THE
TIME-BLOCK
PLANNER

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Find Focus, Boost Productivity,

Achieve More

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CAL NEWPORT

The Power of Time Blocking

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The *Time-Block Planner* implements a personal productivity system that I've perfected over the past fifteen years. During this period, it helped me earn a PhD in computer science at MIT and then go on to achieve tenure as a professor at Georgetown University, while simultaneously publishing six books for general audiences, including multiple bestsellers. Most importantly—and one of the aspects that I believe sets my system apart from any other—I did all of this while rarely working past 5:30 p.m. I need my evenings free to wrangle my three young kids. My productivity system made all this possible, and the planner you're currently holding will enable you to implement it in your own professional life.

As you'll learn in the detailed instructions that follow, the core of my system is a simple but powerful strategy called *time blocking*. Most people approach their workday by trying to cross things off a task list in the small slivers of time that remain between attending meetings and reacting to emails and instant messages. Time blocking, by contrast, requires you to figure out in advance how you want to spend every minute of your day. Instead of trying to generally "be productive," you partition your time into blocks and assign specific work to them. This critical shift from managing tasks to managing time can *massively* increase the amount of useful work you accomplish. It also provides an anxiety-reducing sense of control over your schedule.

I didn't invent time blocking. As soon as people began thinking seriously about personal productivity, they began preaching the benefits of this strategy. In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin explains, "Every part of my business should have its allotted time." He then provides a sample time-block schedule that divides up his waking hours into blocks, each dedicated to a different productive activity. In his 1967 classic, *The Effective Executive*, one of the first professional productivity books ever written, Peter Drucker echoes Franklin's commitment to managing time instead of tasks. "Effective executives, in my observation, do not start with their tasks," he writes. "They start with their time." A more recent article, appearing on a popular career website, reports that both Bill Gates and Elon Musk deploy variations of time blocking to help fuel their "freakish" levels of accomplishments.

This technique, in other words, is one that serious productivity aficionados have been deploying with great success for many years. This planner will help you follow their lead by providing you the tools needed to design and execute your own effective time-block schedules. What you won't find in this planner is a substitute for your calendar. I assume you already manage your meetings

and appointments elsewhere, such as in the shared digital calendars that more and more organizations require their employees to use. Though you will copy events from your calendar into your daily time-block schedules, the planner is not their long-term home.

This planner also doesn't provide room for you to permanently store all of the various tasks and obligations for which you're currently responsible. The modern knowledge worker is burdened with many hundreds of these responsibilities at any given time; it's simply not practical to keep track of them in a paper notebook that's replaced multiple times a year. When using this planner, you will copy selected tasks from whatever system you use into your daily time-block schedules, but as with meetings and appointments, this will not be the primary place you store them.

The time-block planner instead focuses on a narrower objective: getting the most out of the time and attention you have available to allocate toward work each day. You already know what you need to do. This planner helps you do more of it, and do it more intentionally, than you ever thought possible. But enough with the preamble. Let's dive into the details of exactly how this planner works. . . .

WEEK 1 DAY 1

Daily Metrics

METRIC TRACKING

shutdown complete ☐

TASKS:	IDEAS:

COLLECTION

date _____

TODAY'S DATE

TIME-BLOCK GRID

Figure 1

Instructions for Using the Time-Block Planner

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The time-block planner dedicates a two-page spread to each workday. I call these the *daily pages*. It also dedicates a two-page spread for each week, which I call the *weekly pages*. We'll return to the weekly pages later in these instructions. For now, let's focus on the daily pages, as they're the key to this system's scheduling discipline.

As shown in figure 1, the daily pages contain several elements. On the right-hand side is the time-block grid. This is where you'll maintain your time-block schedule for the given day. On the left-hand side is a pair of columns for collecting obligations or ideas that come up while you're in the middle of executing a time block. By writing these intrusions down in the moment to deal with later, you'll avoid the need to divert your attention. The left-hand side of the daily pages spread also includes a box dedicated to tracking metrics designed to measure behaviors that you identify as crucial to succeeding in your professional life. Inside this box is the "shutdown complete" checkbox that indicates that you've completed a shutdown ritual for the day. As you'll learn, this ritual has become a favorite of this system's devotees.

