

Improving Time Management Through Modern-Day To-Do Lists

"It's not enough to be busy; so are the ants. The question is, what are we busy about?"

— HENRY DAVID THOREAU

As our daily tasks continue to multiply, and as we start the new year focused on new goals and resolutions, we may be feeling the urge to get more organized. It is a challenge, of course, but we have some help in the form of a classic tool — the “to do” list.

Research shows that writing down what you have to do unburdens the brain, making you more productive.¹ A 2011 study documented that unfinished goals caused intrusive thoughts and inhibited completion of further tasks, but making a plan to reach goals reduced or eliminated those intrusive thoughts.² Taking an idea and putting it down on paper (or in a digital notes app) has been shown to decrease anxiety, and completing a task and crossing it off the list provides a sense of tangible satisfaction.³ The to-do list also provides a structure from which to plan and organize.³

TIPS FOR AN EFFECTIVE TO-DO LIST

First, find a system that works for you. There are a variety of approaches: jotting down items on a piece of paper, creating an electronic list on your computer or phone, using a designated app, or using a “bullet journal”

(the latest organizational system that keeps track of anything you want).

It may take some experimenting to find the right method for you, but if you settle for a system that you don't like or find too complicated, you will not use it regularly.

Once you find a system you like, try the following:^{4,5}

- **Make more than one list.** Putting all your tasks for every aspect of your life on one list can be overwhelming. Instead, create more manageable, targeted lists. You may have one list for clinical work, one for committee work, and one for academic work. You may also have a separate list for home tasks.

- **Use SMART goals.** The items on your to-do list should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based, if applicable. For example, instead of putting “Taxes” on your to-do list, you might start with “Gather documents for 2022 taxes.” Or instead of “Exercise,” put “Walk for 30 minutes.” Including vague, large items on a to-do list can undermine the list's effectiveness.

- **Limit the number of tasks on your daily list to what you can reasonably accomplish.** If you don't accomplish an item, you can move it to the start of your to-do list for the next day.

- **Remember your life's purpose.** Write down your long-term goals in a document separate from your to-do list. Then, as you draft your to-do list, really think about whether your daily tasks are moving you toward your larger goals.

ELECTRONIC LISTS VS. PAPER LISTS

There are dozens of electronic to-do list and organizational apps available. Benefits of digital lists include that you are less likely to lose them, can easily transfer tasks from one day to the next, can access them from a variety of devices, and can sync them with your calendar. I reviewed five online recommendations for the best to-do list apps.⁶⁻¹⁰ The websites detailed 34 different apps in all, but the seven highlighted on page 6 were mentioned most frequently.

I have experimented with several different types of to-do lists, both paper and electronic, but I usually end up back with my tried-and-true piece of paper. Nothing beats the sense of accomplishment I get by crossing off a task on a paper list.

As we move into the new year, consider updating your to-do list process and see if it helps you spend your time more effectively each day while you pursue your longer-term goals. **FPM**



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SEVEN TO-DO LIST APPS

App	Platforms	Cost	Pros/cons
Tick Tick https://ticktick.com/	Web, Windows, Mac, iOS, and Android	Free basic version. Premium version: \$3/month or \$28/year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple and structured project organization • Integrates with calendar • Can edit tasks on a daily or weekly schedule • Can organize tasks using lists, tags, and due dates • Built-in pomodoro timer to enable you to start a 25-minute work session for any task
Things 3 https://culturedcode.com/things/	Mac, iOS	\$10/year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only available on Apple devices • Integrates with calendar • Simple but well designed
Todoist https://todoist.com/	Web, Windows, Mac, iOS, and Android	Free basic version. Premium version: \$4/month or \$36/year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacks high-level calendar integration • Can add deadlines and color code different tasks • Balances power with simplicity • Adding tasks is easy
Any.do https://www.any.do/	Web, Windows, Mac, iOS, and Android	Free basic version. Premium version: \$6/month or \$36/year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well designed • Drag and swipe option to mark tasks as complete • Sends push notifications in the morning to highlight tasks for the day • Integrates with Google and Outlook calendars
Microsoft To-do https://todo.microsoft.com/tasks/	Web, Windows, Mac, iOS, and Android	Free	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evolved from Wunderlist • Smooth and efficient task scheduling • Can accommodate recurring due dates • Deep integration with other Microsoft products • Able to sync Outlook tasks to mobile devices
Google Tasks https://support.google.com/a/users/answer/9991367	Web, Windows, Mac, iOS, and Android	Free	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated with all Google products • Can add tasks while in Gmail without having to open another window • Not a lot of organizational options
Remember the Milk https://www.rememberthemilk.com/	Web, Windows, Mac, iOS, and Android	Free basic version. Premium version: \$40/year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calendar integration • Automated task prioritization • Streamlined keyboard shortcuts • Seamlessly integrate with team members

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