

Time Management

Finding Time to Organize

Let's tackle that "I don't have time" excuse you have for not organizing. Come on! Do you really need to watch that rerun of a rerun of a sitcom that wasn't very funny in the first place? No? Suddenly, you have a half-hour for organizing.

What about those other things you "have" to do?

- Watching a football game? Try *listening* to it while organizing instead. Conjuring pictures of the game in your mind will be good for your creativity as well.
- Simply *must* see the plays of the game? Take a few drawers to the TV room to organize during commercials and other "boring" times. Go to your work area and organize a shelf during halftime.
- Kids need help with homework? Have them sit at your desk (of course, you'll need to make space for them). Give them their spelling words while you straighten a shelf. Ask them to read to you—a wonderful way to make organizing time go faster. Think of the wonderful lesson of organization you'll teach your kids at the same time you spend quality time together.
- Can't skip your workout? Don't. When you're trotting along on the treadmill, envision a messy drawer and decide what you'll do with all the excess junk later. When you actually get to the task of organizing, the process will go much faster.

You say you can't multi-task? For the most part, organizing takes more patience than brain-power. Obviously, don't try organizing your file cabinet while you're discussing your novel with an editor, but doing a not-so-fun-for-you activity such as organizing a drawer during commercials or pesky phone calls may help you get through both activities more easily.

Get into the habit of setting aside some time each day to organize. Saying you'll spend a half-hour each day organizing doesn't mean it has to be done all at once (or even spending *only* 30 minutes). Sure, plan that half-hour organizing time, but also try to fit in a few minutes here and there and you'll be surprised at how much you can accomplish.

- Are you able to spare five minutes before you start work and at the end of the day? How about 10 minutes of your lunch break? *Voila!* That's 20 minutes of organizing time.
- Empty a drawer or shelf before lunch or at the end of the day. Let your subconscious work on what you'll do with those items. When you get back to your work area, the items may magically tell you where they belong.
- Stuck on trying to figure out how to get your main character out of (or into) a jam? Spend a few minutes organizing and your subconscious may work out the problem for you.
- Chatting on the phone with your mother? Organize at the same time (if you spend a lot of time on the phone, a telephone headset that leaves your hands free can be a great investment—just today I did a quick re-organization of all my kitchen cupboards during a phone conversation with a friend).

If you have a block of time in which to organize, but don't have the enthusiasm, try selecting a song from several CDs you put in the multi-CD changer on "random." Start the music and organize until the song you selected plays. You may be lucky enough for your song to be the second or third played, or you may have to wait an hour or more. You may even surprise yourself and be disappointed your song played just when you were on a roll. Keep on organizing if that happens.

Are you easily distracted when doing something you find difficult or boring such as organizing? Find ways to help you stick to the task.

- Does the telephone or email call out to you as an excuse to stop what you're doing? Get into the habit of making calls and sending emails in batches only in certain time frames each day, such as immediately when you get to your work area, just before and after lunch, and at the end of the day.
- Need a reminder to keep your hands off the phone or keyboard while you organize? Drape a towel over them—just make sure all the towels in the house don't end up under the clutter.
- Do you find yourself wandering off to other parts of the house to avoid organizing? Put a chair in the doorway or stretch a piece of string across your doorway (a stickpin through the string and stuck between the doorframe and the wall won't damage your walls). Just be sure you don't do anything too difficult to get through in the event of an emergency.
- If you're at a point where you're sitting to do your organizing, such as cleaning out your desk drawers or file cabinet, try putting a marble in one shoe or put on one heel and one regular shoe to remind you to put your butt back in your chair the second you stand up.

Are outside influences (e.g. kids, spouse, roommate) distracting you?

- A simple solution: ban them from your work area.
- What? Your kids are too young to leave alone? Try getting together with a friend or neighbor and trade off babysitting so that you'll have occasional distraction-free time.
- You need to be available for your older kids if they need you? Many years ago, I heard Bruce Coville, author of many books including *My Teacher Flunked the Planet*, talk about his work habits. When he wore his "vest of invisibility" (a distinctive vest), his kids knew not to disturb him in any way unless it was an emergency. That hint stuck with me even though I never had any kids.