Let's walk through the use of these daily page elements one by one, starting with the most important, the time-block grid.

>>> USING THE TIME-BLOCK GRID

At the beginning of each workday, flip to the next empty daily pages spread and record the date in the box at the top of the right-hand page. You're now ready to create a time-block schedule for the day. To do so, you'll use the time-block grid, also on the right-hand page. Each solid horizontal line represents one hour, and each dotted line represents a half hour. Moving from the top to the bottom,

		(1) Morning Tasks	
9	finish report	– email triage	
10		– submit form	
		– call Karen	
11	(1)	– fill out doodle	
	research client x		
12	lunch w. Sam		
1			
2	email		
3	planning meeting		
4	edit copy & shutdown		

Figure 2

label the solid lines on the left side of the page with the hours during which you plan to work during the day. For example, if you're working from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., you'd label the first solid line 9:00, the second 10:00, and so on, down to 5:00.

You can now create a time-block schedule for these hours. When you build your first schedule for the day, use the first column of the grid. The other columns will be used later if you end up needing to fix your schedule as the day unfolds.

To build the schedule, partition your working hours into blocks of time, and assign to each block the specific work you plan to accomplish during this time. You record this schedule on the time-block grid by actually drawing boxes around the time captured by each block and then labeling each block with the work assigned to it. If you need more room for a block's description—for example, if you want to list out multiple tasks you plan to accomplish during a short block—put a number in the block, and then use that same number to label a list of the extra information in the upper right corner of the time-block grid, where it's unlikely to get in the way of future schedule fixes. To make these instructions concrete, see figure 2, which shows a sample time-block schedule.

When building your time-block schedule, you should first reference whatever calendar you use to make sure that you're adding time blocks for any meetings or appointments you've already scheduled. The real decision then becomes what to do with the free time that remains. To help make these choices, next consult whatever external system you use to track and organize all of the tasks, projects, long-term goals, or other obligations for which you're currently responsible. You want your schedule to help you make progress on the right activities.

Finally, keep in mind factors such as time of day—perhaps earlier in the day is better for hard thinking and later in the day is better for small tasks—and

Figure 3

how you're feeling. If you're exhausted, you might want a schedule designed to help you catch up on administrative obligations, whereas if you're feeling energized, you might want to put aside large blocks of uninterrupted time for intense projects.

As your day unfolds, you should use your time-block schedule to determine

what work you should be doing at any given moment. It's important that you don't let your attention wander. Focus exclusively on the work scheduled for the current block until the block is completed. If you need breaks, schedule them.

It's unavoidable, of course, that you'll occasionally deviate from your current schedule. For example, maybe a given task took longer than expected, or your boss asked you to stop everything to tackle a new, urgent assignment. In these cases, you don't abandon your time-block schedule; you instead *fix* it whenever you next get the chance. To make this fix, first cross out the time blocks that remain in your current schedule. Then, in the column to the right of your current schedule, create a new schedule for these remaining hours, and turn your attention to executing this new plan. If this revised schedule breaks at some point, then repeat the same fixing process: cross out the blocks that remain and schedule new blocks for this time in the next column to the right. And so on. Figure 3 shows an example of this schedule-fixing process in action.

Notice that it's possible to instead craft your block schedule using pencil and then fix it by erasing and redrawing the blocks in the same column. I generally avoid this method for two reasons: the erasing and redrawing can get messy, and I like to have a record of the changes I made, as these can later help me identify recurring scheduling mistakes.

ADVANCED TIME-BLOCKING TIPS

Tip #1: Embrace schedule fixes.

The goal of time blocking is not to stick to your original schedule no matter what. It's instead to try to always have an intentional plan for what to do with your

time. If circumstances upend your schedule, this isn't a failure; it's an expected part of applying this strategy. When you next get a chance, simply fix the schedule for the time that remains in the day so that you remain intentional about where you direct your focus.

Tip #2: At first, schedule more time than you think you need.

