

Ten Tips for To-Do Lists

According to productivity expert David Allen, using to-do lists are a smart way of keeping on top of your workload. However, there are a number of things you can do to enhance the value of your to-do list and really make it work for you. Based on Allen's best-selling book *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress Free Productivity*, here are his top tips for effective to-do lists.[1]



1. Don't keep it all in your head. This is Allen's first and most important tip when it comes to to-do lists. Our short-term memory can only hold between seven and ten items, so it can become difficult to remember everything single thing you need to do without making a written list. Rather than getting stressed trying to remember everything, making a list will help you focus on what you need to do, as well as reducing anxiety levels.

2. Use a system that is right for you. When it comes to making your list, use a system or tools which already work for you. Many people use a good old **pen** and **notepad** to write their to-do list. You could also use a **spreadsheet** and keep it on your computer. If you are online a lot, why not check out some of the online to-do list applications such as [Remember the Milk](#) or [Toodledo](#)? If you have a Blackberry or SmartPhone, why not download a suitable to-do list App such as [Taskos](#) for Android or [2Do](#) for iPhone to help you get organised? Keep your list **visible** throughout the day to keep your list front of mind.

3. Get specific. Allen calls to-do lists 'next action' lists. Rather than putting vague terms such as 'presentation', 'meeting' or 'holiday', be specific about what it is you need to do. Your list should state **exactly what action** you need to take, or **take next** (for more complex tasks such as: 'create slides for presentation', 'organise venue for meeting' or 'search for flights for holiday to Spain'. To help you do this, start each item on your list with an action verb such as 'call...' or 'determine...' or 'present...'. This will get you thinking about the action you need to take to complete

the task. If you need to make a phone call, include the person's name and number on your to-do list. This means that when you have spare time (e.g. during your commute) you can still complete the tasks on your to-do list.

4. Try multiple lists. Rather than trying to keep a single list of tasks for all aspects of your life, it can be easier to use multiple lists. Allen says it can be helpful to keep separate lists of your **work-related tasks**, **housekeeping jobs** and **family/friends related reminders**. It is important that each list is kept in its proper place. For example, you might keep your work list in your journal, computer or Smartphone, your housekeeping list on the kitchen notice board and your family/friends related reminders in your diary.

5. Lose the big stuff. Allen says there is no point putting big goals like 'get a promotion' or 'lose three stone' on your to-do list. The point is to **break large goals down** into manageable bite-size chunks. The best to-do lists focus on tasks that need to be completed on that particular day. Rather than putting big goals such as these on your current to-do list, Allen recommends creating a separate 'Someday/Maybe' list, for tasks which don't quite fit into your life at the moment, but which you want to keep track of for the future.

6. Have a priority list. Allen recommends having a daily **priority** or **A-list** with the most important tasks right at the top. Anything else can go onto a lower priority, rolling B-list. When putting together your A-list, remember to **factor in other commitments** such as time spent at meetings etc. If you complete your A-list tasks, then start work on the B-list. As you work through the A-list, transfer items across from the B-list to keep things moving.

7. Keep it short and sweet. Don't try to cram lots of items into your to-do list, as this can leave you feeling stressed and de-motivated. Try to keep your daily list **pared down** to the essential tasks you need to get done that day. Allen recommends no more than 20 items to be spread across your A and B lists, all of which you are committed to completing over the next couple of weeks.

8. Do a weekly review. It is important that you regularly update your list to keep things fresh. Each week, take a look at the items on your list and **sort it by age**. It is likely that the oldest items are not being addressed due to some kind of mental block. It may be that they need to be broken down further and made more specific. Alternatively it could be that they don't need to get done at all, and you can delete them from your list. Allen recommends blocking out 30 minutes in your diary every week when you can **review** and **update** your list. Many people choose to do this on a Friday so that their list is in good shape for the week ahead.

9. Log your completed tasks. Allen explains that your list of 'done' or completed tasks is a powerful indicator of the overall effectiveness of your system. If a couple of days have gone by and you haven't completed any tasks, it might be time to take a look at your list, and identify **what is stopping you** from completing key tasks. You can also use your completed list to keep your colleagues and managers updated on your **progress** and **achievements**.

10. Don't list everything! Finally, however useful to-do lists may be, don't let them completely take over your life. Having too many lists can actually be counterproductive and stressful. Allen says that only around 20% of your life should be on a list at any one time

[1] David Allen, *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress Free Productivity*, Penguin,

2002.

Image Credit: Flickr [john.schulz](#) (accessed 10 October 2014 .