# Priorities: how to decide what to do, and when.

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Deciding what to do and when to do it is among the most challenge aspects of improving your personal productivity.  Clearing your workspace, filing, even emptying your e-mail inbox is simple by comparison. Why?  "How to decide what to do when" cannot be reduced to an algorithm.  Days never turn out as predicted, so even advance planning does not insure successful completion of today's list. What you need is a framework and flexibility.  I'll provide a framework, and you will need to provide the flexibility. In my next essay (yes, this is a teaser), I'll *execution* i.e. how to get done what you have decided needs to be done.

<u>What to do: Develop an inventory of current projects</u>

"The affairs of life embrace a multitude of interests, and he who reasons in any one of them, without consulting the rest, is a visionary unsuited to control the business of the world." – James Fenimore Cooper

When faculty talk about "priorities" they are usually referring to the achievement of a goal, such as a promotion, a research breakthrough, or a leadership position; and students are thinking of a degree, or a job. But you can't "do" promotion, scientific discovery, leadership, or a degree.  Instead, you reach these goals by achieving a series of specific outcomes, which I am going to refer to as "projects" (Allen, 2001). Examples of projects are writing a paper, submitting a grant, preparing a lecture, planning a trip, buying new lab equipment, attending a leadership course, taking a course, writing a dissertation, and so on.

*Step 1: Start with a full deck.*

If I asked you to list your projects, the odds are you would respond with a short list of projects that support your major goals.  But you have a large number of other projects to which you have committed to complete over the next few days, weeks or months: your son's birthday party, a new home computer purchase, next week's new student lecture, tomorrow's conference call preparation, and so on.  Most people try to keep a "list" of their high priority projects in their head, and don't keep track of other projects at all – except when a deadline looms.  Here is the recommendation (Allen, 2001): *keep a written list of <u>all</u> your projects.*

You may object that you can remember everything.  I doubt it - most people have between 30 and 70 current projects, and the brain is not the safest storage medium. You may also object that the "high" priority and "low" priority projects don't belong on the same list.   But if you have committed to complete a project, no matter how small, the work required has to be considered when you are planning your time.  For the same reason, you must include on the list your projects from "home" as well as "work." A third common objection is this:  "…but the list will be so *long!*"  Exactly.  If you are really over-committed, the only way out is to face the facts, which leads us to Step 2.

*Step 2: Remove the jokers from the deck.*

Your project list should include *only* projects to which you are committed (over the next few days, weeks or months), and nothing else. Project lists tend to attract "jokers" – projects you hope you can do, or wish you could do, but which really could be deferred. The identification of jokers is not always easy, but the benefits are enormous. Here are two: first, your focus on completion will improve when your brain knows that every project on the list must be done; and second, if the final list appears to be undoable, you are in a better position to negotiate a reduction in your load.

Occasionally, a project should obviously be deferred (e.g. Climb Mt. Everest This Month). Sometimes, it is not at all obvious (e.g. responding to an RFP at the same time you are preparing an R01 submission). Your challenge is to differentiate "wants" from "needs." The latter have to be done, while the former could be done now, later or never.

In order to clarify the status of each project on your list, I suggest assigning each to one of these categories:

    1) Required (e.g. getting board certified, changing the oil in my car)
    2) Promised (to someone else)
    3) Important for advancement in my career/life
    4) Important for my career/life, but could be postponed
    5) I'm just interested

*Categories 1 and 2.* Your only choices with these projects are to do them, delegate them, or negotiate a different agreement with your boss or the person to whom you made a promise. Again, ignoring these projects is not an option. Thus, you must understand the requirements of your job, and think carefully before you make a promise, no matter how small.

*Category 3.* Watch out! Danger lurks here. Many of us have a poorly defined idea of what is required for promotion or advancement. The common error is to believe that projects *you* think are interesting are required, when the people responsible for the advancement decisions do not. Especially when promotion is at stake, you must get feedback from experienced senior colleagues, and then take that advice seriously.

