

Try This At Work

Here I describe a basic set of steps to start benefiting from the ideas in Getting Things Done.

Start here, but don't stop here! Read the book by David Allen, which you can find in any book store. Scroll to the bottom of this document if you just want to buy it now!

Before You Begin

- You will need about 1 hour to set everything up the first time. Do as much as you can in 50 minutes, then stop and take a break for 10 minutes.
- Don't try to organize absolutely everything yet! I provide this information to help you try the basics out and see if you like this style of working. If you like it, then read the book to understand and try the entire system.
- Decide whether to do this as the first thing in the morning or the last thing before leaving the office. Doing this in the middle of the day tends not to work as well.

Gather Your Materials

- About 100 pages of paper. (Really.)
- Pencil or pen. If you use a pen, you might throw away more paper, so get another 20 pages of paper. (Trust me.)
- Timer. You want to be able to set a timer for 50 minutes, then for 10 minutes. Any timer will do. Your phone probably has a countdown timer. Take 2 minutes now to learn how to use it to countdown and make a noise. That's all you need.
- Find a quiet space. You'll need to concentrate and you also might need to make some noise: some yelling, grunting, that kind of thing. This won't be easy. Also, go someplace where no-one will interrupt you.

JBRAINS.CA

Remember these key principles!

Get stuff out of your head; write it in your Inbox.

Try doing work 1 hour at a time: 50 minutes of work, then a 10-minute break. Set a timer and follow it.

If you can do it in two minutes, then do it now; otherwise, put it in your Inbox to do later.

- Now set your timer for 50 minutes and go.

Part 1: Collect

In this part, you get your backlog of work out of your head. Please don't limit this to "work" work: include everything you have committed to do, have decided to do, and want to do, whether it's part of your day job, your home life, or your hobbies.

Follow these steps

1. Get projects out of your head. A project is any outcome you want that requires multiple steps to achieve. Yes, even if it's only 3 steps. Yes, even if it's only 2 steps. When a project comes into your head, write it at the top of its own page. Do this for all the projects in your head, writing one project on each page. Don't worry about getting this perfectly right; focus on getting this out of your head so that you can focus on the next step. Now you have 30-100 pages, each one with the name of a single project at the top. You might need to get more paper.
2. Get next actions out of your head. Start at the top of your stack of projects, and for each project, write down one and only one action that takes a step towards completing it. Please do not write down more than one action yet, because that could take hours! Your goal right now is to identify a next action for every project. Don't worry about getting this perfectly right. If you realize that you really need to do something else before a next action, you can fix that later. For now, focus on getting this out of your head so that you can focus on the next step. Now you have 30-100 pages, each one with the name of a single project at the top, and a single next action underneath. You might need to get a few more pages of paper.
3. Start your Inbox. Take a new page and write "Inbox" at the top. You will use this later.

Part 2: Process

In this simplified version of Getting Things Done, you won't do too much processing, but you will have a little bit to do.

1. Apply the Two-Minute Rule. Look through your next actions for anything that you feel very certain that you can finish in two minutes, and put those pages in a little pile. You might have an empty pile; that's OK. Now look at the pile again. Are you absolutely sure that you can finish each of those next actions in two minutes? Now is a good time to put some of

those items back in the general pile of projects; that's OK. Now you have a small pile of 0-10 projects, each with a single next action that you can finish in two minutes. This is the top of your "do today" (or "do tomorrow" if it's already close to quitting time) list.

Surprisingly, that's all you need to process for the moment. You might do a little more, a little later.

Part 3: Organize

For now, with this simplified system, you'll only organize your immediate work, but that shouldn't bother you, since you probably already have enough immediate work that needs organizing.

1. Scan for the most urgent work. Look for next actions that are due today. Look through the remaining next actions for anything that is due today. Something is due today only if someone else needs the result of that action today. Put those pages in a small pile. You might have an empty pile; take 10 seconds to celebrate. Now look at the pile again. Are you absolutely sure that you absolutely must finish those next actions today? (If nobody needs the result of that action, then why do you need to do it today? What bad thing happens if you don't do it today?) Now is a good time put some of those items back in the general pile of projects. Now you have a small pile of 0-5 projects, each with a single next action that you absolutely have to finish today. Put this pile at the bottom of your "do today" list, after the Two-Minute actions.
2. Look for satisfying work. Look for one more thing that you want to finish today. Of all the next actions you have left, I bet you have one that takes more than two minutes, and isn't due today, but that you really, really want to finish today. Only pick one. You don't have to pick the absolute most urgent, the absolute most important, you have to pick the one that you will feel best about finishing or the one that you will feel worst about delaying. Now you have the One More Thing that you want to finish today. Put this at the bottom of your "do today" list, after the Due Today actions.

