

1.7 ■ Getting Things Done

The Art of Stress-Free Productivity.

The Getting Things Done (GTD) methodology was created by David Allen and described in his book, *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*. It's a system for creating order and clarity in your mind. The GTD process involves dumping all nonessential information out of your brain, organizing your actions into projects, and systematically executing these projects.

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You can use this tool to create more clarity, order, and control in your work and personal life. By building and regularly reviewing an inventory of your commitments to yourself and others, you gain a sense of trust and calm. This allows you more freedom and spontaneity: when you have a clear picture of your projects, you're free at any moment to prioritize what's important to you, be it a work meeting, spending time with your kids, or just taking a nap.

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- Increased productivity, order, and sense of control.
- Lower stress levels and less wasted effort.
- Easy to get started without a huge learning curve.

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- It takes time and effort to fully master GTD.
- Expect that you will fall off the wagon at times.

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GTD is an all-encompassing methodology, of which this section is only a brief summary. In order to get the full benefits, you should read the book or check out other online resources and courses. At the core of GTD is a workflow system of five stages:

1. Capture: Collect what has your attention

Get information out of your head and pour it into an inbox. This frees you from nagging thoughts such as "gotta buy groceries" and lets you process them at the appropriate time.

2. Clarify: Process what it means

Turn each inbox item into a meaningful, clear action. If you noted down "groceries," for example, you might change it to "buy groceries: two gallons of milk, ten eggs, and four bananas." For every item, make sure you define a concrete physical step you can take to advance this action or project. If you can't find anything you need to do with the information, either file it for future reference or trash it.

3. Organize: Put it where it belongs

If you can perform an action in two minutes or less, do it now. (Allen calls this the two-minute rule). Otherwise, you can do one of several things: delegate it; file it as an action or a project; defer it to a later date; or, if you're not committed to completing it soon, perhaps move it into a folder labeled "someday/maybe."

4. Reflect: Review frequently

Periodically, take time to review your projects, actions, and everything else that needs your attention. This helps you prioritize important actions instead of just putting out the hottest and most urgent fires. By doing so, you can build a holistic workflow that takes care of a range of tasks from buying milk and answering your boss's emails, to planning big life changes such as moving or switching jobs or careers, to answering questions like, "Where do I want to be in five to ten years?" You can do this at multiple regular intervals, e.g., every week, month, year, etc., according to your needs.

5. Engage: Simply do

Finally, you have to just buy the damn milk or answer that email.

The following are a few examples of handy GTD techniques that you can use right off the bat.

Mind Sweep

A mind sweep is a way to clear information from your brain and move it into a trusted system, freeing up your brain to focus on other activities. Sit down with a piece of paper (or a computer, phone, or other device), and take stock of what is on your mind: the things you need to do; the conversations you need to have; the resources you need to find; the questions you need answered, etc.

Write every item down as a separate bullet point; each of these items will go into your inbox to be processed at a later time. Don't worry about listing too many tasks. At this stage, writing something down doesn't commit you to doing anything about it. When you clarify and organize this list, you can decide to trash some items.

There are various kinds of mind sweeps. You can do a quick one-minute sweep at the beginning of your day. You can do a full twenty-minute sweep across various categories, such as health and vitality, significant other, work, finances, etc. (see link in references for a template). You can focus on a particular field or problem; for example, mind sweep while walking around your house and note down everything you'd like to repair or improve about it.

A mind sweep differs from a mind map (see Tool 1.5), which is geared toward helping you gather all your thoughts about a concept or goal in one place and mapping the connections between them. Mind sweeping is less concerned with grouping or cataloging thoughts. It is more a method of clearing your mind in a way that frees you from conscious or unconscious worries. Once you have written everything down in a safe place where your brain knows it can access it, your mind will be clearer and more readily able to focus on a specific task or be creative.

Two-Minute Rule

The two-minute rule is briefly described above. It is simple: when you are organizing an action in your system, ask yourself whether you can complete this action in under two minutes. If so, do it immediately. If not, add it to a list of actions to do later or delegate it to someone. It's important to estimate correctly. Some tasks may appear to be achievable in one or two minutes but instead blow up to ten or more, leaving you asking, "What was I just doing and why?" Like most things, your accuracy will improve with time and practice. One way to train your estimations is to keep a physical two-minute timer handy and check your guesses against the timer.

Inbox Zero

While inbox zero was not created by David Allen, it was inspired by GTD and then integrated into it. Many of us have thousands of read and unread messages in our email inboxes. But, according to Allen, that's not the role of an inbox. An inbox is not meant to store things forever. It's meant as a place for things to arrive, be processed, and moved out of, just like the physical inbox where your mailman leaves letters.

Usually, if you're on top of things, you don't keep your letters in your mailbox for a year. You take them out of the mailbox and do something with them. You read them, toss them, file what needs storing, and make room for more items. The same can be said for your email. You can process your email using the five stages of GTD to keep it down to zero messages, or at least a minimal number. If you can do this, you'll find your inbox is less stressful to open and more efficient to process. The general rule here is that you should open and read an email only once, rather than reading and rereading the same emails and subject lines. Besides, your inbox is prettier when it's empty.

Review

Reviews—revisiting and optimizing different areas of your workflow, including your GTD workflow—are an important part of GTD. You can schedule reviews for specific times: daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly, or whatever fits your life best. Each one can be tailored to your particular circumstances and needs and will usually address one particular horizon of focus. Allen describes six horizons:

- [5] Purpose: Solve the world's overpopulation problem.
- [4] Vision: Establish a civilization on Mars.
- [3] Goals and Objectives: Find a way to reuse rockets shipped to space.
- [2] Areas of Focus: Establish a rocket team.
- [1] Projects: Hire Max from NASA.
- [0] Action: Call John to get Max's phone number.

While you can approach these horizons bottom-up or top-down, most people find it easiest to first tackle horizons 0 and 1, with daily and weekly reviews. These clear up time and energy, allowing you to address higher horizons.

What should you review? There are numerous possibilities, including your different inboxes; your projects; the someday/maybe list; the contents of your calendar; and anything else pulling at your attention. To illustrate this, let's look at a daily review.

Each morning, you can spend a few minutes deciding on your focus for the day and the most important task you want to accomplish. You can use this time to clear various inboxes—such as texts, emails, notifications, and physical letters—depending on your life and work style. If you keep a decision log (see Tool 1.9), you can review it and, if you haven't already, update it with every major decision you made the day before.

You can also make a calendar review part of your daily review. You can go over the day before, the current day, and the next day, and look for anything that requires action. Maybe you want to send a follow-up email about a recent business meeting or text a friend you met yesterday and share how much fun you had with her. Or, you might want to look at tomorrow's schedule and eliminate any

double bookings you've made—and make sure you have time for lunch! Of course, if you discover any actions that you need to take based on this information, you can add these to your inbox.

A key part of your daily review, or any other review, is to experiment and customize it to your particular needs. You can also use the weekly or monthly reviews to think about and customize the structure of your daily review. A review is a checkpoint—an opportunity for you to zoom out of your current horizon of focus and change your perspective.

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1. David Allen's *Getting Things Done*, and other books on this topic, are available at most bookstores.
 2. The GTD website: <https://gettingthingsdone.com/>.
 3. Sample Daily & Weekly Review Templates:
<https://workflowy.com/s/gtd-review-lists/PhDOt9Q7YHEiYfon>.
 4. Mindsweep Template: <https://trello.com/c/BZJOOTR6>.
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