Novice time blockers chronically underestimate how long common work activities actually take. If you're new to time blocking, you can save yourself unnecessary schedule fixes by inflating the time block sizes you think are reasonable by 20–30 percent. After you've been time blocking for several months, you'll begin to develop a more realistic understanding of these durations and can begin building more-accurate blocks without needing this extra padding.

Tip #3: Capture email and instant messenger communication in their own blocks.

Many knowledge workers don't consider checking email or instant messenger channels a standalone activity. They instead think of it as something that's always done in parallel with primary work. I *highly* discourage this mindset: all of these quick checks of communication channels significantly reduce your cognitive capacity due to neural network switching costs. Batch your email or instant messenger time into their own blocks. When you get to one of these communication blocks, do nothing but communicate, and when you're not in one of these blocks, don't communicate at all. If your work requires you to check these tools often, then schedule lots of blocks to do so, but refuse to let this behavior be something that occurs informally in the background.

Tip #4: Use "conditional blocks" to add flexibility to your schedule.

If you're unsure how long a given activity might take, break it into two blocks. The first block is dedicated to working on the activity. The second is assigned to activities that are conditioned on what happens during the first block: *if* you need more time for the original activity, then use the second block to finish it; on the other hand, *if* you've finished the original activity, use the second block for the backup activity you identified. In this way, you can avoid unnecessary schedule fixes when confronting work of ambiguous duration.

>>> USING THE COLLECTION COLUMNS

On the left-hand side of the daily pages are two lined columns labeled "tasks" and "ideas." Their purpose is simple: if while you're executing your time-block schedule you come across a new task or relevant idea, you can jot it down in these collection columns to deal with later, and then return immediately to executing the current block.

For example, perhaps someone sticks their head into your office to ask you to do something for them, or while walking back from a meeting, you have a sudden brainstorm about how to tackle a pressing problem. By writing down these cognitive intrusions in a designated area in this planner, you avoid the need to divert your attention from the current time block to handle them in the moment. You can be confident that you won't forget them, as they're written right there in black and white on your daily pages. If you're without such a collection space, the fear of forgetting would likely drive you to drop everything to handle the

new obligation right away, a reaction that cedes control of your schedule from your intentions to the whims of other people.

If you need to take action on this new information later in the same day, then the collection columns will hold it for you until you arrive at a good time to fix your block schedule to include this work. If the information is less urgent, then it will remain safely recorded in the collection columns until you complete your shutdown ritual at the end of the day (we'll get to this soon), during which you'll transfer it to whatever permanent system you use to track your obligations.

>>> METRIC TRACKING

Part of the art of time blocking is figuring out what work to schedule. Some of these choices are obvious, like allocating blocks for preexisting appointments or projects with impending deadlines. But you'll still often find yourself needing to schedule more discretionary, non-urgent endeavors. It's here that personal metrics can help nudge you toward the long-term results that matter most to you.

A personal metric describes a behavior that you think is important with a quantifiable value. Many readers of my book *Deep Work*, for example, track each day how many hours they spent working without distractions on cognitively demanding tasks. They accept my argument that this "deep work" should be prioritized in an increasingly competitive knowledge economy. Their daily deep work hour count is a personal metric that captures how well they're living up to this commitment.

Some jobs might yield metrics that capture behaviors specific to the particular type of work. If you're in sales, for example, the number of sales calls you

make each day might be important, while if you're in a leadership position, you might instead want to track how many different team members you checked in on during the day. Some metrics are quantified as numbers while others are binary: you either did them or you didn't. Perhaps, for example, you maintain a simple checkbox to indicate whether you ended the day with an empty inbox or filled out your online time sheet.

You can also track personal metrics that are only loosely relevant to your work. In my own case, for example, I'm a strong believer that a healthy body supports a healthy mind. Accordingly, each day I track the following information: how many steps I take, whether or not I exercised, and whether or not I ate healthily. These personal metrics aren't, strictly speaking, describing work activities, but I track them alongside more work-specific values, as they ultimately do affect how much useful thinking I'm able to extract from my brain.

