A Simple Guide

— to —

Meaningful Productivity

Written and published by Shawn Blanc & friends.

thesweetsetup.com

Welcome! 👋

I'm Shawn Blanc.

I'm a husband, dad, writer, small-business owner, and creative entrepreneur. I live in Kansas City where I publish a small network of websites to help people like you do their best creative work.

For more than a decade I've been teaching and learning about creativity, diligence, and focus.

In 2013, I started The Sweet Setup as a place where we could highlight our favorite apps and those which are proven to be the *best* (and not necessarily just the newest).

The entire goal of our website is to help you, the reader, to get the most out of your time, energy, and attention. We want to help you find the right tool for the job and then get back to what it is that matters most to you. (That's why we're visited by more than 500,000 readers every month.)

But I realize that helping you find the right software tool is only one small part of the equation.

Tools help us be more efficient, but at the end of the day **the real challenge is to find the clarity and momentum we need in order to get traction on our goals.** I can download the best writing app for my Mac, but that doesn't transform me into someone who can show up every day and do the hard work of actually writing.

And we know that you get that...

Recently we conducted a short quiz where we asked our community and readership what their greatest challenges were when it came to utilizing technology and doing their best creative work.

When we asked people which categories of apps they were most reliant on, as well as which areas of their life they were most interested in, the response was overwhelmingly clear...

By far and away the greatest category of interest was related to productivity, time management, and focus.

As you can see from the charts on the right, by and large, what we learned is that you, our reader, want to make the most of your time and attention.

In this simple guide we're going to focus on the big picture of mindsets, tactics, and the overall approach to meaningful productivity.

You are not going to find *43 weird life hacks that change your life in seventeen seconds.* (Ugh.)

What you will find is a series of articles and stories I've written specifically on the topics of productivity and efficiency. This guide is here to serve you by giving you a jump-start on what we like to call Meaningful Productivity.

Thank you for reading.

— Shawn Blanc (@shawnblanc)
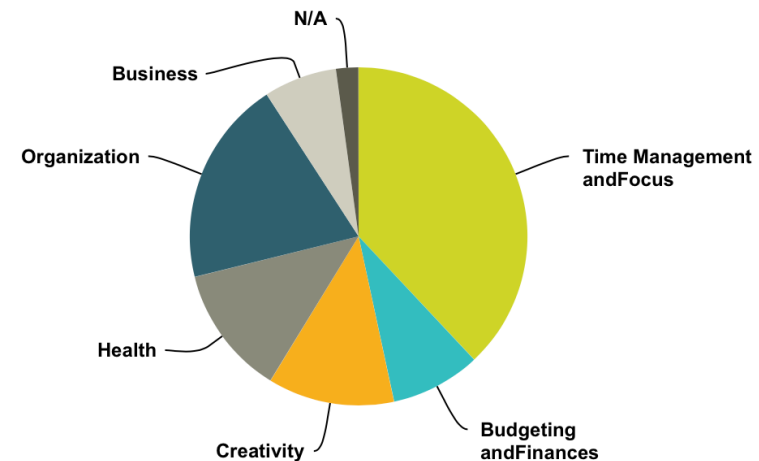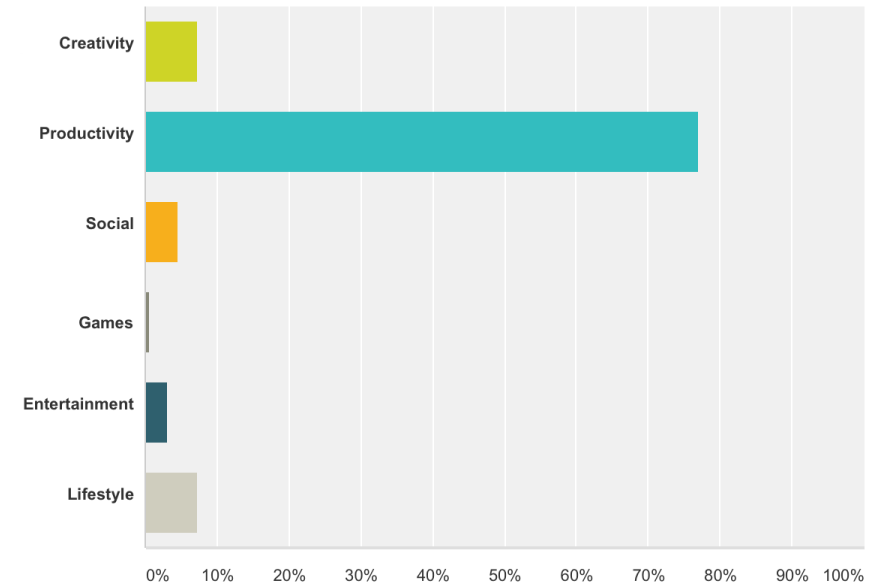
P.S. In addition to The Sweet Setup, we have a few other websites and products you may find helpful:

The Focus Course:

An online course to help you get clarity about your goals and priorities, build traction on your side projects, stop procrastinating, and bring your life into focus.

Time Management Training:

Scheduling, prioritizing, and time management training to help you get (and stay) in control of your time and attention.

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Mindsets and the Bigger Picture

Let's dive in to some helpful thoughts to frame productivity and rest. It's important to establish a healthy approach to our creative work and to consider the many challenges we face toward spending our time and energy on the things which matter most...

Thoughts on Meaningful Productivity

It's the end of the day. I work downstairs, so for me, closing up the office is as simple as stepping away from my desk and walking up the half-flight of stairs.

I've had this 30-second commute since 2011, which is when I quit my job to focus full-time on my writing at shawnblanc.net.

Despite the complete autonomy for how I spend my time, doing my best creative work is still a daily practice.

There have been seasons in my life when, at the end of my day, I walk up that half-flight of steps with a feeling that my day was a waste. I just spent hours at work, yet feel completely unsatisfied.

Usually this is because I got caught up in the seemingly urgent and pressing issues of the day. Things didn't go as well as I'd hoped they would. I tried to make progress on a meaningful task, but just kept hitting a wall.

It's now been over five years since I began working for myself and working from home. And over the years, it has become ever more important to me that I spend my time well. I've learned a bit about how I work (and how I should best be spending my time) so I have fewer "wasted days."

For me, spending my time well means spending my time creating.

But that's easier said than done.

Since I work for myself, I'm also in charge of all the budgeting and bookkeeping, server admin, customer support, marketing, income projections, content strategy, and more. Not to mention, you know, actually doing the work of writing and publishing.

I could spend hours and hours every day on email and other admin tasks. Or, I could spend hours every day making something.

This is not news, of course. You're in the same position.

It's the age-old conundrum of "urgent versus important," right? We want to spend our time on work that's important, not just work that's all shiny right now but won't matter one lick tomorrow.

Where everything changed for me was the day I realized that **I alone was in charge of how I spent my time**.

I have to choose how to spend my time. I can spend it on silly things or I can spend it on awesome things.

Sometimes, silly and awesome intersect (such as here).

But usually, when doing my most important work, it's work.

Which is why it can be so easy to become desensitized to shallow work. All the email and admin tasks are easy to do, and I fool myself into thinking that checking email throughout the day is a totally fine thing to do — I'm being "productive."

Below are some thoughts on what I call "*Meaningful* Productivity" — what it is, what it isn't, and why it matters.

Productivity Isn't Just for Business-y Stuff

Is the stay-at-home dad who spends most of his day changing diapers and cleaning up messes any less productive than his wife who is the CEO of a charity organization?

Of course not. Each is productive in his or her area of responsibility.

Productivity tends to be defined by how well we use our task management systems, how organized our calendar app is, how fast we can blaze through a pile of emails, and how fluidly we flow from one meeting to the next.

But those metrics skew toward rewarding effective busywork while giving little dignity to meaningful work.

This is why I want to define productivity differently. With less of a focus on our party trick of balancing many plates at once, and more of a focus on our ability to consistently give our time and attention to the things that are most important.

Productivity is Not Primarily About Efficiency

Productivity, in and of itself, is just a metric for efficiency.

Yes, efficiency is awesome. But what's more awesome is spending your time on the right things — things of substance and value.

Besides — even though productivity measures efficiency, it's a sliding scale.

How *fast* you can get something done is not always the proper metric. Sometimes I spend 30 minutes or more on a single email because it needs to be worded just right. Sometimes I can fire off a reply in less than a minute.

Speed alone doesn't matter. What matters is if I communicate the best I can.

While there is obviously no point in spending 30 minutes on a single email that could just as easily be written in 1, it's equally poor form to spend just 1 minute on an email that requires more time and thought.

My point being: rather than concerning ourselves mostly with tips and tricks, we should make sure we're actually spending our time well in the first place. Tips and tricks can help (and they're fun), but they aren't the main topic.

Meaningful Productivity Thrives on Deep Work, Focused Attention, and Relationships

More often than not, our best work is accomplished during times when we are in the zone. Or as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi says, when we are in a state of *flow*.

Focused Work looks like an hour or more of single tasking. Practicing a musical instrument. Practicing a physical activity. Writing. Painting. Planning and architecting. Coding. Designing. Etc.

Shallow work looks like "multitasking." Email correspondence. Checking our social network timelines. Browsing the news. Etc.

We can't pit deep work and shallow work against one another because they're both important in their own right.

However, neither should we replace the former with the latter.

Sure, there are some people whose most important work is to live in their email inbox — communicating with others. For most of us, if all we did was check email we'd be out of a job.

And yet, when most of us sit down to "work," the first thing we do is open our email program.

Why do we open our email? Because we don't know what else to do.

It's one thing to show up and set aside a few hours for focused work. It's another thing to know *what* to work on during that time.

When you realize that you're in control of your time and attention, you'll see that you have two roles: boss and worker.

You are both the planner and the executer. The thinker and the doer.

Don't try to do both of these jobs at the same time. Have planning, thinking, strategizing time. And then, later, have working and doing time.

For example, if you're going to write something, don't sit down when it's time to write and ask yourself, "what shall I write about now?"

Know ahead of time what your writing topic will be. This way, when you sit down to write you have just one task: to write.

Meaningful Productivity is a Byproduct of Clarity

You can't spend your time doing work that matters if you don't know what matters in the first place.

Productivity hacks, daily routines, automation tools, and the like are all great, but they are a means for optimizing how you're already spending your time. They're just faster horses.

And what good is a faster horse if you're on the wrong road, headed to the wrong place?

We need clarity about who we are, what our values are, our vision for life, what's important, and what we can do every day to stay steady in our aim of doing our best creative work.

You Have to Start With Meaning

If true (Meaningful) Productivity is doing that which is most important, then it means that productivity is not ultimately based on efficiency, but rather vision and values.

