just what you need.

When you do take a break, beware the temptation to extend it beyond your initial intention. If you're taking five, take five. If you're taking twenty, take twenty. Use the timer to keep your breaktimes tight, if you expect to get any more Blocks made today.

Most importantly, enjoy your breaks. Savor the time.

STEP 6: Repeat and refine

After taking a break, or not, it's time to make another Block, unless you're done for the day. That means beginning the cycle again.

The important thing to remember here is that all the same steps are necessary for each Block.

- Identify the task and picture its finish line before you start that timer, in order to keep yourself focused on finishing.
- Mark down the Block upon completion, in order to maintain your sense of progress.
- Pause or break after each Block, to keep your Block-making intentional and orderly.

Repeating these steps between each Block takes so little time that you might be tempted to skip them. Don't. Once you're familiar with them, they take only seconds. Yet they will save you days, weeks, or years of your life, because without them, entropy will take over and you won't be making Blocks anymore.

As long as you do the steps each time, they will become second nature. Until then, it can help to say them to yourself as you transition into each one:

Okay, so what am I doing here... One: choose a task. Okay, got it. Two: think of the finish line...

And so on. Giving words to the steps trains the mind to expect what's next.

Each time you make a Block this way, you'll get a little better at moving through the process. You'll learn what kind of breaks work for you and which don't. You'll figure out how to divide tasks into smaller pieces, and how to shoot for completion each time.

This refinement occurs naturally if you repeat the process faithfully. Later on we will discuss ways to accelerate this process, in the "Tightening Up the Ship" section.

Start Now

It's time to begin.

Before you continue reading, you will make your first Block.

Take a half an hour – right now if possible -- and make a Block using the steps we just covered. If you can't do your first Block now, then schedule it now for a time when you can.

To refresh you on what you're about to do:

- You will select a task from your to-do list, and imagine it completed.
- Then you'll work towards completing it for 25 uninterrupted minutes. (If you finish with time to spare, start another task.)
- At the end, you'll give yourself a checkmark – your first Block.

The steps are simple, but can be easy to forget when you're new to making Blocks. So print out the Quick Reference Sheet included with this guide and keep it near you. If you don't have access to a printer right now, jot down a word or two for each step on a sticky note or scrap of paper – Choose, Picture, Work, Mark Down, Break. (We won't need to the Repeat step this time because you're just doing a single Block).

If you have to refer to this book to remember what you're trying to do, that's okay. Count that as part of your task, not an interruption.

When you're done your first Block, however it turned out, come right back here.

(Go!)

After Your First Block

Welcome back. Well done. Whether your first Block felt like a masterpiece or a 7th-grade shop class project, you just did something significant. You began building a richer life.

In the next part of the guide, we will look closer at the Block-making experience. We'll look at why the 25-minute Block happens to work so well, and we'll address some questions and trouble spots that might arise as you get used to this process.

Three Things You Might Notice

So you've made your first Block. Making Blocks probably felt different than just "getting to work" in your usual manner.

A few things you might notice working this way, if you haven't yet:

You can get a lot done in 25 minutes (or even 5 minutes)

Twenty-five minutes sounds like pocket change. It's barely enough time to shower and hurriedly comb your hair. I used to think I needed two or three hours to really get something done. Because I insisted on these large stretches of time, I didn't work with much urgency, and I allowed my focus to be perforated by interruptions, which seemed necessary precisely because I was trying to work in hours-long chunks.

Despite my and perhaps your expectations, a single Block is enough to knock off many small tasks, or completely change the complexion of a large one. Once you discover how big a step forward a single, focused Block is, a whole day to get things done seems like a vast amount of time.

The dwindling timer breathes life into every minute that remains. If you have five minutes left, you *use* it, and in doing so discover how much use 5 minutes really is.

It's a relief to have clear boundaries between working and not working (again)

People used to enjoy much clearer lines between working and not working. You would clock in at the factory, or head out into the fields, and you were working. Then a whistle would blow or it would get dark, and you'd stop working and be not working.

Today the line is much blurrier, with our workstations doubling as entertainment devices, and with so many of us working from home. Working in Blocks is a refreshing return to a clear boundary between being officially working and officially not working. When the timer is running, it's very clear that it's *not* time to check your Twitter mentions, to see if that book is on sale, to or look up the name of the actor your professor resembles.