Unfortunately, Coville's hint doesn't work on cats! My biggest distraction is my cat. Yes, I'm breaking my own rule by never locking her out of my office no matter how big a pest she becomes. She does make a good paperweight when my window's open. I just wish I could teach her to play Twister™—you know, "Right rear paw on the Chapter Eight notes. Left front paw on the Chapter Two first draft"

To Do List

Do you sometimes wake up in the middle of the night realizing you forgot to do something important? My experiences as managing editor of *Stories for Children Magazine* reminded me that many creative people are sometimes forgetful. A few people emailed me with the question "Did I send this contract back to you yet?"

Keeping a separate To Do List to remind you of important tasks is helpful—as long as you remember to add what needs doing to the list.

You don't need a fancy store-bought notepad with a cute phrase such as "Things I'm Putting Off" written at the top. Use those if they'll help keep you on track, but backs of used envelopes work just fine—and you're also being "green."

The list doesn't even have to be on paper—a computer or PDA file works even better for the technologically-minded. I personally prefer a paper list so that I can see it at a glance—and seeing it nags me to get things done.

If you choose a paper To Do List, keep it in the same place all the time (mine is just to the right of my computer screen where I'm able to glance at it while waiting for slow downloads; I also sometimes declare "no computer" time and turn off the computer just to do other tasks). A To Do List won't do you any good if you can't access it easily.

Whenever you have a bit of spare time or simply need a transition from one project to another, select an item from the list and do it. You may even want to build some "Tackle the To Do List" time into your schedule.

The types of things you may want to include on your To Do List:

- Check out the writing section of the library for new books.
- Get more 9"x12" envelopes for mailing manuscripts.
- Research publishers for [whatever] manuscript.

(An aside: a household To Do List is also helpful for things such as "make vet appt.," "trim the lilacs," and "get oil changed in car.")

The best part of keeping a To Do List is the satisfaction you feel when you cross off an item at its completion.

Calendars

As you know, calendars are essential for good organization.

Like the To Do List, your calendars may be electronic or paper and purchased or homemade. Many computer programs have a built-in calendar that allow you to print blank calendars, let you fill the calendars electronically, or both.

I used to use a desk blotter calendar, which had plenty of space for writing notes as well as forcing me to keep my desk clear, but now I use the simple, 8.5"x11," make-on-my-computer, see-at-a-glance calendar.

Accomplishments Calendar

Another calendar I use is an "Accomplishments" calendar with space to write in each day. A dollar store planning calendar with a nice picture works well because I lean it against my lamp, where it's handy, but takes up almost no space.

Back in my days as the Minnesota SCBWI regional advisor, I'd often get to the evening knowing I'd been busy, busy, busy all day, but couldn't see that I'd accomplished anything. I started keeping track of what I did each day and realized that 25-30 hash marks next to "SCBWI emails" (my record was something like 78 emails in a day) are what kept me from working on other projects.

Typical things I now include on my Accomplishments Calendar are

- Called J. N. about his “Two-Shoes” ms.
- Edited R.C’s “Gilpin” ms.
- First draft of “Time Management” section
- Rewrote “Cowboy Hats”

I also include non-work things such as “lunch with Patty,” “Bonnie phone 2 hours” [Hey! She’s my sister who lives in another state and we don’t talk that often.], “quickie clean entire condo.,” etc.

An accomplishments calendar can give you a real feeling of satisfaction or spur you to action if a few days have a lot of white space on them.

Important Stuff Calendar

An “important stuff” calendar (I prefer that term to “appointments” because not all important stuff is meeting others) is essential to keep you on track. Not only will the calendar tell you when and where you need to be at what times (the “appointment” aspect), but can also let you know other important events in your life, especially things that have deadlines.

Most of the time your work life and your private life should be kept separate, but an important stuff calendar is an exception to that or you may end up booking a meeting with someone you need to interview at the same time you’re supposed to be attending your daughter’s dance recital. You may wish to keep another calendar in the kitchen for family members to schedule their events.