This is why having a life vision and life goals is so powerful. With them, you can define what it looks like to actually be productive (not just busy).

It is in the area of work that this fight to be meaningfully productive is perhaps the most difficult. Our offices, workflows, managers, reports, and meetings all center around the act of being busy with little in place to recognize or reward meaningful productivity.

Productivity "hacks" and "tricks" that promise real and lasting change apart from a foundation of personal values, vision, and personal integrity are merely skin-deep.

The foundation of **meaningful productivity** is having values (purpose) and vision (priorities) and the integrity to walk them out.

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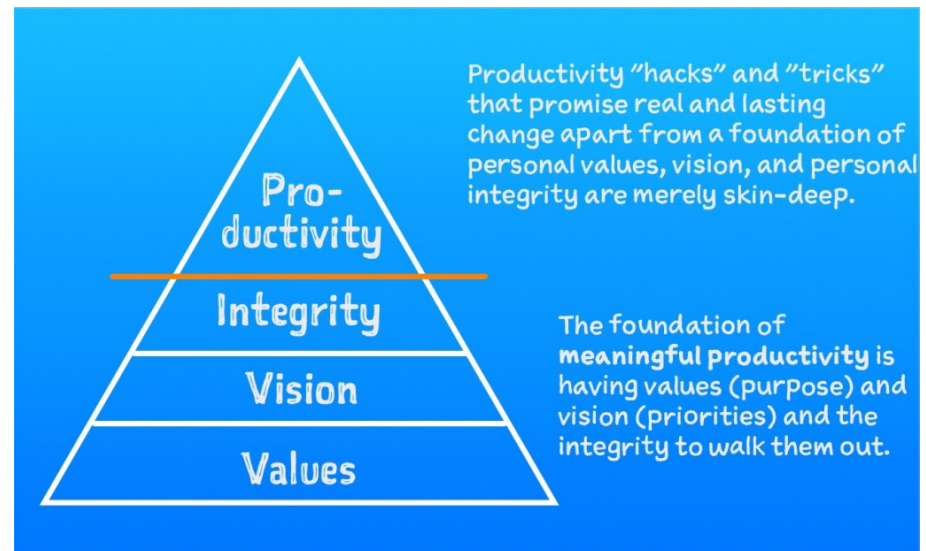
The foundation of meaningful productivity is having values (or purpose), vision (or priorities), and the personal integrity to walk them out.

Ask yourself this:

- What is most important to you in life?
- What are your most valuable relationships?
- What are the values you most want to impart to others?

Answer those questions and you've got a strong foundation to direct how you spend your time and energy. Because now you can measure your tasks against your vision and values and use them to define meaningful productivity for your life.

Margin for Your Schedule

I love how David Allen says that you can't actually *manage* time. If you start with 5 minutes, there's no way to manage it well enough that it will turn into 6 minutes.

What you *can* do is manage how you *spend* your time, which is more like time stewardship — because you alone are responsible for taking care of the time you have in the day.

And this is why margin in our schedule is so important. It gives us the breathing room and the wherewithal to steward our time and manage ourselves in how we spend it.

In his book, *Margin*, Richard Swenson states that there are four main areas of life that we most need margin in. They are our emotional energy, our physical energy, our finances, and our schedule.

And I would add one more area to that list: We also need margin in our mental energy — our thoughts, and with it, creative energy.

You can't pit any of these against one another when looking for one that is more or less important. They overlap and intertwine with one another so much that when we have margin in one area, it helps open the door to margin in the other areas. And, conversely, when we *lack* margin in one area, it puts a strain on the others.

When We LACK Margin in Our Schedule

When there is margin in our life, it brings with it a sense of contentment, simplicity, balance, and rest.

Consider this with your current schedule...do you feel content, balanced, and rested?

- Is your schedule simple enough that you control it? (Or does it control you?)

- At the end of the day, when you look back at how you spent your time, do you feel content? Or do you feel frustrated at all the things you *didn't* do and all the fires you had to react to and put out?

- At the end of your day, do you feel that your day was balanced? Were you meaningfully productive? Did you spend your time on things that matter most to you in more than just one area of your life? Is there an area of your life that dominates your schedule and causes other areas of your life to get out of balance?

- At the start of your day, do you feel rested and prepared to do awesome things? Or do you feel behind before you even begin?

Your answers to these questions can help you determine if there is any margin in your schedule. But my hunch is that you don't need much self-assessment to know if your schedule has breathing room or not.

When We HAVE Margin in Our Schedule

Imagine waking up in the morning and being able to spend time doing what you want to do.

Perhaps it's going to the gym or going on a walk. Having time in quiet to read, think, and/or journal. Being able to make a healthy breakfast and still have time to prepare for work and begin your day doing the things that are most important.

Margin in your schedule means your day has breathing room.

And that breathing room means two things: (1) that you can set aside time for doing the things that are most important; and (2) there is space to account for the unexpected. That's what Margin is all about: it's space left over.

Conversely, when our schedule lacks any breathing room, it's like waking up just minutes before having to rush out the door. Grabbing a Pop-Tart without even having the time to put it in the toaster. Then, getting to work and spending 8 or more hours putting out fires and responding to multiple urgent issues.

The difference between a schedule with and without margin is far more than just one of getting up earlier. It's an internal choice. The choice to take ownership of our time and attention.

The person with margin has taken ownership of their time and has slowly established a routine that allows for health and breathing room. The other person is, honestly, a bit out of control.

Out of Control

I love how Dan Mall replaced the phrase "I don't have time" with "it's not a priority" for his internal dialog:

> Recently, I've tried to stop saying, "I don't have time." It insinuates that I'm a helpless victim to the all-powerful stream of hours that mightily passes me by. It's easy to adopt an "Oh well" attitude to what you're giving up. It authorizes my apathy.

Instead, I've replaced it with the phrase, "That's not a priority." Suddenly, I've taken control of my own decisions. I've taken responsibility for what I do and don't do. I've added clarity, condemnation, and encouragement, all in 4 short words.

How many people do you know who "don't have time," who are "so busy?" Everyone, right? We're all so busy. None of us have any time.

This has kind-of become the standard answer we all give when people ask us how we're going. It's a badge of honor, even.

I used to think that the busier I was, the more important I was. The more people who wanted me to do stuff for them, the more meetings I was invited to, the more projects I was in charge of — all of it was proof that I was important. Each additional commitment was another badge on my uniform to display to those around just how important and responsible I was.

But there's a difference between having a full schedule and being busy. My schedule is still very much full. But it's full with all the things I am choosing to do. Such as three meals a day with my family. Time in the evening to read. Time in the morning to write. A whole day of the week where I build trains with my boys and don't even look at email. A date with my wife every single week.

How to Restore Margin to our Schedule

There are so many ways you can restore (and maintain) breathing room in your schedule. Here are just a few suggestions:

- **Give yourself permission to have some breathing room**: This is what the book *Fringe Hours* is all about. You need margin in your schedule; it's okay to make

that happen. Give yourself permission to create some breathing room and to spend your time doing the things that are most important to you.

- **Automate, delegate, and eliminate**: Are you spending time doing things that aren't important or could be done by someone else? Cut those tasks out or delegate them to someone else.

- **Cut out baseline noise**: When you got up this morning, did you check your phone right away? Email, social network timeline, news feed? Did that help you start your day? Do you even remember what you read?

- **Minimum and Maximum time blocks**: Give yourself a minimum amount of time to spend on important things and a maximum amount of time to spend on less-important things. For me, this looks like a minimum of two hours writing and a maximum of 30 minutes doing email. I have a minimum time I spend with my family each day and a maximum time to watch Netflix each week. A minimum amount of time spent reading and a maximum amount of time spent on social networks.

- **Schedule your most important tasks**: If you know what is most important for you to do each day, then schedule it.

- **Single tasking**: I'm terrible at this one, but trying to recover. If you look at my computer, there are about 9,000 open windows and browser tabs. In an ideal state, there would be just one open window — the one I'm using to write this text right now.

  Single tasking goes beyond just focusing on one software app at a time, it also goes for other activities. For example: don't check your email when playing ball with your kids. If you're scheduling your most important tasks, then it's safe to

assume you've planned when you're going to do all the things that are meaningful to you. So, trust your commitments to yourself and single-task the activity you're doing right now.

Your Daily Plumb Lines

One of the quickest ways to take ownership of your schedule is to know what your most important work is. What are the areas of your life that you want to spend time on?

As I mentioned above, set a minimum and a maximum time allowance for different things.

In short, urgent tasks will always find us, which is why we have to be proactive about making time for the important tasks and then protecting that time.

Urgent issues always come up. If they don't align with your vision and values, then you can feel comfortable saying no. Like Dan Mall says, "it's not a priority."

For me, I have a few areas of my life that I want to spend time developing every single day. These areas are my work, my personal self, and my family.

I have just a couple of things in each area that I want to do every single day. They are my Daily Plumb Lines. They include things such as: pushing the needle forward on at least one of my current projects; spend time away from my desk; learn something; encourage and serve my wife; give my boys my full attention.

It can be easy to get distracted by something interesting, exciting, or urgent and to not even realize that I'm actually just wasting my time.

Sometimes when I sit down to work, I will feel overwhelmed at all the plates I know I have spinning. I'll feel unsure about what my next action step should be. This is not an ideal state to be in, but it happens. It's not the end of the world, and there are ways out.

For the days when I feel as if I have nothing figured out, at least I have clarity about what my most important goals are because the goals don't change from day to day. Therefore, I can still make meaningful progress on my projects and have a productive day, even if I'm not firing on all cylinders.

One thing I can do for certain is to make sure that my next action is something that falls in line with one of my aforementioned daily plumb lines. This way, when I'm feeling overwhelmed or prone to distraction, I have options other than to just zone out and check Twitter.

Moreover, by having these plumb lines, it gives me permission to say "no" to much more than distractions. It also gives me permission to say no to opportunities that would encroach on the breathing room in my schedule.

★ ★ ★

Breathe

It's not easy to restore and maintain breathing room in our schedule. Especially at the beginning, when some of us may need time to transition out of a few current commitments and establish a new routine.

I mentioned some suggestions above, so if any of those sound awesome to you, then go for it.

If you're not sure where to start, perhaps start by saying no to the next incoming opportunity that doesn't excite you and line up with what's most important to you.

Secondly, take a few minutes and do an audit on how you're spending your free time. When you get home from work, what does your average evening look like? For most Americans, they're watching more than 5 hours of television every day. Perhaps all you need in order to buy back a bit of margin in your schedule is to [sell some of that Netflix time](#).

When you have margin in your schedule, it's liberating.

You have the time to get enough sleep, go on a date, have breakfast with your kids, invest in your own mental, spiritual, and physical health, and do your most important work each day.