*Categories 4 and 5.* These categories represent your chance to reduce your work load. Decide which of these projects should be pruned from your active projects list. Don't delete them, but move them to a "someday" list. This list can be reviewed regularly, and you can promote projects to the active list when the time is right.

I've created (Step 1) a sample list modified from my own current project list (of 84 total projects), and edited it (Step2). Your list can be formatted however you like – note that I have divided the list into functional areas, and the projects are in alphabetical order, with "hard" due dates included in the project name. I've also used some sub-categories (paper, manuscript reviews) so that like items sort together. You can store your list on paper, in a spreadsheet or other electronic document, or in a list program (e.g. Outlook Tasks).

The items marked by an asterisk (*) are the result of promises – and although I have to do them, I may not want to accept more discretionary assignments for now. I took 3 items off the list: the bone RFA was interesting but outside my core area (category 5), Smith is in no hurry for the consultation (either 4 or 5), and my spices will last a bit longer (a 4, because I care about my cooking!).

Scholarship/Research
~~Bone grant RFA decision~~
*Paper – PMS chapter **DUE May 1**
*Paper – Essay to AP&S **DUE Aug 15**
SWAN study: May agenda plan

Teaching & Clinical service
*Hot flash lecture for CME conference in April
*Jones dissertation committee
Patient Lab follow up

Service
*Manuscript review – ACOG Précis chapter
*Manuscript review – FSMB journal **DUE March 23**
NBME meeting panel prep **DUE March 27**
Search committee – review nominations
~~Smith – time management consultation~~

Personal
China trip vaccinations
FASA completion
High school graduation party plan
Insurance policy decision
~~Spice replacement (kitchen)~~
Taxes 2006 submission

When to do: Develop a weekly and a daily plan.

"It is surprising how much I can get done when I take enough time for planning, and it is perfectly amazing how little I get done without it." -- Frank Bettger

Regular planning is a must. I recommend the method described in *Goldilocks & the Three Bears*: not too much, not too little, but *just right*.

*The week.*
A weekly review of your work is recommended by most experts (Allen, 2001; Covey et al, 1994). The weekly review is a classic example of an activity that is easy to do, but is not easy to make habitual. The simplest form review includes reading through your project list and your calendar entries for at least the next month. For each, add and delete entries as appropriate. As you review, identify projects for focus on this week (and the specific tasks needed to move each along), and any preparations needed for events on your calendar. Put these on a separate task list, and keep it in front of you during the week.

*The day.*

Many people believe they are supposed to spend most of their time doing high priority work. This belief is untrue, and would be impossible to carry out even if it were. Think for a moment about your personal life. Let's assume that your highest priority is spending time with family or friends. But if you spent all your personal time doing just that, the dishes and mail would pile up (and the bills never paid), your teeth would go unbrushed, and so on.

At work, the same is true (Allen, 2001). In addition to high priority projects, you have the other project to which you have committed, along with **new input** (mail, e-mail), **routine work** (going to clinic or class, taking call, signing forms); and **emergent work** that must be done right away (the call from your boss or the emergency room, the experiment that needs unexpected attention). In order for your life to work, you have to learn to juggle all three types.

The trick is to intentionally move between these categories over the course of the day. Here are some suggestions:

1) Identify a *short* list (no more than 5) of tasks that must be done before you go home that day – *at least* 1 should be related to a high priority project.

2) Complete at least one key task *before* you look at your email (Morgenstern, 2004).

3) Set time limits for e-mail and other routine work.

4) Alternate between high priority projects related work and the other categories.

Summary

These methods lead to more intentional approach to your work and your life. The up front work has huge payoffs: fewer missed deadlines, elimination of the stress of "what did I forget," and the knowledge that you know what really needs to be done.

**References**

Allen, David. (2001). *Getting Things Done.*. New York, Viking.

Bettger, Frank. (1947). *How I Raised Myself from Failure to Success in Selling*. New York, Fireside.

Covey, Stephen R, Merrill, Roger A, Merrill Rebecca R. (1994). *First Things First*. New York, Simon & Schuster.

Morgenstern, Julie. (2004). *Making Work Work.* New York, Fireside