Part 4: Do

Now that you've practised some of the basic steps of collecting, processing, and organizing work, get to work!

1. Put your organized stack of next actions within reach.
2. Set an alarm for 30 minutes before you intend to leave the office for the day. You'll need

this later.

3. Set a timer for 50 minutes. (I know: a pomodoro is only 25 minutes. If you already feel comfortable at that rhythm, then do that instead.)
4. Take the first next action, which might be the first Two-Minute task, the first Due Today task, but probably not your One More Thing. (Do the urgent and tiny things first.) Do it until it's done or the timer tells you to stop.
5. When the timer tells you to stop, take a 10-minute break. During your break, get up and walk around; it's important for your health—you know, your primary source of energy to get things done. (Sitting is the new smoking, you know.)
6. Continue to alternate 50-minute working sessions with 10-minute breaks.
7. When you finish a next action, ask yourself, Have I finished this project? If you have finished it, then throw that project's page away (rip it in half, at least); if you know that there's more work to do, then write the new next action on the project page. Don't work on this new next action yet, unless you're very, very sure it will take only two minutes! Finish all the Two-Minute, Due Today and One More Thing actions first.
8. If your stack of work runs out before the day ends, then scan your pile of remaining next actions, pick one, then do it. When you finish it, ask yourself whether you've finished the project yet. Repeat.
9. Stop when your "I intend to leave the office for the day" alarm sounds. You'll need to do a little collecting and processing before you go home, and it can take a surprising amount of time.

Rules for Completing Next Actions

I've written these rules for novice practitioners. If you prefer to treat them as guidelines, then feel free to do that.

- Alternate 50 minutes of working and a 10-minute break. (If you prefer a different rhythm, use it, but if you're not sure, try this.)
 - Take your lunch break as usual.
- When you're working on a task, minimize obvious distractions.
 - If something pops into your head, then write it quickly in your Inbox, then stop thinking about it and get back to the task at hand.
 - If someone interrupts you, apply the Two-Minute Rule. If you can't do what they need

in two minutes, then write it quickly in your Inbox. Ask the person, If I can't finish this today, then how does that affect you? Often it's no big deal, and you can defer it to later. If the person's need sounds compelling, then add it to your Due Today pile, otherwise leave it in your Inbox.

- When it's time to take a break, take a real break. Don't check email; don't process your Inbox; don't work on a task. Get up, move around, talk to someone.

When it's 30 minutes before you intend to leave the office for the day, collect more work for tomorrow:

- Check your email inbox, accept meeting requests, mark emails that need you to respond to, write down new tasks in your Inbox.
 - Process your Inbox.
 - Mark Two-Minute items, which you'll do tomorrow.
 - Move other items into new or existing project pages. You might now have two or three next actions for a project; don't worry about that, but don't add more.
 - As you process each item in the Inbox, cross it off in your Inbox.
 - When your Inbox is empty, you're done!

Summary

I have presented the basics of Getting Things Done. With these steps, you can start taking more control over your work. If you follow these steps, you will notice two things: you have a lot of little things to do, and you can focus better on doing them. Don't stop here.

1. Read the book Getting Things Done to learn more about the system, how it works, and the psychological benefits of it.
2. Implement the system as fully as you can for two weeks.
3. Ask me, or your colleagues, for help. Tell your colleagues about how you're reorganizing your work and how that should benefit them. Invite others to do this with you. Compare your experiences.
4. Don't expect everything to go perfectly from today; some of the benefits come quickly, and others take time. Building your trusted system will take time. Let it happen.

Further Reading

- David Allen, [Getting Things Done](#).
- Julie Morgenstern, [Never Check E-mail in the Morning](#). (I know it sounds too good to be true. I made it work at IBM.)

Helpful Tools

- [Todoist](#) to manage your next actions list.
- [FollowUpThen](#) for time-sensitive reminders, as a tickler, and to manage when you're waiting for other people to complete tasks.
- [Evernote](#) for filing reference material that doesn't require your action yet.

Don't Forget to Ask For Help!

J. B. (Joe) Rainsberger helps teams deliver better software with less stress. Ask him questions about lean/agile software development, agile software design techniques like test-driven development, and how to drive pointless stress out of your work at <https://ask.jbrains.ca>.