And best of all, when there is margin in your schedule, you can be available to help and serve. You can respond to the needs of others without it disrupting your whole life.

Margin for your Creative Energy

In his book, *Deep Work*, Cal Newport states that as our information economy grows, there is an ever-increasing advantage for knowledge workers who are able to focus.

His Deep Work Hypothesis is this:

> *The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. As a consequence, the few who cultivate this skill, and then amen it the core of their working life, will thrive.*

In this article, as we hit on the importance of margin for our mental and creative energy, I want to frame it in the context of deep work.

Making the Time and Choosing the Focus

If you want to do your best creative work, you've got to show up every day. But showing up is just half of it.

Once you've carved out the time you need to work, when you *do* sit down to focus, do you know what it is that you're going to work on? And are you able to spend an hour or more of your time working without interruption?

For me, I have a minimum of two hours a day that I spend on what Newport would call deep work. In fact, it's the very first thing I do in the morning: I write.

I set a note out for myself the day before that tells me what my writing topic will be. This way, when it comes time for me to do the work, all I need to do is open my text

editor and begin writing. I don't have to spend my time thinking about what to write about, I simply write.

Writing is not easy. It's never been easy, and I suspect it never will be. I've been writing as my full-time vocation for half-a-decade now, and sitting down to write is as challenging and cognitively demanding as ever.

Now, don't take this as me complaining about my job. I love writing. I love the sound of my clicky keyboard. I love having a hot cup of coffee and a couple of hours to share a story or an idea. But no matter what, writing is hard work.

Challenging, demanding work is not mutually exclusive from work that is satisfying. In fact, the two usually go hand-in-hand.

And thus, I have two very important reasons to show up every day and write:

- For one, as I mentioned above, it's something I can do each day that keeps me mentally sharp. It's challenging, difficult, and rewarding.

- Secondly, writing is my job. Literally everything about my business stems from writing. If I'm not writing, then the very underpinnings of my work and business will slowly unravel.

The Paramount Importance of Margin for Thought (or: Why Facebook Hates Your Muse)

As I mentioned above, one very important step in my writing routine is the note.

The other is having margin for my mental and creative energy.

Margin is, simply put, breathing room.

Does your mind have breathing room? Do you have have a strong distaste for distractions? Are you comfortable with boredom?

Now, of course you dislike distractions. I know that you know that I know that when you're trying to do something, the last thing you want is to be interrupted. But, when the rubber meets the road, do you honestly, truly, really, *really* dislike distractions?

It's one thing to be annoyed at the external distractions of unwanted phone calls and passive aggressive taps on the shoulder by bored coworkers.

It's another thing altogether to let yourself CMD+Tab over to your email app every 10 minutes.

That tug you feel when you're at the far edge of your attention span? That distraction from within that shows up when you sit down to do work that matters? What are you doing about *that?*

I totally know how it goes. You're sitting down to work on a project, but after 10 or 20 minutes you hit a roadblock. What then? Do you instinctively reach for your phone to check Facebook? Do you switch over to the Twitter app or check your email inbox real quick? Or do you stay focused?

When you are trying to focus on deep work, don't give up after 15 minutes. Stick with it for an hour.

When Matt Gemmell is writing and he hits a mental block, he reaches for a ball to toss while thinking. Marco Arment wrote a computer script that quits out of Tweetbot and email in case he accidentally leaves them open. John Gruber tends to spend his time

reading through all his RSS feeds in one pass, then focuses on writing; he also has [an Apple Script](#) that takes all the read-but-not-yet-replied-to emails in his inbox and archives them at the end of the day.

These are brilliant behaviors and tactics because they state that in order to do our best creative work, we need depth and focus. Depth is a result of uninterrupted focus on a single task. And uninterrupted focus is a result of, well, not being interrupted — not being distracted.

To do your best creative work, you have to do more than hedge off the distractions from outside (buzzing phones and office interruptions). You also have to cut off the distractions from within.

You do that by creating margin for your thoughts and margin for your creative energy.

Quit "The Just Checks"

When was the last time you had a few minutes of free time and you chose not to spend it checking email, Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram? This morning, when you woke up, did you reach for your phone and spend some time perusing the news and your social network timelines before getting out of bed?

Here is, by far and away, one of the best ways you can keep margin for your thoughts and margin for your creative energy:

- Don't check email when in line at the grocery store.
- Don't check Facebook when in the drive-through.
- Don't check the news before you get out of bed in the morning.
- Don't check Twitter as the last thing you do before turing out the light and going to sleep.

Now, we all know that there's nothing morally or instinctively *wrong* with checking your social media timeline before getting out of bed. And neither is there anything wrong with keeping your computer's email app open all day and switching over to it every few minutes.

But what these moments of "just checking" do is teach our brains that boredom is bad. They put a ceiling on our creative energy.

You won't reach the height of what you're creatively capable of if you can't go 60 minutes without checking your email or scrolling your Facebook timeline.

Choosing to allow yourself to be bored when standing in line at the grocery store is also a choice to set yourself up to do your absolute best creative work.

Finding Flow and Getting In the Zone

Having a set time for deep work is liberating. The days when I know I'll have have several hours of uninterrupted time are the days I most look forward to.

Not only do I look forward to the task and process themselves, but I also love the work that is produced after a season of deep work and measured progress.

Again, to quote Cal Newport:

> To succeed you have to produce the absolute best stuff you're capable of producing —
> a task that requires depth.

Your best creative work happens when you're in the zone. When, in the words of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, you've found flow.

Getting in the zone, finding flow, making progress on your best creative work, growing in skills as a creative— all of this requires intentional practice. It requires depth.

The good news is two-fold:

1. Making margin for your thoughts is something you can choose to do. It's not at all outside of your control. Though, it may require a few uncomfortable lifestyle changes.

2. Deep work and diligence are skills. You can learn them, you can practice them, and you can get better at them. In fact, you can incorporate them into your everyday life!

How to Get Margin for Thoughts and Creative Energy

Just like with regaining margin for your finances, you need: (1) a short-term, drastic change in behavior to get some quick momentum; and (2) a long-term commitment to doing things differently.

I suggest that you start with a week-long information diet. Then, try to implement one new "alternative" action to those moments when you're bored and want to reach for your phone.

Information Fast

Try this: take one week — or, if you're feeling timid, start with 24 hours — and spend it disconnected from news and media.

Try going a whole week with no television, no news, and no social media. Perhaps a whole weekend with no email. Or even a whole day with no digital devices at all.

It sounds wild, right? This is some serious living-on-the-edge stuff. And the positive impact will be great.

In Chapter 6 of _The 4-Hour Workweek_, Tim Ferris quotes Herbert Simon. Simon says (emphasis added):

> _What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence, **a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention** and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it._

You need margin for your thoughts and margin for your creative energy is so that we can have a reserve of energy and attention that you can spend focusing on doing work that matters.

During your information fast, here's another tip from Ferris:

> _Develop the habit of asking yourself, "Will I definitely use this information for something immediate and important?" It's not enough to use information for "something" — it needs to be immediate and important. If "no" on either count, don't consume it. Information is useless if it is not applied to something important or if you will forget it before you have a chance to apply it._

Long-Term Alternatives to the Just Checks

Little moments of mental down time can do wonders for our long-term ability to create, problem solve, and do great work. So, what are some alternatives when we've got a moment of down time?

For the times I do want to use my iPhone when I'm waiting in line at the grocery store, I've come up with a few alternatives instead of just checking Twitter or email. These are alternatives to The Just Checks:

- **Scroll through your Day One timeline** and read a previous journal entry or browse some old photos and memories.

- **Launch Day One and log how you've spent your time so far for the day**. Doing this for a few weeks can also be super helpful for getting a perspective of where your time and energy are being spent.

- **Write down 3 new ideas**. These could be articles you want to write, business ideas, places you want to visit or photograph, topics you want to research, date ideas for you and your spouse, gift ideas for a friend, etc. These ideas never have to to be acted on — the point isn't to generate a to-do list, but rather to exercise your mind. Ideation and creativity are muscles, and the more we exercise them the stronger they get.

- **Send a text message to a friend or family member** to tell them how awesome they are.

- **Don't get out your phone at all.**

These alternatives are meant to be healthy. They have a positive long-term effect and satisfy that need to *do something* during a moment of down time.

The whole point of having these alternatives is so that we don't merely default into the passive consumption of content (ugh).

Take advantage of those down time moments, and allow your mind to rest for a bit. Or, engage your mind by doing something active and positive that you can use the next time you've got an hour or two scheduled for your deep work.

What I love about having this bias against passive information consumption is that it helps cultivate a bias toward action.

Thus, instead of putting our energy into managing and watching the incoming — the inbox — we put our energy into creating, doing, and making.

Work Focus; Rest Focus

After breakfast, I sit down and schedule out the rest of my day.

I literally schedule every single minute.

Scheduling my day used to take 10 or 15 minutes, but I've gotten better at it over time. And even if it took 15 minutes, it'd be worth it — time spent scheduling is not time wasted.

When I've got that plan for how I'm going to spend my time and what I'm going to do when, I get more done during the day, and my day is significantly less stressful.

I used to think a schedule meant I'd never get to have fun. Because if you're scheduling your time then you should only put Super Duper Important things on your schedule.

Well, I *do* only schedule Super Duper Important things. I just have a smarter definition of Super Duper Important.

Did you know I schedule time to watch Netflix? I schedule time for a mid-day nap if I want. Time to read for an hour and a half in the middle of the afternoon. Time to take my wife out for dinner once a week. Time to go running at the gym. Time to play trains with my kids. Time to have lunch with a friend. Time to help my wife with dinner. Time to write for as long as I can handle in the morning.

In fact, by scheduling every minute of my day, I help make sure I do all the things I want to do — for work and for play.

But…

I'm not here to talk about the how and why of scheduling every minute.

The Week's Wildly Important Goals

What makes it easy for me to schedule every minute of my day is this: I already know what I want and need to do that day.

I get this because on Sundays, usually in the late afternoon, I sit down and list all the big things I want to accomplish over the next 7 days.

In *4DX (The 4 Disciplines of Execution)* terminology, this is me listing out the Wildly Important Goals for my week.

For a recent example, here are the outcomes I listed out for the week of February 1st:

- Build the Elements of Focus class into something that people could sign up for at any time.
- Finish migrating all of our email lists to our new email service provider.
- Work with my developer to finalize the plan and timeline for our next buildout and addition to the Focus Course website.
- Finish reading *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*
- Outline the content for the Time Management online class we're doing next month.
- Publish my two podcast interviews with Cal Newport and Havilah Cunnington.

Knowing what my desired outcomes are for the week means I can assign some time to them.