You probably don't get anywhere near 8 hours of real work done in a day (and you don't need to)

A standard eight hour workday is large enough to accommodate sixteen Blocks, assuming five-minute breaks after each one, or *nineteen* if you pushed straight through like Iron Man.

It is unlikely you will achieve anywhere near that many Blocks in a standard workday. If I get three or four made in the morning and again as many in the afternoon, it feels like a rather productive day.

This surprisingly low actual output is a good thing. It means (1) you can probably get your daily work done in less time than you thought, and (2) that the time *is* there to get massive amounts done when you need to. The key is not to “find more time” as we often tell ourselves, but to make your available time dense with productivity, which is precisely what Blocks are for.

The 25-minute Block is seemingly optimal for getting lots done while defending against distraction, busywork and other productivity killers. It’s like the golden ratio, except for productivity instead of geometry. In the next section, we will tease apart why that is.

Why It Works So Well

Working in Blocks isn't just a way to allocate your time into focused pieces, or trick yourself into actually working instead of procrastinating. Something more profound starts happening. The 25-minute Block seems to hit a sort of sweet spot on a number of psychological dimensions – maximizing clarity and motivation while minimizing your incentives to distract yourself or drift into busywork.

Francisco Cirillo, author of *The Pomodoro Technique*, identified 25 minutes as the perfect length of time for working in sprints like this, and I agree. It's not only the length though – there's something transformative about turning our work obligations into small, discrete units that meet a certain quality standard. It makes the whole idea of “working” feel much more pleasant to the mind, and eliminates many pitfalls inherent in less structured ways of working.

For me, and surely many others who have had a troubled relationship to productivity, this effect feels almost magical sometimes. I've studied this effect during my sessions, and here's why I think it works.

25 minutes is enough time to get real work done – unless you're not really working. I always thought getting some *real* work requires at least two hours, but that's because I spend the first thirty or sixty minutes hemming and hawing about what to do, or perhaps answering a few emails first, to ease my way into the important thing. If 25 minutes seems inadequate for getting real work done, real work is probably not what it's being used for.

25 minutes creates just enough urgency. It's enough time get a meaningful amount done, but not enough time that you feel you can waste any. This mild sense of scarcity gets you pumping value into your time. With the timer quickly ticking down from 25:00 to 21-something, to 16:00, to 9:00, you feel a healthy desire to make every minute count – and so you do.

The Block trains you to give up the “quick check.” Cal Newport writes frequently about the folly of the *quick check* – a supposedly harmless checking of email, sports scores, or social media mentions, under the pretense that it only takes a few seconds, so it's no big deal. Sometimes these diversions really do only take five seconds, but the real problem is that they interrupt your intention to finish the task at hand, and it is this intention that converts time into productivity. Blocks are so short that it feels absurd to indulge in a quick check during one, so you learn to say no quickly. (Especially because then the Block doesn't count.)

Working in Blocks reduces dread. Workload-related stress often revolves around the fear that you don't have enough days or weeks to get your current slate of tasks done. The Block method makes it clear that productivity isn't about how many days remain till your deadline, it's about how much real work happens in that time. Whatever is coming down the pipe, you know you have the ability to use your time to make Blocks to meet those challenges. That's all you can do, and all you need to do.

Blocks reveal your biggest time wasters. When work is getting done in dense, 25-minute stretches, you will immediately notice which tasks are quick and worthwhile, and which take more time than they deserve. If processing customer service emails takes up four or five blocks a day, there may be a much better way to handle customer service. If you're familiar with the 80/20 rule – and if not you should google it today -- working in blocks makes it clear what's 80 and what's 20.

Blocks allow you to get started even when you have almost no appetite for work. A Block is always a significant amount of work, and it is almost always achievable. When motivation is low, the brain is foggy, and you're on the verge of chickening out of starting (or resuming) your work, you can agree to do a single Block before resigning for the day. This single block is easy enough to do, and always makes you feel better about yourself and usually makes tomorrow a lot easier. Quite often you will want to continue working afterward, your mental fog having mysteriously evaporated.