The open box above the collection columns is the space for recording these metrics each day. You simply jot down the name of each metric, followed by the relevant value—be it a number, a tally of hash marks, or a simple check. Tracking personal metrics serves a couple of purposes. The first is psychological. The knowledge that you'll be recording information about a key behavior at the end of the day can motivate you to dedicate time to that behavior when building your time-block schedule, as you don't want to have to record a disappointing metric value.

The second purpose is informational. The metric tracking boxes will contain a record of how well you did, day after day, in executing key behaviors. This record can reveal useful trends. For example, if you're tracking deep work hours, you might notice that these values dip precipitously on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Further investigation might reveal this is because you have a series of regular meetings on those days that are spread out enough throughout the day to break up any long, uninterrupted stretches of time. Once the problem is

identified, simple fixes might be possible. In this case, perhaps you reschedule one of the meetings to free up a morning block for deep work on these days.

To summarize, if something's important to you, track it in the metric-tracking box. This simple habit can inject much more intentional behavior into your daily schedule.

>>> THE SHUTDOWN RITUAL

One of the most important pieces of my system's daily scheduling discipline is executing a shutdown ritual that helps your mind shift more completely from work mode to non-work mode. The details of this ritual are straightforward. At the end of each day's time-block schedule, your final step is to shut down work. To do so, first make sure your personal metrics have been recorded. Next, go through the tasks and ideas in your collection column, deciding for each what you want to do with it. In some cases, you may need to add new tasks into your task system, while in other cases you may need to update your calendar, or even shoot off a quick message.

Once you've finished going through your collection columns, you should then briefly review any other potential sources of unresolved work obligations. For most people, this means taking one last look at your email inbox, to ensure you didn't miss something urgent, as well as reviewing your calendar and obligation-tracking system. When done with these checks, look over your weekly plan (which we'll discuss in more detail next), updating it as needed. The goal here is to convince yourself that there's nothing being forgotten, or missed, or being kept track of only in your brain, and that you have a reasonable plan for the days ahead. All of these reassurances are the precondition for enabling your brain to fully shift its attention from work to life outside of work.

To make this transition, complete the shutdown ritual by marking the "shutdown complete" checkbox that's preprinted in the metric-tracking space. (I put this checkbox in the metric area because recording whether or not you've completed this ritual is itself a personal metric.) Later in the evening, if you feel a generalized background hum of work anxiety, and your mind begins to fret and wants you to think about that email you have to write, or to endlessly review your plan for an upcoming project, you can arrest this rumination with a simple reminder: "I wouldn't have checked the shutdown complete box if I hadn't completed the shutdown ritual that convinced me I'm fine to avoid work until tomorrow." In this way, you address the anxiety without engaging with the specific topics fueling the anxiety.

I came up with this ritual early in my career as a graduate student, with the only difference being that I actually said the phrase *shutdown complete* out loud instead of checking a box. (Over the years, as I've written about this strategy, the phrase *shutdown complete* has become a shibboleth of sorts for my more devoted readers, an eccentric reality that makes me inexplicably happy.) In my experience, when facing a period of intense work anxiety, I'd find myself frequently returning to the disclaimer for about a week, after which my mind learned I wasn't going to indulge in any interesting rumination, diminishing its urge to fret. You'll likely experience a similar effect. If you strictly follow this shutdown ritual, you'll soon discover that not only are you working harder when you work, but your time after work is more meaningful and restorative than ever before.

>>> THE WEEKLY PLANNING PAGES

So far in these instructions, we've been discussing the various elements of the daily planning pages. There is, however, another type of page that you'll

encounter in this planner: those dedicated to weekly planning. Every week's worth of daily pages is accompanied by a two-page spread for weekly planning. Unlike their daily counterparts, however, the weekly planning pages contain few preformatted elements. You're instead presented with two empty pages on which to craft your plan for the week ahead in whatever format you prefer.

As I wrote in a 2014 essay on the topic, "I've found it's crucial to embrace flexibility. The style or format of your plan should match the challenges of the specific week ahead." As these challenges shift, so will the format of your plan. In my own weekly planning habit, for example, I find that for some weeks I want to sketch out a plan for every day individually, as shown in this abbreviated case study:

Monday

- Start with a focused task block to get out ahead of the small things on my lists for the week. Be sure to finish merit report.
- Prepare a lecture for my class, then research work.
- End the workday with a 1-to-2-hour writing block.