By assigning time I know *when* I will be doing the things that are important. This is far more effective (and stress-free) than just having a list of things I want to do and hoping that I'll get around to doing them.

Planning the Week's Focus

With my week's goals listed out, I then sit down and plan the main things I'll be focusing on each day for my Monday - Friday.

For this, I have two areas of focus: work and rest.

- **Deep Work Focus**: I have capacity for about 3 hours of deep work each day — 2 hours in the morning and 1 hour in the early afternoon.

  Therefore, for each day of the week (M-F) I list out what my one or two areas of "Deep Work Focus" are going to be.

- **Rest Focus**: I know I'll have down time in my day because, as I mentioned above, I schedule it. And so I also choose ahead of time how I am going to spend that time.

  For me, it's important not to spend every spare moment I have checking Twitter, email, or watching TV. Having a few pre-chosen activities for how I'm going to spend my down time goes a long way in helping make sure my down time actually leaves me feeling *more* rested and re-charged.

  (This is what I was getting at when I wrote about some alternatives to the just checks.)

For example, during the week of February 1, my down time was spent reading 4DX.

- **Other**: Of course, you don't have to stop at work and rest. You could also define a family and relationships focus, a health focus, and a personal inner-life focus. (For those who've gone through The Focus Course, this is exactly what we address in Modules Three and Five)

★ ★ ★

Being proactive with your time and focus is liberating.

Trying to plan ahead like this can be difficult at first. We are so used to being reactive and responding to the tyranny of the urgent. Or we are afraid of "boxing ourselves in" by making a choice ahead of time.

But the effort is worth it. In no time you'll be able to whip up a plan in just a few minutes. And the freedom it will bring to your day-to-day life is awesome.

Living without Regret in an Age of Distraction

It took us over a century to realize the changes and impact that the Industrial Revolution was making on our lifestyle, culture, economy, and educational system.

Technology has changed all of that again, but this time it took less than a decade.

Today, if we need advice on a topic, it's as close as posting a question to Facebook or Twitter. If we don't know an answer, we can Google it. If we want something, we can buy it from our phones and have it delivered to our house. If we have a moment of down time, our social network timelines guarantee we never have to be bored. And we have the world's catalog of movies, music, and books available to us from our living room.

Nobody in the history of anything has ever lived like this before. It's fantastic. Also, it's a little bit terrifying.

There aren't any experts in these fields anymore. We're all guessing about what's next for education, the economy, communication, media, our jobs, our art, and our families.

Diligence, focus, art, parenting, marriage, priorities, work culture, and time management have always been moving targets. How much more now that we're always connected thanks to the internet that lives in our pocket?

* * *

With time and focus being such precious commodities, it is all the more important to have a vision for our life and to run with it. Use it as a path for our creative work and as a guardrail for how we spend our time and energy.

So often I get this feeling that I can live however I want, in the moment, and over the long run everything will pan out for me. Something whispers to me that I needn't worry about hard work, focus, planning, or diligence because one day my ship will come in and all the important things will just happen.

Alas, that is not how real life works. Those things don't just happen all by themselves simply because I want them to. They happen through vision, planning, and a lot of hard work.

Benjamin Franklin wrote that "human felicity is produced not so much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen, as by little advantages that occur every day."

★ ★ ★

The dreams of our heart will not come to be through magic or luck. They are forged little by little, day by day. The most meaningful things in our lives are produced from the ground up with much focus and diligence.

Too much attention on the big, long-term goals and we despise the little daily steps needed to make progress. But too much focus on the granular, and it can be easy to feel like the "urgent" things are most important.

How do you reconcile these two vantage points? How do you have an eye for the long-term while also focusing on what's most important right now? Why is big-picture planning so important to helping us navigate the small successes and failures we have every day?

If you know what it is you're moving toward, then you can slice that down into something small and actionable every day. You can define "important work" as

something that moves the needle forward rather than something that is merely urgent in the moment.

Having a defined goal can help us focus on actually accomplishing our idea and making it happen. As I wrote in my article about fighting to stay creative, a clear goal is a significant stimulator for creativity.

Looming, unanswered questions often lead to inaction and procrastination. We get frustrated at ambiguity and indecisiveness in the work place, so why do we tolerate it in our own life as well? Overcoming this is often as simple as taking time to define an end goal and then taking the first step toward that goal.

Another significant stimulator for creativity is diligence. And diligence…well, it isn't a personality type— diligence is a skill we learn.

Some of us had a good work ethic instilled in us by our parents, while some of us have had to cultivate it on our own later in life. It is silly to think a creative person should live without routine, discipline, or accountability. Sitting around being idle while we wait for inspiration is a good way to get nothing done.

You *can* live without regret in the age of distraction. You *can* change your attitudes and behaviors. You can spend your time doing work that matters.

Celebrate Progress

How would you define a successful creative career?

There are two important elements: creative freedom and financial stability.

So, let's define success as having the ability to do creative work we're proud of and to keep doing that work.

Now, there is no recipe for this stuff. It's different for each person and changes with all sorts of factors like skills, passion, and even geographic location. It is important to define creative success in such a way that it doesn't require a particular location, vocation, or paycheck.

However, there is more to it than creative freedom and financial stability. Something else is also critical to our long-term journey of doing our best creative work.

We need a healthy inner work life.

Our emotional and motivated state is just as important (if not *more* important) as our finances, tools, work environment, and overall creative freedom.

Teresa Amabile is a professor at Harvard Business School. In 2012 she gave an excellent talk at the 99U conference. In that talk, she shares about how our inner work life is what lays the foundation for being our most productive and our most creative.

When our emotional and motivated state— our inner work life— is strong and positive, then we are most likely to be at our best in terms of creativity and productivity.

What drives our inner work life? Well, a lot of things. But one of the most important is **making progress on meaningful work.**

When we see that we are making progress — even small victories — then it strengthens our emotional and motivated state. We are happier and more motivated at work. And therefore, we are more likely to be productive and creative.

Consider the inverse. When we feel like cogs in a machine, then we see our time as being spent just doing meaningless busy work and not contributing to anything worthwhile. And so we slowly lose our desire to be productive and efficient. We don't care about coming up with creative solutions or fresh ideas. We just do what's required in order to get our paycheck so we can go home to our television.

This is one reason why having an annual review for yourself (and your team / company) can be so beneficial. It reminds everyone of the goals accomplished and the projects completed. It shows that the oftentimes mundane and difficult work we do every day is actually adding up to something of value.

Coming back to Teresa Amabile, she calls this the Progress Principle. In short, making progress on meaningful work is critical to being happy, motivated, productive, and creative in our work.

And so, if progress is so important, why do we seem to celebrate only the big victories and only once or twice per year?

One of the greatest ways to recognize our progress is to celebrate all victories — big and small. And one of the best ways to celebrate and chronicle the small victories is with our own daily journal.

We often forget about our small wins after a few days or weeks, or they quickly get buried under our never ending to-do lists. Or, if we don't recognize and celebrate them, then they stop being "small wins" and start just being "what we should be doing anyway."

By cataloging and celebrating our small wins each day then we can be reminded that we are making meaningful progress. And, in truth, it's the small wins that all add up to actually complete the big projects and big goals. As Benjamin Franklin said, it's little strokes that fell great oaks. And so, to celebrate a big victory is actually to celebrate the summation of a thousand small victories.

The Creative's Workspace

This is what my home office workspace looked like in 2007. (Don't laugh.)

(I still have that trashcan. And the weird blocks underneath the legs of the desk are there because I mis-measured by about 3/4 of an inch when I was shortening the height of the desk to something more comfortable.)

It was dorky, but it was also inspirational. Inspirational for what it stood for, really. That photo was taken around the same time as the beginning of my weekends-and-evenings freelancing career. I had just bought that refurbished Mac Pro and 23-inch Apple Cinema Display, and now I was ready for the big leagues. It felt great to have a new machine (doing print design on the 12-inch PowerBook was not very ideal), and a newly organized workspace with some semblance of organization and structure. You know the feeling.

A few years later, we ripped out the carpet to reveal the hardwood underneath, painted the walls, got a new desk from IKEA, and bought a lamp.

That's the desk where I launched my full-time gig writing shawnblanc.net.

A few years after that, we moved my office downstairs because the upstairs room was to become a nursery for our first son, Noah.

Here's what my space looked like last year:
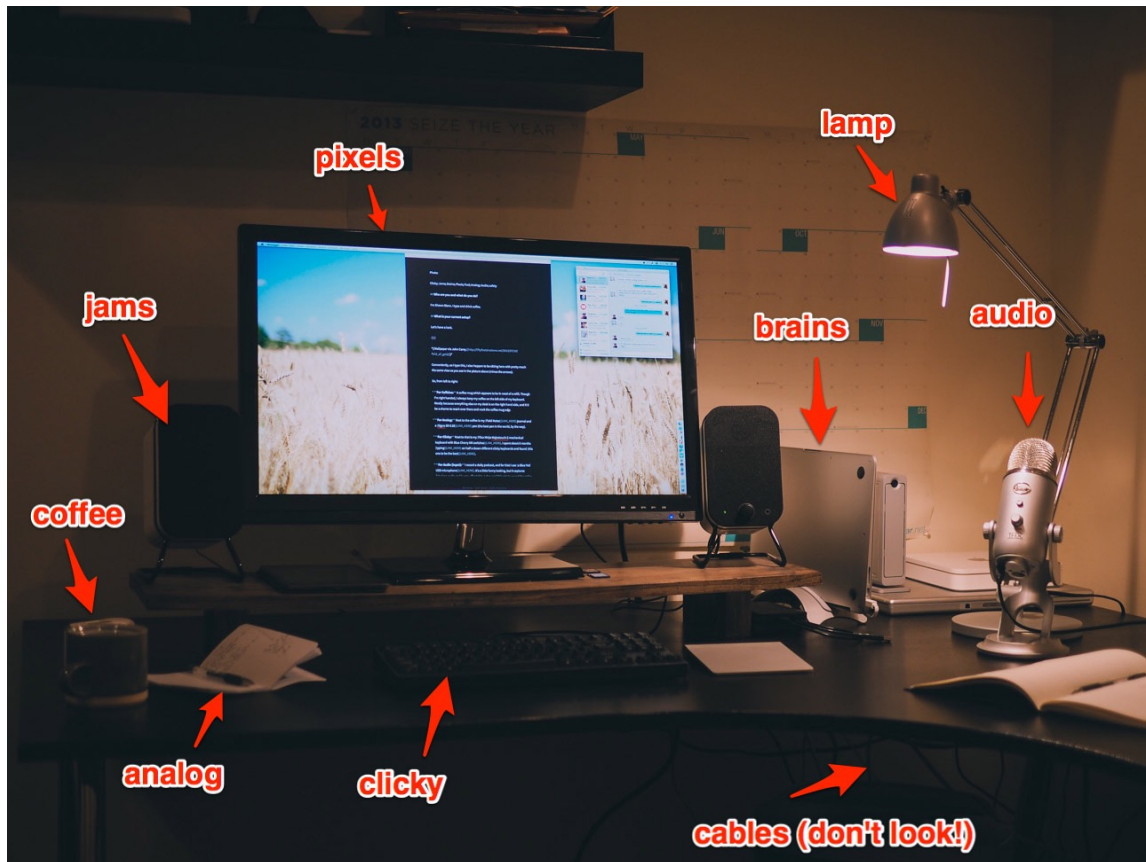
Since that time things have de-cluttered a bit. Mostly thanks to the Retina iMac (which is still incredible by the way).