Working in Blocks virtually eliminates "rage quitting." Some of us are prone to throwing up our hands and storming off when we hit a snag with certain kinds of work. (For me it's website/computer stuff.) When you're making a Block, you're usually only a handful of minutes from finishing, so it seldom makes sense to unceremoniously quit working in response to a frustrating moment. Retaining your composure for the eight or ten remaining minutes – and often getting past the snag -- is greatly preferable to losing the Block and guaranteeing that tomorrow you will be resuming the task at its most objectionable part.

Blocks create rewards all the way. Blocks make it so that the rewards of work are frequent and always nearby. Instead of grinding towards a distant goal that will supposedly make it all worthwhile, you are getting things done now and getting rewarded now. Human beings have limited ability to delay the rewards of our toil. When we try to grind away at our work indefinitely, we end up looking for our reward at the coffee machine or on a news site or a mobile app. Blocks bring the rewards into the work itself, and they're never more than a handful of minutes away.

Blocks make breaks much more enjoyable. When frivolous activities like messaging and social media are relegated to breaktimes, you might notice two positive differences. Firstly, you can enjoy these activities without guilt. Secondly, you need less of them to feel rewarded. If diversions are allowed during working time, they become much more compelling but less satisfying -- not only do they supply their expected bump of stimulation, they also feel like a temporary haven from work – the moment you stop, you have to go back. The result is an uneasy combination of half-enjoyment, half-guilt, which procrastinators know well and often get stuck in. Blocks designate time for both work and repose, eliminating both the uneasiness and the magnetic pull of certain breaktime diversions. When you're making Blocks, breaks feel clean and earned.

The Finer Points of Block-Making

Making Blocks is both a craft and an art, just like actual woodworking. There are nuances in the process you'll discover and adapt to as you go.

While experience alone will teach you virtually everything you need to know, it can help to get a few pointers from an experienced Block-maker. Consider this section a lesson on the ins and outs of Step 5 -- navigating the Block itself.

The most important thing to understand about Blocks is that they are *not* simply 25 minutes of doing stuff.

Let's revisit our definition. A Block is made of three elements:

- 25 minutes
- of uninterrupted work
- directed towards the completion of a task

It is essential to keep the work uninterrupted and aimed at a finish line, otherwise we slip into an aimless activity state, and then we're no longer making Blocks or building anything. While you make your Blocks, you want to work with a sense of what you're doing and where you're trying to get.

This is why Steps 1 and 2 are vital. At the top of each Block, you refresh your intentions by stating or re-stating the task to yourself, and remembering how great it will feel to finish it.

There's an art to seeking the finish line. As you make a Block, you are zeroing in on the finished state of the current task, like a circling shark. You're moving towards the blissful experience of *doneness*, deferring all other concerns until the Block is done. Just begin with the end in mind, as Stephen Covey famously put it -- and keep it in mind while you work.

Or, to use a sales analogy, remember to ABC -- Always Be Closing.

If you do the steps and work with the end in mind, you will quickly grasp the art of Block-making. To speed things up I want to address a few common snags.

If you keep forgetting what you're trying to do

With my ADHD, I'm constantly forgetting what I'm trying to do — I mean, I always know what I'm *working on*, but I often forget what I'm specifically trying to accomplish right now, or the immediate steps to get there.

For this and other purposes, I've made great use of a very simple mechanism I call a Right Now List. I put a sticky note beside me on my desk, with the heading Right Now List (abbreviated RNL) that simply lists in a few bullets what I need to do next:

- open MS word
- load both documents I need
- check the draft against the outline

Identifying a few clear, physical actions is almost always enough to get me into the mode of working with the end in mind. If I don't know what to do, I look at the list. And if the list can't tell me, I make another one.

At the end of the Guide there is a standalone lesson on using Right Now Lists.

If you don't know how to start (or resume) a task

If at any point you don't know the next step, then the next step is to figure out the next step or two (or three).

This is another job for a Right Now List. Get out a scrap of paper or sticky note, and write down what next steps *seem* to make sense from where you are. This is usually all you will need.

If your task requires elaborate planning, then the task should be divided up. Your first task is to divide it up into smaller tasks, and the second task is to do the first of these smaller tasks, which may be to draft a more comprehensive plan for the whole project.

Dealing with distractions and interruptions

While you're working on a task, other things will pull at your attention – external stimuli like text notifications, or things happening in the room with you, and inner distractions such as your own thoughts.