Tuesday

- Head into the office early to work on upcoming paper submission.
- Teaching/office hours/meetings dominate the midday.
- End day with 1.5 hours in the science library, where the first hour is writing and the last 30 minutes are focused on small tasks.

This weekly planning format provides detailed guidance for the time-block schedule I'll build each day of the week. During other weeks, however, I might

decide that something higher level is more appropriate. For example, when facing weeks already filled with meetings and appointments, I sometimes instead use my weekly plan to provide a few heuristics about how to make use of whatever free time remains each day. For example:

Research

The goal this week is to try to find enough time to fix the correctness proof for the new gossip algorithm. Brainstorm during commutes. Try to carve out one additional hour every day to give the proof concentrated thought.

Small Tasks

I have a lot of small things lurking on my lists. Do 30 minutes each morning on my task lists first thing before heading into campus. End each day with 30 minutes as well. Include email checking into these blocks. Sixty total minutes should be enough to keep my head above water until this busy week ends.

Meeting Strategy

Add 15–30 minutes onto the end of each scheduled meeting this week to try to process and make sense of any new obligations it places on my plate. Otherwise, these obligations will pile up and cause stress.

This weekly planning format doesn't detail exactly what will happen each day but instead gives me a couple of pointers about how to fight to make use of the scraps of free time that remain. These case studies show only two possible

formats out of many ways for crafting these weekly plans. The key is to embrace whatever format seems most useful for the particular week you're planning.

Regardless of the format you use, you should craft your weekly plan either over the weekend before the week begins or first thing Monday morning. When crafting the plan, look over your calendar and whatever system you use to track your obligations, projects, and goals. Some people like to empty their email inbox as part of this planning process so that they feel as if they're starting the week fresh. For other people, this goal might be infeasible. Regardless, crafting these plans takes time. I usually spend, for example, between thirty and sixty minutes to get completely up to speed on what's going on for the upcoming week and to decide how to tackle it.
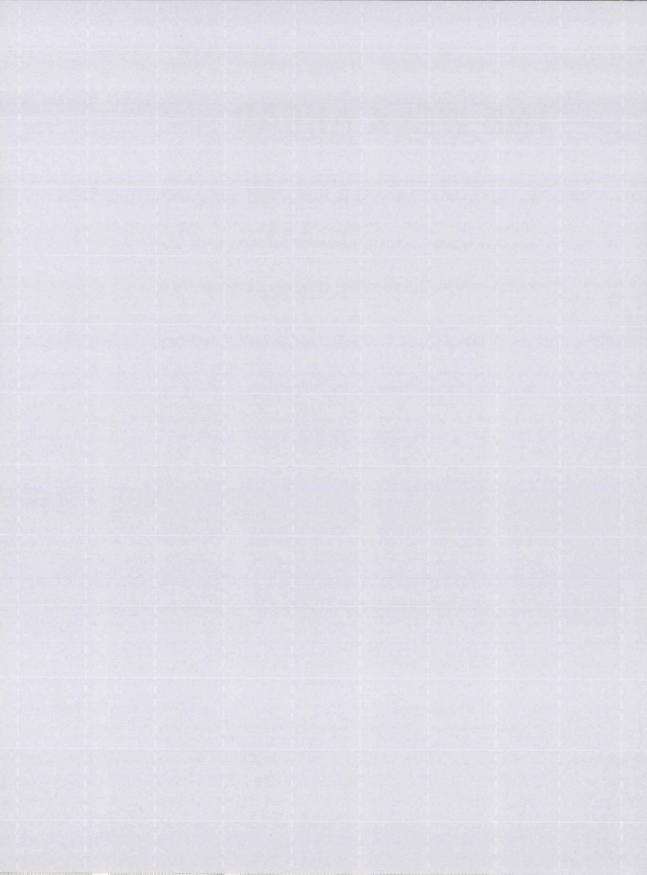
You might feel at first that this time is wasted—like you're throwing away an hour you could dedicate to actually completing concrete tasks. I urge you to resist this reaction. The planning may take time up front, but it will return much greater productivity for the entire week that follows. Among other benefits, it will identify important patterns that can help you plan to get much more accomplished. If you see, for example, that Wednesday through Friday are very busy due to a visiting client, then you can compensate by squeezing in more uninterrupted deep work on Monday or Tuesday. Or if you know you'll be off-site all day Friday, then you can adjust your Thursday schedule to make sure loose ends are tied up before the trip.