Here's what my desk looks like today:

As desks are wont to do, mine certainly gets cluttered and messy. But I try to keep it clean and not let the mess get out of control. For me, inspiration and ideas and calm are more prevalent when the peripherals are dealt with.

My desk is where I spend so much of my time. It's where I work and where I create. I write, design, pay bills, ignore emails, edit and share pictures with my family, and more… all from here. I'm here right now, in fact.

When I think about showing up every day and doing my best creative work, I think about this space. It has certainly changed and evolved over the past decade, but one

thing it's always had has been a surface to work on, a keyboard to type on, and an internet connection to publish through.

Your creative workspace may be different, but regardless of what or why you've got what you've got, here are a few things every good creative workspace needs:

- **Ritual**: By far and away, the best thing you can do for your creative workspace is to build some ritual / routine into it. When you combine the power of a consistent "where" along with a consistent "what and when," then you're basically putting your creative genius on autopilot.

- **Fun**: Having fun is an excellent way to do our best creative work. If there's nothing playful, enjoyable, or fun about your workspace, how can you hope to create anything inspirational or vibrant? All work and no play makes our creative work very dull indeed.

  For me, I have fun built right into the very core of what I do: writing. My keyboard is as clicky as they come, and I love it. Secondly, I have a computer that I love to use: the Retina iMac is a marvel. As someone who works with words all day long, not only do I have my favorite way to type them with, I also have a jaw-dropping display to view them on.

- **Inspiration Rich**: Speaking of fun, a good workspace is inspirational. A few friends of mine who have some pretty great workspaces include: Sean McCabe's office, which is filled with art prints; Cameron Moll's space which is very open and organized, but yet also is clearly lived in; and Jeff Sheldon's office studio, which, like Cameron's is very organized but very lived in.

  I have a bit of inspiration in my place. My bookcase is packed with hardbacks, paperbacks, magazines, Field Notes, Moleskins, and Baron Figs. On the walls

are prints of photographs I've taken over the years. But looking at some of the aforementioned office spaces, I know there is much I could do to enhance the life, vibrancy, and overall inspiration of my own workspace.

- **Distraction Poor**: A good workspace empowers us to do our best creative work. Distractions are pretty much the opposite of inspiration and motivation. In addition to not letting myself check any stats or social media before I've put in my morning writing time, I also get rid of physical distractions in a couple of ways.

  For one, I clean up my desk at the end of the day so that tomorrow when I come down to work, there's nothing left undone that I need to tend to first. Secondly, I put on headphones. I work form home, but right upstairs are two toddler boys whose superpowers include turning into tornadoes.

- **Efficiency**: This is threefold. For one, it's critical to have the right tools for the right job. You wouldn't want a butter knife when you're trying to cut down an oak tree. Secondly, get the best tools you can. I don't mean get the best tools period, get what you can afford and what you can handle. Lastly, a good workspace is efficient in that it can accommodate what you use on a regular basis and that everything is easily accessible while not also being in the way.

- **Multiple Spaces**: This one's a luxury, but it's also so great. If you checked out the photos of Sean, Cameron, and/or Jeff's offices you may have noticed that there were multiple "stations." Their offices have more than one physical place to do work.

  In my office there is my desk, but on the other half of the room is a couch and coffee table. And, even my desk converts between a sitting and standing desk. I have these different stations because not all creative work is equal. I spend at

least as much time writing as I do reading and researching. And that latter activity is better spent *not* in front of my computer.

* * *

In her book, *The Crossroads of Should and Must*, Elle Luna lists Space (as in *Work* space, not *Outer* Space), as one of the four obstacles that stand in the way of us doing our most important work — what she calls our "Must."

Elle writes:

> *You need a physical space — private, safe, and just for you. When you are in this space, you are not available. I repeat,* **you are not available.** *This is your sacred space to be by and with yourself. We all need safe containers. How might you create a safe space that you can spend time in daily? How might you get creative with where it begins and ends? Find this place and make it your own.*

The unsung hero of showing up every day and doing your best creative work is your workspace. You may think it's your determination, zeal, and creative genius, and it probably is. But, it's also that you've somehow managed to carve out a spot where you can think and work without judgment, inhibition, or distraction.

Your space doesn't have to be made with a desk or a computer. I read about one woman who made her workspace by using painter's tape to section off part of her living room. She ran the tape across the ceiling, down the walls, and back over the floor.

I've had many productive days at coffee shops. Find a table where nobody will give you the stink eye if you're there for too long, put on headphones if you like, and make your space with an Americano as your wingman.

Perhaps you've created your workspace intentionally, or perhaps unintentionally. But either way, if you find that you've been doing some of your best work lately, take a moment to thank your space.

However, if you're struggling — if you don't have a space — it's time to make one.

What Would Your Ideal Workspace Look Like?
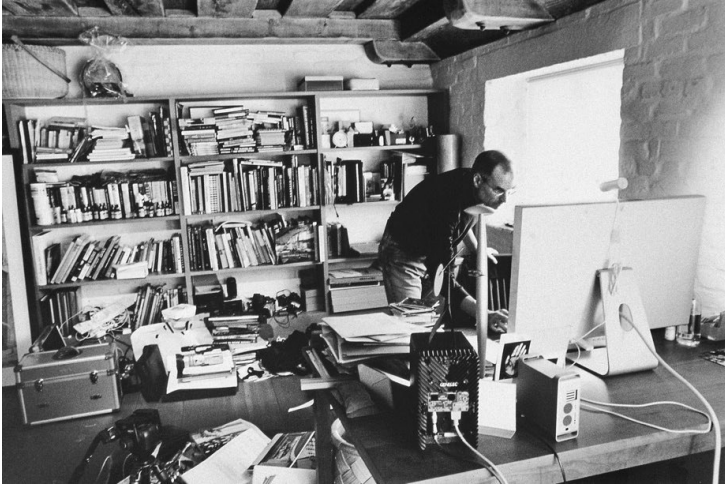
A while back I wrote about [Whole Brain Creativity](), and how each of us have different learning and thinking styles.

And, as Cynthia Ulrich Tobias writes about in her book, *The Way They Learn*, **we each have our own preferences for an ideal and productive work/learning environment.**

The ideal elements of our best workspace go far beyond the gear on our desk. It also includes the temperature of the room, the way it is lighted, how comfortable or not the chairs are, if we are hungry or not, if there is background noise/music or not, and more.

For me, even if I have 4 hours of interruption-free time and all the right tools are at my disposal, if the room I'm working in has an uncomfortable chair and is too cold, then it will be nearly impossible for me to concentrate.

* * *

I am a staunch proponent for making it a routine to do our best creative work every day. Quantity leads to quality, and showing up everyday helps us overcome procrastination and build a "creative habit."

Why not show up every day to a work environment that is conducive to doing our best creative work? A space that serves us, inspires us, helps us, and gets out of our way and allows us to concentrate.

It seems obvious in hindsight, but oftentimes it's the low-hanging fruit of things just like this that we take for granted.

My Ideal Workspace

Several weeks ago as I was thinking about this, I decided to write out what my ideal workspace would actually look like.

I didn't let myself get caught up in the practical limitations of how all the elements would go together in reality. I just wrote down individual components that I wanted — things I knew would be awesome and helpful.

Here's my list:

- A huge, huge tabletop. Like 150-square-feet big. 5 feet deep and 30 feet wide. It has to be big because it has multiple "spaces" on it. One area for a computer and keyboard. Another area for spreading out books and notebooks for research. And yet with still enough space left over so that there's a clean space somewhere. In short, big enough to spread out without taking over everything.
- I could work either sitting or standing.
- Speakers and music.
- There is space for other people to work as well, but they don't work there all the time. I need some hours every day to work alone and in concentration, but I also want to have hours every day where I am working with others and collaborating.
- Lots and lots of natural light, with bright-yet-warm lamps and ceiling lights.
- The view outside is of something spectacular — mountains, ideally — and there aren't people walking by the windows to distract. But the office itself is just a short walk from a downtown area where there are coffee shops, restaurants, parks, and people.
- Tall ceilings to allow space for big ideas and wildly creative thinking.
- Fantastic coffee with non-generic coffee mugs.
- A conversation-starting brown leather couch that's ideal for reading, sipping on a drink, and taking napping.
- Bookshelves, drawers, and plenty of other storage so that everything can have a place while also being easily accessible.
- Beautiful and inspirational artwork and photography.
- Lots of whiteboards so ideas are never in want of a space to get fleshed out.

- Super fast internet that never goes down.

As I read through that list I can get a vivid picture of what a space like this would look like. It has the vibe of a master woodworker's shop, but with the amenities and tools of a pixel pusher. It's a place for thinking, relaxing, collaborating, and crafting.

But for some people, a large, open, and bright space like the one I've described sounds terrible. They'd prefer a smaller, quieter, more cozy room with walls painted deep and warm colors, and just a lamp. For others, their ideal work environment is free from the distractions of the Internet. And I'm sure a good percentage of folks would be happy to never see another white board in their life.

Will I ever have a work environment like the one outlined above? Maybe. I hope so. But identifying the elements of my ideal workspace isn't just about a pie in the sky dream. It also gives me clues about what changes I can make to my current workspace.

For example, in my small downstairs den, I don't have a spot for even one giant whiteboard. So maybe I should consider getting one of those kraft paper wall mounted rollers as a stand-in.

And while I don't have a 150-square-foot tabletop, I do have both a desk and a coffee table and I bet I could find a larger coffee table.

What does your ideal work environment look like?

Just because your company issued you a 3x5 desk, a semi-adjustable chair, and a room full of florescent lights and distractions, it doesn't mean that is the ideal work environment for you.

What does your ideal work environment look like?

Is it open and collaborative, or is it cozy and personal? Music or silence? Coffee, tea, water, nothing at all?

Think to the last time you were deeply focused and concentrating on something enjoyable…

Where were you? What was your posture like? Were you eating or drinking anything? Were you at a desk, on the couch, on the floor, outside? Was there any music or other sounds? Were you alone, or were other people around?