Some basic preventative measures go a long way: mute your phone, disable on-screen notifications, close your web browser, ask others not to disturb you, and so on. You'll quickly discover what tends to distract you, and those are the diversions you need to shut down.

The general interruption policy is *say no to everything but the task*. A Block isn't very long, so virtually everything else in the world can wait. Whenever you notice your attention has been captured by something, simply come back to the intended task.

If you do succumb to distraction – you end up replying to texts, browsing email, or going and getting a muffin – the Block doesn't count. We'll cover what that means below.

The power of cultivating mild urgency

I prefer to have the timer in full view while I work. A visible countdown imparts a certain positive form of urgency, wherein you feel a healthy desire to make the most of your time, because you don't have tons of it. Regardless of how much time remains – 21:13, 11:03, 6:38 -- you know that those minutes can be packed with excellent work.

Harness this exhilarating sense of urgency. When you're in the middle of a Block, make a game of getting as much done as you can, without getting reckless. Treat the interior of a Block something like you're in some sort of pilot's seat, or you're live and on the air. It should feel like it's performance time.

Especially when the timer gets down to less than two minutes, ratchet up the urgency – it is astonishing what you can do with a spare 38 seconds if you challenge yourself.

What to do when the timer goes off

When the timer goes, stop, and mentally congratulate yourself. You've just done what's always been so hard – a significant piece of real work! Allow yourself the pleasure of marking the Block down on your sheet. Make this mark with care. Picture yourself sliding a beautiful, finished wood Block into place, the latest brick in the building of something you really want.

The ringing of the timer will sometimes be jarring, which probably means you're on a roll. You might want to keep working. Good! Stop anyway. The desire to keep going will fuel your next Block, and reinforce a positive relationship with the idea of getting to work.

If you need to finish the sentence you were writing, or mark down the next step so you don't forget what it is, then do that. After that, make a clean break from the task. Stand up at least, and (Step 5) consider taking a break.

If your Block wasn't very productive

The timer going off should feel good, because you know you've done some real work. If you feel like your Block wasn't a very good one, take a moment to figure out why. There are essentially three possibilities:

- 1. You let interruptions or diversions get the better of you.** You didn't really work on the intended task, or you let yourself get diverted into unintentional activities. If this is the case, the Block didn't count. That's okay, as we'll discuss.
- 2. The task was larger or more difficult than you expected.** You thought the task would fit into one Block, and now you realize it will take several. This happens all the time, and it's fine. The thing to remember is that the Block probably accomplished the hardest part: reckoning with the reality of the task, and figuring out what it entails. If so, your Block was an *especially* productive 25 minutes.
- 3. You just don't feel like you did your best.** You worked on the task as intended, but perhaps without a lot of tenacity. This is okay too. All that's usually needed is to resolve to make a better Block this next time. If this keeps happening, perhaps this isn't the right task for right now. Choose something better suited for your mood or energy level for your next Block.

On Blocks that don't count

When you succumb to diversion or aimless busywork during a Block, it doesn't count.

That seems harsh, but it's vital for staying productive. If you begin to compromise your Blocks, by allowing seemingly harmless diversions – an email check here, a trip to the kitchen there – the boundaries will soon be gone and you will no longer be making Blocks or getting much done.

Throwing out a compromised Block is an extremely productive thing to do, because by doing it you're guaranteeing the quality of *all* of your Blocks. If you're ten minutes into a Block and you realize you haven't been focused on a task, then just stop, locate your intentions again, and reset your timer to make a real, dignified Block. When it comes to Blocks, quality outranks quantity completely. Racking up any number of compromised Blocks is, frankly, wasted time. Making

three real Blocks is better than sixteen that don't fit our definition. Remember this whenever an attempted Block doesn't work out -- keeping your standards up is the most productive thing you can do.

We'll talk about what exactly should and shouldn't disqualify a Block in the "Tightening up the Ship" section.

Tightening Up the Ship

In the beginning we established the purpose of this guide: to help you create a dramatic increase in your productivity, and to do it in a week or less.

If you begin to use your work time to make Blocks, as we've defined them, you will almost certainly be getting a lot more done after a few days.