Sometimes your weekly planning habit can motivate you to change the appointments already on your calendar. After trying and failing to fit in enough hours to finish an important project, for example, you might realize that you need to cancel or reschedule a few non-urgent appointments—coffee with a colleague, or perhaps a brainstorming meeting for a speculative project—to make room for the more urgent work.

Weekly plans are also important because they allow you to tackle objectives that require more than a day to complete. If you decide at the beginning of the week, for example, to write an article that'll require around ten to fifteen hours of research and writing, your weekly plan can help you figure out how to spread this work out across the upcoming days. It's much less likely that you'd end up getting all of this required work done if you instead just planned each day as it arrived.

It's this combination of high-level weekly plans with detailed daily time-block schedules that unlocks the full potential of this productivity system. The weekly/daily approach is what allows you to move around obligations like pieces on a chessboard and construct configurations of your schedule that enable you to accomplish head-turning amounts of work, all while staying on top of the various small requests and tasks pulling at your time and attention. While your peers react frantically to inputs and deadlines as they arise, often putting in late nights to try to compensate for their haphazard schedules, you'll approach each day with a justified confidence.

Build smart weekly plans. Use these plans to develop effective daily time-block schedules. Execute those daily schedules with intensity, and then when done for the day, shut down completely. This is the rhythm of an extremely productive and satisfying professional life. And it's exactly what this planner is designed to help you achieve.

THE WEEK AHEAD

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We spend much of our day on autopilot—not giving much thought to what we're doing with our time. This is a problem. It's difficult to prevent the trivial from creeping into every corner of your schedule if you don't face, without flinching, your current balance between deep and shallow work, and then adopt the habit of pausing before taking action and asking, "What makes the most sense right now?"

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WEEK 1 DAY 1

Daily Metrics

shutdown complete ☐

TASKS:	IDEAS:

WEEK 1 DAY 2

Daily Metrics

shutdown complete ☐

TASKS:	IDEAS:

Process and Proceed

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You've made it through thirteen weeks of time blocking. Hopefully, you felt both more productive and more in control of your work during this period. Before moving on to a fresh planner for the next thirteen weeks, however, it's important to take some time to process what you've learned from the weeks that just passed. I suggest browsing through the pages of your planner to review the following information:

- **Metric Completion.** Survey your metrics to develop a better picture of your activity during these weeks. If you track deep work hours, for example, this is a good time to confront how

many such hours you completed on average. If you're not happy with this number, perhaps it's time to consider more serious changes to your work setup. Similarly, if you find that you're struggling to complete a given metric, you might tweak the behavior you're tracking to something more tractable.

- **Schedule Repairs.** Review the days where your time-block schedule required multiple repairs. Study the source of these disruptions. It might turn out, for example, that you chronically underestimate the time required for a certain work activity. This is useful to know! If the disruption is external—say, your boss has the habit of stopping by your office to ask you to "quickly look into" their latest big idea—it might make sense to put a process in place that allows you to handle these requests without blowing up your schedule.

- **Time Allocation.** More generally, as you look over your recent time-block schedules, improve your understanding of how you actually spend your time. Are your days almost universally fractured with meetings? What's your ratio of email to non-email efforts? Most knowledge workers never directly confront the reality of their professional efforts, but such confrontation is crucial, even if it can sometimes be uncomfortable. To move from *busy* to *effective* you must understand exactly how you're actually spending your time, identify what you don't like about these allocations, and then take hard steps to fix it.

Once you've reviewed and processed this information, you're prepared to start fresh with a new planner, armed with knowledge that will make you an even more effective time blocker than before. When it comes to your work life, if you don't control your time, others will do so for you. I hope your experience with time blocking so far has helped you appreciate the superiority of the first option.