The way you default to concentrating when you are doing something enjoyable can give you some insight into how you may best be able to concentrate when doing all of your work.

Make changes so as to have an ideal-as-possible work environment. So that way, when you show up to do your best creative work, you're giving yourself as many advantages as possible.

The Note

When I sit down at my desk in the morning, it's time to write.

There is hot coffee to the left of my keyboard. My keyboard, well, it's about as clicky and awesome as they come. I put in my earbuds, hit play on the *Monument Valley* soundtrack, and set a 30 minute timer.

My phone is in Do Not Disturb mode. So is my computer. The outside world can wait. For the next half hour, I'm pushing the cursor.

This is my writing routine.

It sounds a bit regimented, but I've become a believer in the routine. Having a set time and place for doing my most important work is genius. I used to write when I felt like it — at some point during the day I'd hope to write something. Who knows when it would be or what the topic would be (I certainly did't).

Now, I write at 7:30am. If I don't feel like it, too bad. I can at least suffer through 30 minutes of mud. But what's wild is that most days it takes just 5 or 10 minutes for the writing to start feeling pretty good. Or, if the writing sucks, at least the calm of it being just my coffee and my words begins to take over and even if I'm not feeling in the zone, I at least feel comfortable putting my thoughts down.

This is my time to write without inhibition. I'll have the whole rest of the day to edit and re-write and figure out what I was trying to say. But for a writer, the hardest part is that initial step. To put the words together in the first place.

By giving myself no room for wiggling around or making excuses, I've found that having this set time to write means I actually write *more* than if I were to wait only for inspiration to strike. I write more words in general (usually 1,500 words every day) than days when I wait for inspiration. And my writing is of a higher quality — my crappy first drafts are much less crappy.

And, though my timer is set for 30 minutes, more often than not by the time the half-hour is up, I'm firing on all cylinders and I will continue to write for another hour or three.

As someone who writes for a living, I cannot think of anything more important for me to do each day than to actually write.

I'm 33, and I've been writing part-time since I was in my mid-20s and full-time since I was 29. If I don't write, I don't eat. But more than that, if I don't write for too long then I get fidgety and idle.

I'm already thinking about ways I can better improve my daily writing routine. Right now I rarely write on the weekends and I can totally feel it on Monday mornings — not only am I starving to write by Monday, but I feel rusty when I do. Imagine that, after just two days off I can tell a difference.

This morning is a Thursday, and the writing feels great.

Maybe it's the weather. It's cloudy and drizzly outside: the perfect weather for writing. But I've also had all week to write, and I'm riding the momentum from the days gone by already and it serves me well.
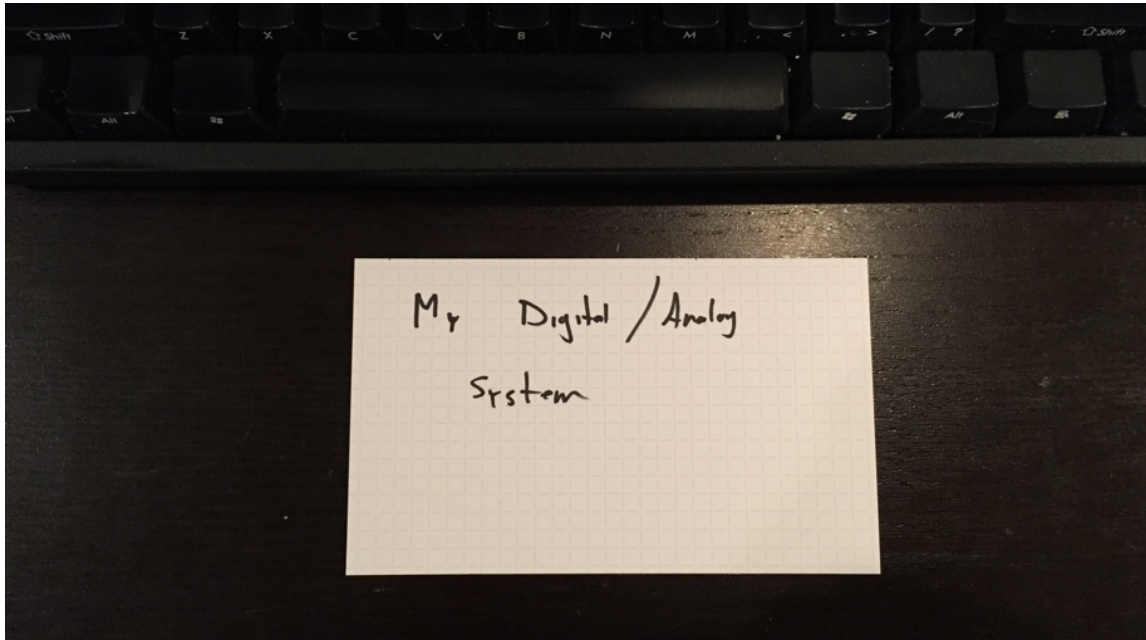
But there's one more thing...

The Note

When I sit down at my desk, coffee and keyboard ready to go, there is something else.

There, waiting for me on top of my desk and in front of my computer, is a handwritten note.

It's the note I wrote to myself yesterday evening when the day was done.

The note says one thing. Today it says: "My Digital / Analog System"

500 words ago, I lied to you. I said my writing begins at 7:30 every morning.

The truth is that my writing for this morning began yesterday when I put that note on my desk. That note is my topic for the day. That note is the single most important

element of my personal productivity system. Because that note is the single most important thing I have to do today.

* * *

Distractions, diversions, oddities, and excuses to procrastinate are aplenty. I want to cut all of them off at the pass so I can have the time and space to do my best creative work every single day.

And The Note is a critical component to that.

Writing down the *topic* that I'm going to write about tomorrow gives me a few advantages:

1. It gives my subconscious a 12-hour head start. The well of my writing mind gets the whole night to fill itself up with what it wants to say on the topic. I don't have to be anxious and keep it at the front of my mind, wasting my time and energy thinking about. Tomorrow is when I will write about it.

2. Thus, when it comes time to write, I have all my energy at my disposal. When I sit down to write, I haven't yet spent any of my willpower on trying to muster up an idea, comb through a list of possibilities, or scour the internet looking for inspiration. It's time to write and I am not desperate. Nor am I lost, dazed, or confused.

    I am clear. I know *exactly* what to write about because it's there before me. All that's left is for me to open up my writing program and write.

"Here, Shawn, write about this," I tell myself. And so I do.

Sometimes the most creative, inspired, productive thing you can do is try to be as lazy as possible while still showing up to do the work.

If I finish in one day then I will publish it. If not, I will come back and keep working tomorrow. Or sometimes, if it's horrible, I'll just put it away and at least I did my writing for the day. But no matter what, at least I've had a small victory: I've written something.

The premise of today's article actually touches on four ideas:

1. Doing something today that will make life for my future self a little bit easier.
2. Having a daily habit that centers around doing my best creative work.
3. Having the deep personal integrity needed to show up and do the work even when I'm not inspired or motivated.
4. Celebrating the small victories.

Just recently, I got an email from a reader, Elisha, sharing with me about how many of us know we need to make change in our lives, and often we even know what things specifically need to be changed. But for so many, he said, the biggest challenge is actually getting off our rear-ends and doing something and actually being disciplined.

Sidenote: If the ideas in this chapter hit home for you, then I believe you will love my online course, The Power of a Focused Life.

How to Audit Your Workflow

Question: What does your car, your house, your coffee grinder, your budget, your work routines, and even your marriage all have in common?

Answer: They all require maintenance.

Pretty much anything and everything of importance requires our intentional and proactive care.

However, I find that the older I get, the more "set in my ways" I am.

Somewhere I read that after the age of 35 or so, people stop being excited about new technology. And they even begin to look at new technological inventions and advancements with a critical and negative eye.

If we're weary to get the latest cell phone, how much more so are we prone to keep doing things the way we've always done them?

That stubbornness can be good and bad.

It's good insofar as it keeps us on track to show up every day and do the work.

But that stubbornness does not serve us well if it keeps us from learning, maturing, and adapting. Our workflows, tools, and routines all need a good old-fashioned audit once in a while.

Auditing Your Workflow

It used to be that when a new operating system would ship for my Mac, then I would do my most serious tinkering. I would do a clean install of OS X and be forced to re-evaluate which apps I wanted to re-install.

But nowadays, updating OS X is about as easy as updating an app. And though I have made some significant changes to my daily writing routine, I haven't preformed a good workflow audit in nearly a year and a half (since I bought this Retina iMac).

As you're getting to work on your goals and projects for the year, now is as good a time as any to reassess the tools you're using and how you're using them.

Maybe it's time to find a more advanced tool. Or, maybe it's time to switch to something more basic. How can your processes be enhanced? How can they be simplified? Does something need to be added? Can something be removed?

There's no right or wrong answer so long as you're at least asking the questions. (Put that on a stock photo and Pin it).

So, when I do a major workflow audit like the one I'll be doing this month, there are several things I consider:

* On my Mac and iPhone I consider what software I no longer use or need; what files can I archive away onto a backup drive; and what files can I delete?

* In my schedule I consider how I'm spending my time over the course of a week; what would I like to add or remove to my routines; is my time being spent how I want it to be spent; at the end of a week do I feel a sense of accomplishment and contentment in the areas that matter?

- With my team I look at how to remove bottlenecks and friction as well as ways to empower them, give them more autonomy, and increase overall team morale.

- For my own day-to-day activities, I consider how I plan my day; how I manage and accomplish my to-do list; how I deal with email; how I write, record, and publish articles and podcasts; how I read and study; and how I make consistent progress on big projects.

Because everything above interacts and interweaves with the others, a look at the entire workflow is needed on occasion. It's valuable to just take a moment, look at the big picture, and ask if everything is running well.

Our lives are ever-changing. As are our interests, priorities, and availability. It's worth the effort to take a look at our systems and tools to make sure they are still the ones serving us and not the other way around.

And then, as they advise in *4DX*, if every other area of my operation remained at its current level of performance, what is the one area where change would have the greatest impact?

Recommendations

From Mac and iOS apps, to the notebook and pen I use everyday. Some of my recommended tools

Little Things That Improve the Way I Work on a Mac

Let's talk about tools, services, and apps that can help you reduce cognitive friction during your day.

Computers are *great* at doing the boring, automated stuff we don't like to do. So why not automate common tasks (like performing backups of your computer), pre-make decisions for your computer to carry out on your behalf (such as auto-filing certain email newsletters), and generally just find ways to make yourself more efficient?

I think the biggest reason we don't do these things is because we don't care. Seriously. In the moment, it seems easier to just continue suffering through our broken and inefficient workflows than it does to take a step back and consider if there's a better way.