Your important stuff calendar should include speaking engagements, meetings, doctor visits, etc., but other items of importance may include

- Estimated taxes due
- Library books due
- Send birthday card to Auntie Em (and actually get the card to her before her birthday in September instead of wishing her “Happy Halloween” in the same card)
- Anything else you tend to forget

At the end of each year, you may wish to fill out the entire next year’s calendar with dates that don’t change (such as birthdays, anniversaries, tax dates, etc.). That way, it’ll all be ready for you when you need it. At the very least, fill out the calendar two or three months in advance.

An extra hint: Make a list of all birthdays, anniversaries, and other dates that don’t change. Following that list each year may make filling out your important stuff calendar go quicker if you’re not having to stop to think when your brother’s birthday is, plus you won’t forget anyone.

Projects Calendar

Keeping a separate projects calendar can be motivating, especially if you’re the type who works better with deadlines. Writing what you hope to accomplish on a calendar can keep you going on those days you don’t know what to work on next.

Types of things to include on a projects calendar are

- Research third chapter of “Feline Facts”
- Rewrite chapters 4-6 of “The Windmill”
- Organize bottom right-hand desk drawer

- Final draft “Animal Adventure” (due next week)
- Research publishers for “Maybe Katey”
- Month-end finances
- Fill in two more weeks on calendar schedule

Something else you may want to include on a projects calendar is when you expect replies to submissions or, because so many publishers no longer reply unless interested, when to give up hope of receiving a reply. For this date, add a couple of weeks to the maximum amount of time the publisher guidelines say they’ll respond. For example, “responds in 2-3 months” means you’ll write the name of the publisher and a word or two of the manuscript title (e.g. “XYZ—Lion”) about 14 weeks from the day you mail the submission. That way, you’ll know to send the submission to the next publisher right away or else contact the publisher to ask the status of your manuscript.

A computer works best for this schedule because you’ll be able to make updates without messing up or actually destroying your calendar. You don’t even need to use an actual “calendar,” but just list the days in a word processing program and what you want to do under them. When you update your schedule, simply delete the old dates. What you need to do will still be there to separate by new dates.

If you want to get really creative, you can use a spreadsheet and break out the type of activities such as “research,” “paperwork,” “errands,” etc.

Be realistic in the time you allow to complete each project. Do you really think you can do the first rewrite of your 400-page novel in two days? Leave yourself plenty of time and you won’t get frustrated at not completing your projects as scheduled. Remember, working ahead is always an option.

A good idea is to schedule at least a half-day each week for “catch-up time.” If you’ve completed all your projects by then, good for you! You may use the time to do an extra project (organize that supply closet?), work ahead on your other projects, or take a well-deserved rest.

Don’t do your schedule more than two or three weeks in advance. Something (an editor requesting a rewrite?) may pop up and take over your plans. You may also get on a roll and end up a few days ahead of schedule. You’ll ultimately save time by not planning too far in advance.

One of the best things about having a projects calendar is that if someone calls and wants you to spend a couple of days going door-to-door collecting donations for an organization, you can honestly say, “My calendar is full.”

Final Thoughts on Calendars and a To Do List

Whether you keep your calendars and To Do List on paper or electronically, color-coding may be helpful. When I first started doing a projects list, I used red ink for the most important items (the “must do” stuff), blue ink for the less important tasks (the “should do” stuff), and black ink for low-priority items (the “do if there’s time” stuff).

That way, when you check your To Do List and calendars for what to do next, you’ll have the colors to guide you. These days I can practically see the colors in my head without putting them on paper so don’t color code any more.

What I still do, and you should as well, is cross off the items you’ve completed. Not only will that allow you to see what still needs doing easier, the feeling of satisfaction is wonderful.

That final act of scratching out or hitting the delete key on something you particularly detest doing (such as contacting an editor because your royalty check is late AGAIN or washing the blinds) is downright thrilling!

Whether you delete the items on paper or electronically, reward yourself for your good work periodically (in my case, it's when I've gone to a new sheet of paper for my To Do List). Your reward depends on your budget and your schedule and can be anything from a dinner out to a relaxing bath to that new mystery novel you've been eyeing.