Just switching to the Block method will probably represent a massive jump in productivity if you've struggled to get things done. The next step is to gradually ramp up your productivity further, by improving your Block-making across three dimensions:

Quantity – make more Blocks per day

Quality – make better Blocks, more densely packed with work

Consistency – refine your Block-making routines so that the quality and quantity remain sustainable

As long as you keep working this way, you'll naturally improve in each of these respects. To use a seafaring analogy, you're now piloting the vessel and cruising at a good clip, so you can't help but become a better captain. However, we can take some proactive measures to tighten up the ship, in order to make it faster and more resilient to the elements.

We will also cover a few questions that might come up as you make Blocks.

How to make more Blocks (Quantity)

You may be surprised at how few Blocks are needed to really feel like you did something. Three or four are enough to move any major project forward, or knock off dozens of small tasks. Imagine then what ten or twelve Blocks could do, especially if you did that many every day.

Bringing up your Blocks-per-workday count is the most straightforward way to increase your overall productivity. In general, Blocks scale linearly -- if a project will take you ten days working at a rate of three Blocks per day, then doing six Blocks per day on it should take you about five days.

It's liberating to be able to think about productivity in this quantitative way. Whenever you're falling behind, you don't need to "find more time," you only need to find a way to make more Blocks. Recall that a standard eight-hour workday technically has room for a ridiculous *nineteen*

Blocks, which strongly suggests that time isn't usually the limiting factor in how much a person gets done.

Since Blocks don't require much time, adding one here or there isn't a big deal. When the schedule gets heavy, adding a single after-dinner or Sunday-morning Block can take a tremendous load off the next day.

Challenging yourself to get more Blocks done today than yesterday can be a fun way to ratchet up your productivity. You've got a big project coming up — can you do six Blocks on it this morning? What if you did that every morning this week? What a bombshell of productivity that would be.

Calibrate your ambitions based on your workload and your capability. There are no objective standards for how many is a lot, but as long as your Blocks remain good quality, more is better.

How to make better Blocks (Quality)

While ramping up quantity is the most straightforward way to become more productive, improving quality is the long term goal. If you can get done in three Blocks what used to take six, you've become exponentially more powerful. Each day has essentially become longer and you need to use need less of it to keep up with work. You can use the rest of your time to get ahead, or just enjoy life.

The first and most essential tenet of quality control is not to count Blocks that don't meet our definition. (That's 25 minutes, of uninterrupted work, directed towards the completion of a task.)

Beyond that, improving quality is mostly a matter of doing three things we've already mentioned:

1. Harnessing the mild urgency of the running timer
2. Keeping the end of the task in mind as you work (Always Be Closing)
3. Identifying and cutting out time-wasters

You don't need any specific strategies to improve these three micro-skills — you can go by feel. As you make Blocks, you'll notice that some feel better than others, and they're probably the ones where you're doing these things. Take note of what it feels like to be operating on all cylinders like that, and try to work from that place every time, the best you can.

I also strongly suggest looking up the 80/20 rule if you haven't already, or refreshing yourself on the concept if it is already a familiar idea.

How to keep making Blocks (Consistency)

Since making Blocks is part of a longer process of building what you want in your life, you want to be able to keep up your production over time.

Consistency is achieved by forming a regular schedule around Block-making that you can maintain.

As you begin to work in Blocks, you can only really guess at what the best schedule is for you. You might start out aggressively, trying to turn out a Block from each half-hour of your normal workday – one at 9:00, 9:30, and so on. Or perhaps you ease in, going for three Blocks in the morning and two later in the day.

Whatever you do, you'll quickly discover what you can pull off regularly and what you can't, and it might be quite different than you expected.

You may find you do best when you get up early and get most of your work done by noon. Or perhaps you discover the value of pacing yourself, slipping in a Block in the evening or a few on the weekend.

You will also discover the best way to use Blocks for certain kinds of work. Perhaps you can handle nearly all your email processing in a single afternoon Block, with a short session on the weekend for overflow. You might find a regularly-scheduled morning Block allows you to progress on your manuscript a little every day. The quantitative nature of Blocks allows us to define clear regimens for tackling long-term projects or maintaining regular obligations.

This is a natural process of discovery. All it really takes to gradually converge on an optimal schedule is to ask yourself at the end of the day what you would do differently tomorrow.

Anti-Interruption Strategies

Blocks are by definition uninterrupted work, and all kinds of things can interrupt you while the timer is running. Your brother calls. Missionaries knock on the door. A chatty colleague leans over your cubicle wall.