You could spend an extra 5 minutes every day for the rest of your life sorting through the spam and newsletters in your email inbox, or you could take 15 minutes today and tell your computer to do it for you.

I think another reason we don't set stuff like this up is because we don't even know what options are available to us. And so that's why I've put together this brief list of all the apps, tools, and services I use to help me do things better when I'm at my Mac.

1. **Email Rules:** In an ideal world, the only emails that would show up in your inbox are the ones you want to read. Email is not the enemy, but it sure can get unwieldy in a hurry.

Step one is, of course, to unsubscribe from all the incoming email newsletters you don't want. I am subscribed to some email newsletters because I like what they have to say; some of these emails I keep out of my inbox and auto-file them into my "Bacon" folder. I also have rules set up to flag certain emails that contain the word "sponsorship" or "typo." And I use VIP sparingly — my accountant and my wife send me an email, it will set off a push notification on my iPhone.

2. **Keyboard Maestro:** This is a utility app for bending your Mac to your will. It's hard to explain what KM does because it can do just about anything. I use it to launch certain apps with just a keyboard shortcut; I use it to streamline the exporting of my podcast audio out of Garage Band; I use it for doing bottom-posting email replies when appropriate; I use it to automatically launch the Doxie importing software and to import all my document scans as soon as I've plugged my Doxie Go into my Mac; and more. Basically, what Keyboard Maestro is good at is automating certain certain tasks for you.

3. **Hazel:** Hazel is like the cousin to Keyboard Maestro. While also great at automating tasks, it works under slightly differently contexts. Hazel works with the files on your computer, and mostly runs under the hood. You can have it do things like automatically clean up all the files on your Desktop at the end of the day and move them into a "Desktop Cleanup" folder. Hazel will notice if you delete an app and then ask if you also want to clean up all the system files related to that app. Hazel can automatically take any new images you've added to Lightroom to your NAS drive and copy them onto your NAS drive for backup and archival purposes. And more.

4. **LaunchBar:** The whole point of an application launcher is to quickly get to the files and apps you frequently access on your computer. You bring up LaunchBar with a keyboard shortcut, type in the first few letters of an app, bookmark, or file

that you want, and LaunchBar presents a list of the best results sorted by most-likely-what-you-want.

As you use it, LaunchBar learns your most common searches and provides weighted results. There's a lot you can do with LaunchBar, custom searches, zipping and emailing files, and more. I wrote a whole review about the latest version here.

5. **TextExpander:** Surely everyone reading this knows about this utility app which runs in the background on your Mac to expand snippets of text into sentences, words, dates, and whatever else you can imagine. It makes a great tool for quickly punching out common things you type on a regular basis (such as common email replies, email signatures, misspelt words, etc.) For example, I use the snippet `;email` to automatically insert my email address, and I use the snippet `;home` to automatically insert my home mailing address. (A tip about using the semicolon before the word: that helps guarantee that the snippet isn't something I would type in any normal situation.)

6. **1Password:** Another app I hope you're familiar with. Yes, 1Password is great for storing all the various logins and other sensitive bits of information, but it's also a very *efficient* tool. When I need to log into something, insert my credit card info, or whatever, typing a quick keystroke brings up the 1Password quick entry window and I'm off to the races.

7. **OmniFocus:** One of the things I most love about OmniFocus is the Quick Entry. I use CMD+Shift+Space to bring it up and quickly enter in a task. I also use a Javascript bookmarklet that will send the current Safari tab's Title and URL to my OmniFocus inbox. I also have an Applescript that takes a whole Safari window of tabs and drops them all into OmniFocus as a single to-do item.

8. **Fantastical:** Fantastical is an awesome calendar app, and one of the things I like most about it is how quickly accessible it is (since it lives in the Menu Bar, a keyboard shortcut brings up the app instantly and I can see the list of my agenda). But I also like the natural language parsing. When it comes to events and appointments, we all just naturally speak in sentences. And so, having a calendar app that interprets that language so well makes it much easier to enter in new events (and reminders).

9. **Time Machine:** I can't stress how important it is to have regular backups of my computer. Time Machine takes all the thought out of it by automatically backing up my computer to an external hard drive several times per day.

10. **SuperDuper!:** I also like to have a bootable backup of my computer, and I use SuperDuper to do this every night. There's an option in SuperDuper that will automatically launch the app and begin a smart update backup as soon as I plug in my USB drive. So that means when my computer's apps are all closed out and I'm ready to do the nightly backup, all I do is plug in the USB drive.

11. **Maximum internal storage:** One thing I've learned about computers is that there is never enough internal storage space. I would rather spend my time taking photos and listening to music than shuffling files around. And so I always get as much internal storage as I can so hopefully I don't have to keep fighting that ceiling.

12. **BreakTime:** A simple app that reminds me to move around every 45 minutes.

13. **Timing:** A utility app that tracks how I spend my time when on my computer. Hindsight is 20/20 you know?

14. **Banktivity 5 (formerly iBank 5):** This financial management app has auto-import rules that properly re-name and assign transactions when I'm importing them from my bank. It also has income/expense reports, budgeting, and more. I know that any banking software worth its salt will have this, but <u>I use iBank because I think it's the best</u>. I do all my own bookkeeping, and having as much of the busywork automated by my software helps me so I only need to spend less than 5 hours per month doing my books. (iBank also becomes extremely handy come tax season.)

15. **Tweetbot:** I use lists when I need a quieter timeline and I use some muting rules so I don't see certain tweets that I'm not interested in (such as those "whatever daily is out!" announcement tweets).

Mindfulness

It can be easy to get hyper nerdy about this stuff and to spend forever and a day tinkering and fiddling and "optimizing." I listed out the above things not to say that you should be utilizing them as well, but instead to give you an idea of perhaps one or two ways that you could work smarter.

It just boils down to being mindful about the work we are doing. When we notice that there's something we do repeatedly, step back for a moment to see if there's a way to automate that task. And if there is something we do that annoys us, step back for a moment and question if that task is truly necessary or if it can be delegated to someone or something.

Hybrid (My Digital + Analog System)

Long-time readers of my personal site, shawnblanc.net, will know that I've been a hard and fast OmniFocus user for over five years now. However, for more than a year, I've actually been using a hybrid system for my task management: combining both digital and analog in my everyday juggling act.

If you're familiar with the Eisenhower / Covey Matrix then you know all about Urgent vs Important. Of course, you don't have to be familiar with the Urgent/Important Matrix to know that many tasks are urgent, but that doesn't mean they're important. And, how often does the truly important work we need to do sit quietly for us to act on it, instead of crying out for our attention?

Being able to define and then act upon what it is that is most important for us to do is a skill indeed.

And for me, I believe the reason I've settled into using a hybrid system of both paper and digital is because it serves me well in my pursuit to show up every day and do my most important work.

For digital, I use OmniFocus. And for analog I have a Baron Fig notebook and Signo DX 0.38mm pen. These two tools each serve as the different storehouses for the different quadrants of urgent and important.

In general, my most important activities for the day are written down in my Baron Fig notebook — and almost always they are written down the day before.

OmniFocus is where I keep anything with a due date, as well as all the other administrative miscellany of my job. OmniFocus is for work that is important but not Most Important. Like many of you, I suspect, I'm at my computer for the bulk of my working hours. Thus, virtually all of the incoming tasks I need to capture are of the digital kind: they deal with emails, bills, invoices, website edits, servers, files, graphics, etc. And OmniFocus is great for this (as would be any digital task management app worth its salt).

I break up my day with writing and important-but-not-urgent tasks in the morning followed by administrative and other tasks in the afternoon. Or, in other words, I spend the first half of my day with the Baron Fig and the second half with OmniFocus.

There's no reason I couldn't just keep *everything* in OmniFocus or in the Baron Fig, but I like this hybrid approach.

There is something concrete in the act of using a pen to write down my most important tasks onto a piece of paper. And there's something ever-so-slightly less distracting about coming downstairs and having a notebook open and waiting, listing out in my own handwriting what it is I need to get to straight away.

When I open up OmniFocus, as awesome as it is, it's still full of buttons and colors and widgets and options. While these can be [minimized](#) (something I love about OF), I'm still an incessant fiddler and the last thing I need is something to fiddle with when I'm supposed to be writing.

Apps and Workflows: iPhone (6s Plus) Edition

The First home screen is a peculiar spot. You want it populated only with the most frequently-used apps, but what happens when there are but a few apps that you often?

My first Home screen has a few "classifications" of apps:

- Those I use several times per day: Slack, Tweetbot, Weather Line, Fantastical, OmniFocus, Safari, Simplenote, Messages, and Music.
- Those I use several times per week: Overcast, Day One, Google Maps, and Instapaper.
- Those I use often enough that I like to know exactly where they are: such as VSCO, 1Password, PCalc. I also a couple of folders with some miscellaneous apps related to work and life.

Just a little over two years ago, I [wrote](#) about all the iPhone apps I used at the time. Since then, things have changed quite a bit for me. Not only have I consolidated the amount of iOS apps I use now compared to then, but I'm also trying to use my iPhone [less often](#).

Another big change (pun intended) is that I'm currently rocking the iPhone 6s Plus, which is just altogether a different device than the iPhones of yesteryear. As I'll get to in a second, because the iPhone 6s Plus is a two-handed device, it lets me get away with having less apps on my first home screen. Since 95-percent of the time I'm using two hands, I don't usually *need* to have the apps reachable by thumb when holding the device with just one hand.

If you're wondering, I'm not nearly as thoughtful with my second, third, fourth, and fifth (!) Home screens. Those screens are basically no-man's land. One of my email apps is

over there; there are apps I've downloaded to try out that are now just floating around; some games; and other miscellany.

A Brief Aside About the iPhone 6s Plus

Last fall, I went big. I bought the iPhone 6s Plus, named it Hercules, and decided to give it a shot. It has definitely taken some time to get used to, but I think I've certainly acclimated.

The tipping point was when I no longer tried to treat the Plus as a one-handed device. For years and years my iPhone was something that could be used with one hand. The Plus? Not so much.

But, once it became natural for me to use both hands when dealing with the Plus, it stopped being an awkward device and the advantages of the larger phone — namely the larger screen and superior battery life — are absolutely wonderful.

With the battery life, I often forget just how spectacular it is. I can't remember the last time my iPhone's battery was in the red.

Another thing with the iPhone 6s Plus is that it somehow managed to take over the spot my iPad used to hold. It was such a sly move I never saw it coming. But somehow, over the course of a few months, I just stopped using my iPad for reading and note taking.

In part, I think it's the speed. My 6s Plus is quite a bit faster than my 2nd generation iPad mini. But also, it's that the iPhone is just big enough that it's not worth bringing along and using another iOS device for the purposes of reading, researching, and note taking.