The primary strategy, if it's not too obvious to say so, is to do everything possible to prevent these interruptions from happening at all. Put your phone on silent. Close the office door. Ask people not to disturb you. Work when others are less likely to ask your attention.

You have two basic tricks up your sleeve to prevent an interruption from undermining the Block:

Option 1: Ignore it, making a note to get back to it later if needed

Option 2: Quickly respond, letting the person know you'll be just a few minutes (and you can tell them how many)

However, some interruptions cannot be deflected, especially if you are working at home and you have children.

If a Block gets torpedoed by something or someone needing immediate attention, that's just a part of life, and it's okay. Blocks are valuable precisely because they don't come easily. And you probably got something done anyway. Just start a new one as soon as you can.

On "Borderline Case" Interruptions

You will undoubtedly have instances in which it's not clear whether an interruption is significant enough for the Block not to count.

For example – does signing for a parcel invalidate your Block if you get right back to work?

What if you open Gmail out of muscle memory and catch yourself after ten seconds?

You'll have to make rulings in these cases. The general principle is if the interruption makes you feel uneasy, as though you know the Block has been compromised, then it has been. Better to stop the timer, take a breather, and begin a new one. Remember that throwing out a compromised Block is a productivity power move – it saves the day from going mushy, and sharpens your productivity prowess overall.

A Productive Life

By now you've made at least one Block, and you can probably see the immense potential in working this way.

Virtually any challenge or aspiration can be met with some number of Blocks. All you have to do is parse the goal into rough steps, and then make the Blocks for each one.

Want a healthier lawn? A Block or two of research will yield a list of steps, each of which might take couple of Blocks to do. Then, every Saturday, you can make yourself a lemonade and perform the needed maintenance routine, maybe getting it down to two or three Blocks a week.

Want to play *Stairway to Heaven* on the guitar? In one Block you can map out song's different parts and make a plan to practice them. Then you can start applying Blocks to each one, tracking how long they to master. Whether it's seventeen or seventy-seven, you will be playing it, and for your next song you'll see how much you can cut that total down.

Want to speak a second language? A Block a day would go a *long* way in year. You'll quickly learn what sort of Blocks yield meaningful progress and what's a waste of time.

Everything accomplished on this earth is built from effort, and now you have an extremely efficient (yet relatively easy) way of budgeting and directing your own effort. You can work towards anything you want, and the path is always finite -- if it can be done, it can be done in some number of Blocks.

A Seat at the Table

Racking up good solid Blocks on important projects is immediately rewarding, and translates quickly into more free time and more money. There is an even greater reward offered by the Block method, however, especially if you've always felt that even a "normal" level of productivity is beyond your reach.

If getting things done has been a long-term struggle for you, that struggle can become a part of your identity. When you identify with being unproductive, you might feel like many of the great things life has to offer are available to others but not to you. You can dream about landing a cool job, owning your own home, or developing an expert skillset, but it feels as though only other people can actually have those things. All those go-getter-type people are playing a different game than you are, and it has better prizes.

Now you can play the productivity game too. You're no longer an outsider. Those once-distant prizes – the coveted job, the expert-level skills, the profitable business – are now available in the game *you're* playing. All of it – anything you want – can be made out of Blocks. And you can make Blocks.

You still have to play the game well, but you're at the table now. Whether your dream project takes sixty Blocks to complete, or six thousand, it's now yours if you want it. You can start stacking those Blocks today.

Let me be the first to welcome you to what is likely to be a new and more abundant phase of your life. I wish you the best in your adventures.

David

Secret Weapon 1: The Right Now List

Earlier I described an immensely useful tool I call the Right Now List.

A Right Now List is a scrap of paper or sticky note on which you list the next physical action or two or three you need to take. Usually these actions are very small in size – on the order of “Open Microsoft Excel” or “Get out a sheet of looseleaf.”

The purpose of this tiny list is to get you from being not quite sure what’s next to knowing and doing what’s next. It’s especially helpful for tasks that seem messy or don’t have clear starting points.

Let’s say you sit down to do a straightforward task from your to-do list: “Reply to Fred re: his proposal”

It sounds simple enough – you need to reply to an email. But you notice you’re not sure what to say, or how to respond, and you *really* just want to do this later.

Instead of procrastinating, or getting stuck dithering, you can make a Right Now List. You simply list the most basic, bare-bones actions that probably have to happen next.

In this case:

- Open Gmail
- Reread Fred’s email
- List my reservations about the proposal

...and suddenly you’re in the middle of it. None of these micro-tasks are difficult, but once you do them you’re already past the messy don’t-know-how-to-start phase where you’re likely to procrastinate.

Any time your current RNL is no longer what you’re doing right now, toss it. Make new ones as needed.

The Right Now List is also helpful when you’re doing something complex or unpredictable and there’s a danger of losing track of what you’re trying to do. When I’m doing genealogy research, for example, I write down what I’m trying to do right now – *check the 1920 census for the Bradley family’s birth years* -- so I don’t get sidetracked with the many productive-seeming diversions that pop up during certain kinds of work.

The items on the Right Now List will be smaller and more granular than the task on your main to-do list, making it easy to move forward from any point.

I keep a sticky note pad within arm's reach whenever I'm working. If I have any sense of ambiguity about the next step, I look at my Right Now List. If I don't have one, the thing to do is stop and make a Right Now List.

Secret Weapon 2: The Red Carpet

Often we don't end up getting around to a major task we intended to do today. Naturally, we resolve to do it tomorrow.

Sometimes we have good reasons to put something off, and sometimes we're just procrastinating. Either way, despite our intentions, there's always a danger of pushing it back again the next day.

When you decide to do a thing the next day instead of today, there's a way you can almost guarantee you *will* get it done in the next 24 hours.

Deciding to push back a task till tomorrow always frees up a bit of time today. The first thing you should do with this liberated time is to *make it as easy as possible to do the task first thing tomorrow*.

Clear your workspace and lay out any tools you'll need. Make a clean list of the steps you're going to take, and put it in the center of your desk, or somewhere you can't miss it. Remove as much psychological resistance to the task as possible. In particular, get very clear on the very first thing you're going to do.

I call this "red-carpeting" the task. You arrange the environment so that it feels like there's a red carpet laid out right to the doing of the task. You're setting things up like this not just to make the task easier, but to make sure that tomorrow it will be *as easy as it is ever going to be*. Red-carpeting the task will undermine any procrastinatory impulses you may have tomorrow morning, because you will know that the task has reached peak ease — if you want it done, you want to do it now.

The red carpet is a great concession for a rough day. Okay, so you're not going to be a hero today. But you *will* do the task tomorrow, and for once you're not just saying that.

For further reading, there is an article about red carpeting on Raptitude: [How to Do it Tomorrow Instead of Never](#)

The Block Method

Quick Reference Sheet

1

CHOOSE

Select a task you want done.

- If it's a very large task, break it into a few pieces.

2

PICTURE

Take a few seconds to picture the task in its completed state.

- A single positive image will do. A printed, stapled report. A clean kitchen counter.

6

REPEAT AND REFINER

Start the cycle again, or call it a day.

- Work on streamlining your process each time to make more and better Blocks.

5

BREAK

Consider taking a short break before your next Block.

- At the very least, stand up if you've been sitting.
- Decide when you're starting your next Block before beginning your break.

4

RECORD

Mark down your completed Block somewhere.

- A sticky note or scrap of paper is fine.
- This is just to track today's total number of Blocks; no need to keep it.

3

WORK

Start your timer and work for 25 uninterrupted minutes.

- Aim for the completed task you just pictured.
- The Block only counts if you stay on task

What Did You Think of *How to Do Things*?

Please let me know whether you found *How to Do Things* helpful. Your feedback is a huge help for me in making the Guide better.

[Do the three-question survey](#)

A Word on This Version of The Guide

You are reading version 0.91 of this guide, which is a bare-bones version intended to convey the essential ideas and garner feedback. The follow-up version, 1.0, will be sent to everyone who purchased 0.91.

The following changes are planned for the Guide:

- The addition of graphics and diagrams
- Streamlining to make it more clear/concise
- Additional optional tools
- A FAQ section
- Other adjustments based on feedback

My goal is as stated at the beginning: give people all they need to create dramatic increase in productivity in less than a week, in a resource they can read in one sitting. I will continue to refine this guide towards that goal.

If you have any questions or comments about this guide, please send me a message at raptitude.com/contact.