Perhaps I'll get a new iPad when it eventually comes time to replace my 5-year-old MacBook Air, but I'm not sure. I'm pretty happy with my iMac in the office and my iPhone everywhere else. And, for when I'm on the road and need to work, my MacBook Air still gets the job done.

My iOS Apps and Workflows

This will almost certainly be far less nerdy than it sounds.

I mostly want to share a bit about the iPhone apps I rely on the most, why I use them, and how they fit in to the day-to-day rhythm of my life.

Simplenote

We'll start with Simplenote because if I had to pick just one single app to have on my phone, this would be it.

There are many, many, many apps that allow you to create notes and sync them to your iPad and Mac. And most of those apps are far more feature-rich than Simplenote, but I don't mind.

I've never been let down by Simplenote's speed, reliability, or search. It handles these features with flying colors, and to me they are the most important features of all.

With Simplenote, I have the ability to find any note I'm looking for within a matter of seconds, I've never lost a note, and I've never felt that I'm using the app wrong.

In a future post I'll write more about my writing routine, what I do with all my bad ideas, and the like. But for now, I'll just say that Simplenote is pretty much at the heart of it all.

Messages

If I could have just *two* apps on my iPhone, the second would be Messages because I like to text with my friends and family. Who doesn't?

Apple Music

First, a moment of silence for Rdio...

While Apple Music has a lot going for it, it is without its charms. But, nevertheless, I use it every day.

My home office is downstairs and directly above it are hardwood floors and two toddler boys, which means I wear headphones almost all morning.

The first thing I do when beginning my work day is put on those headphones and hit play on the Monument Valley soundtrack and listen to that music for an hour or two while I write.

Fantastical

The best app there is for calendaring and remindering on iOS.

OmniFocus

I've been a hard and fast OmniFocus user for more than half-a-decade. Something I've always liked about the app is that it can be flexible to work the way you work best.

When I first began using OmniFocus, I was managing an in-house design team. At any given time, we had roughly 45 active projects. It was crazy, and OmniFocus helped me keep everything moving forward.

Nowadays, I have about 3 or 4 active projects at a time. I'm managing far less action items. In both situations, OmniFocus is as powerful or as simple as I need it.

I should say, however, that I'm considering a move to Wunderlist. At the beginning of this year, Blanc Media hired its first full-time employee, and so now I'm looking at getting a task management system that allows for group collaboration.

Safari

Probably my favorite 1st-party app on iOS (Trailers is a pretty stellar second) and, if you count all the in-app browsers that use Safari, this is surely the app I use the most on my iPhone.

Tweetbot

For checking the Twitter, of course.

Weather Line

Every night before I go to bed, I set out my clothes for the next day, so I check what tomorrow's weather is going to be so I can dress accordingly.

PCalc Lite

Yep. I can't ever post a picture of my iPhone Home screen without getting comments about how I use Pcalc Lite. Well, it's not. I have the full version of PCalc via in-app purchase, but went with the "Lite" app because I prefer the looks of the orange icon over the blue one.

Slack

Who's *not* using Slack these days? This is the app we use to communicate about and basically run Tools & Toys, The Sweet Setup, and The Focus Course.

Scanbot

This is the app I use to take photos of business expense receipts when I'm out and about. It does OCR on the receipt and uploads it to my "Receipts" folder in Dropbox.

1Password

Of course. Thanks to iCloud Keychain, I don't need to open up 1Password on my iPhone all that often, but it's still a critical app.

Instapaper

While I still use Instapaper every day (to send things to it) I only read about a half-dozen articles in a week (if that).

Nearly all of my reading is with physical dead-tree books nowadays. It started over a year ago when I ordered a whole slew of books off Amazon while researching for The Focus Course. It was far cheaper to order used books from Amazon than to by the

Kindle versions, and then I just got hooked on how much easier and faster it was to read a paper book.

Speaking of reading, savvy readers may have noticed a lack of an RSS reader in my list. Since all the reading I do these days is with physical books, I haven't check in on my RSS feeds in at least a year.

Overcast

This is the app I use for listening to podcasts whenever I'm in the car. Which, since I work from home, isn't all that often.

Even though I'm subscribed to a few dozen podcasts, I only listen to about 1-2 episodes per week. And so I'm very particular about which episodes I listen to, choosing only the ones that look the most interesting or relevant to me.

Which is why my number one feature request for Overcast would be a custom playlist that works like a "listen later" queue. I'd love to be able to flag individual episodes and have them show up in a list and I could just work my way through that list.

Day One

Though I use Day One all the time, it's not always from my iPhone. I also do a fair amount of my writing from the Mac. What I love most about the iPhone version is how I can quickly snap a photo and create a new journal entry with that photo, add in a brief caption, and the location data is automatically placed. Between a picture, the geo-tagged location, and a brief explanation, it's pretty easy to have a robust journal entry in a few seconds.

★ ★ ★

When I first started writing this article a few days ago, my home screen had one more row of apps than it does now. But the process of writing about the apps helped me realized that I had more apps than I wanted. So, thanks to a couple folders on the Home screen and the ability to search for an app from any Home screen, I've simplified things a bit.

For me, just the process of writing this article caused me to think again about if the apps that were on my Home screen were the apps I still wanted there.

A FOCUS ON TIME MANAGEMENT

If you'd like more in-depth training on scheduling, prioritizing, and time management, we have a class that I think you'd love…

thefocuscourse.com/time

So many people have shared with me their frustrations at not being able to find a time management **system that works**. One they can stick with. One that's not a pain in the butt.

A good system will **empower you** to do the things you want and need to do. It also should align with your personality. Without those two characteristics, your "system" will be little more than a burden.

Which is why this is not your typical "nerdy schedule party" type of class. Trust me — I've been there and it's not pretty.

This is a class for people who dislike schedules just as much as it is for those who love them. How is that possible? Because taking ownership of your time and attention goes deeper than implementing a few quick tips for how to rock a Day Runner™.

Focus, priorities, time management, etc… these are important because they're about **loving life**.

Which is why *A Focus On Time* promises to be equally relevant for those who adore spontaneity as well as those who thrive in administrativia.

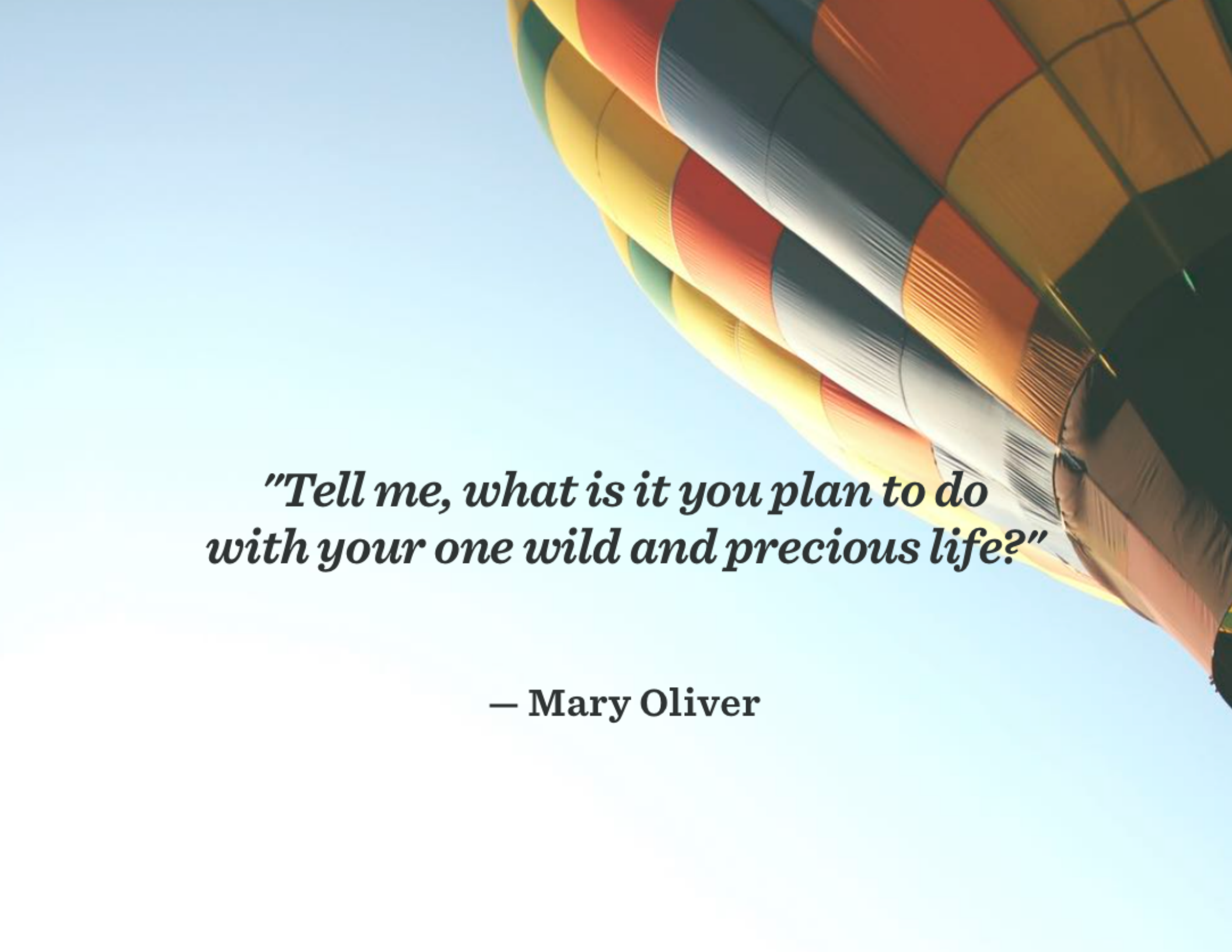**Get the most of your time — your life — every day.**

The class consists of 30 MP3 lessons (5 hours of total audio) and 7 PDF worksheets you can use for getting clarity about your time and scheduling your day.

Some of the main themes addressed within the class include:

- How to create a time management system that works.
- Quick wins, strategies, and tools for Time Management (to get you started).
- How to schedule and plan your year / month / week / day (for both your work life and personal life).
- How managing your time can empower a spontaneous and open schedule.
- How to get breathing room in your day.
- How to thrive with a schedule that varies every day.
- What to do in an office culture that loves meetings.
- Time management clichés and myths.
- Setting goals and priorities.
- The importance of valuing relationships over efficiency.
- How to keep your schedule.
- How to be productive at home.
- Using your time to do work that matters and build your business, side project, etc.
- Surviving in a meeting-loving, urgency-centric office culture.

You can learn more and sign up here:

thefocuscourse.com/time

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

— **Mary Oliver**