



# Just Start:

A quick guide to  
setting up  
a time  
management  
system

CamaDuke.com

by Cama Duke

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# Strategy: Think Small

## Strategy: Think Small

Here's my deep thought: Anyone who wants to manage time better doesn't want to spend a lot of time on the process.

Here's another deep thought: Success in improving the way you manage your time results from a series of small changes rather than a massive or overwhelming shift in how you spend your time.

Yes, that's my advice, at least to get us started. Think small. In these guides, I provide strategies that are mostly small tweaks rather than grand changes. Whether these strategies are new to you or not, I hope you will give them a fair try. At the same time, please think small. Don't quit doing what works for you. Consider these strategies small changes that might help you do more.

But Cama, you might say, I want to think big. Quit trying to hold me back.

Okayyyy. First, let's back off the caffeine. And yes, dream big. But it's my experience that anything big is made up of countless small steps. In most cases, you can't achieve something big all in this minute. But you can find one small step forward. Take it. Pat yourself on the back for taking that step. Then find the next step, whatever that looks like for you.

I also provide prompts for experimentation and reflection because I don't think time management works without reflection. That is, you need to spend a few minutes thinking about what is working and what needs to change. Devoting a little time to reflect as you go along will help you develop a time management system that works for you. Once you fine-tune that system through reflection, you may spend less time figuring out how to manage your time because the various strategies and tools will become a habit.

### Reflect:

Which time management strategies have worked for you in the past, even for a short time? What was helpful and why?

# Strategy: Commit

## Strategy: Commit to a system

The challenge in effectively managing time is not a lack of options. You have countless choices of systems, some highly specialized, some invitingly creative, some high-tech, some low. In fact, almost everyone who owns a cell phone already has a complex calendar system in their pockets. Many digital systems are available at no cost, such as Google or Apple calendars.

All the choices from cell phone calendar to bullet journal can work well. Each offers some pros and cons. None of those matter as much as this one strategy: You need to commit to a system.

I use the word system deliberately because you may need to use more than one tool. It is possible to do everything you need with one planner (or one cell phone), but you may need several different tools to accomplish your goals. Some paper-based, some digital, and even some options of white boards could be part of your approach.

Instead of recommending one specific system to choose, I will instead tell you what I consider

the four essential qualities of an effective system.

**1** Some or all of it must be **portable**. It will save you time and stress if you can refer to your system whenever someone asks you to make an appointment to meet with them later. You must be able to see if you are available to meet at that time. I know it is possible to estimate and get back in touch with the person later, but that is time-consuming, and a good system will allow you to schedule appointments whenever needed.

**2** Your system should allow you to see how your various time commitments **fit** together. You should be able to see, for example, how your personal commitments fit between work or school commitments.

**3** Your system should prevent you from **double-booking** yourself. When you record an appointment on your system, you should see right away if something else is already scheduled at that time.

**4** Your system should include ways to record every appointment, deadline, task, and reminder. These can be all part of one single tool (such as a planner) or multiple parts of a system.

By the way, you don't have to commit to using this one system forever. But you should commit to using this one system for more than a week. In fact, I would recommend committing to a system for four months, about the length of an academic semester. That will be the right amount of time to give it a fair shot and to

## Reflect—

Identify your system. What do you intend to use for the next four months? Assess the following:

- 1: Is it portable in some way? Can you consult it and update it when you are away from home?
- 2: Can you see all of your commitments in one place—work, play, etcetera?
- 3: Can you avoid double-booking yourself by accident? For example, when you schedule a dental appointment, are you confident you don't have a meeting at that time?
- 4: Can you keep track of appointments at specific dates and times? Do you also have a way to keep track of tasks and reminders that may not have a set date or time?

Find what you like and what you will commit to maintain.

develop habits that could boost your success.

Just remember that committing doesn't simply mean identifying the system you wish to use. It means interacting with this system every day. **Every day.** Often more than once a day.

I encourage you to look at your system not as a burden but as a tool that can expand what you are capable of achieving. Your time management system is your partner. But it will only be helpful if you spend a little time with it every day.

# Strategy: Plan Ahead

## Strategy: Plan Ahead

Here's the truth: I don't like to be surprised by a deadline or to be placed in a position of completing work at the last minute because of the way someone else prefers to work or due to a failure in communication or planning appropriately.

Yes, that's right. Strong words from Cama (me). But this is something that causes me to use strong words indeed. I don't like completing important work at the last minute, and if you put me in that position, I will have an attitude.

Pew, confession IS good for the soul.

Now that you know this about me, I realize some of you are confident--and you can show me articles that support you in this--that last minute work is more creative. Not only that, it's how you prefer to get things done, and there is no need for you to read any tips on how to create long range plans.

To which I answer, sure, maybe so.

A moment or two passes.

But... you knew it was coming...even if you ignore any other suggestion I make, please, please, please don't let this preference on your part to complete work at the last minute guide what you expect others to do. If you are part of any kind of team or any family activities, plan ahead at least enough so that you can let your group members know deadlines well in advance. And remind them periodically of the deadline. Be sure to provide some minimal resource they can consult when you are not available to be sure they know what, at least in broad strokes, they are responsible for doing.

Hmm. Since those categories apply or will someday apply to all of you, it means you might benefit from learning how to plan ahead.

You knew I would get to this point eventually.

Still, I promise that you can do all the work at 3 am before the deadline if that makes you happy, but please plan and communicate so others aren't forced to do everything at the last minute.

# Plan Ahead, continued

One more thought for those of you determined to complete work at the last minute-- almost every project that might benefit from that last minute burst of creativity usually involves some mindless preparation, such as identifying and gathering the materials you need to succeed or asking questions or pursuing additional research of some sort. You might even create a task list or outline of actions to ensure you aren't forgetting anything. The goal is not that you have to change your style in how/when you create, but that you will plan ahead to maximize your success at the moment you create, and you won't make people like me suffer unnecessarily by forcing us to do the same when we are happier when we whittle away at large projects.

Okay, so now that I've tried to make the case for why you should plan ahead, let me walk through how. You need a way to view several months as a whole. The month views on your calendar systems can

work if you flip through them enough, but I prefer to have a separate quarterly view of three months (or four) at a time.

Whatever your system, make it a priority to write down all of your major deadlines and events so you can see them in the month/quarterly view as well as in any daily or weekly view of your calendar. Digital calendars will take care of this step automatically.

If you use a paper-based system, it is not necessarily a waste of time to rewrite a major deadline so you can see it in different ways. I compare this work to studying: If you want to remember something, then you need to spend some time with it. If you don't see the deadline when you need to see it, you risk forgetting or discovering that deadline when you won't have enough time to get the work done.

So write the deadline down, wherever you need to write it. Don't resent the time it takes. Just writing it down may be the key to getting it done.



I mark major deadlines in online calendars like Google or Apple Calendar as All-Day events so they show up more prominently in the month view.

# Plan Ahead, Continued

Now I want you to look at the next 3-4 months ahead, surveying how major deadlines and events fit together. Viewing these events as a whole can help you see when you will be most busy, and it can help you plan ahead for those busy times. Even though I don't like completing work at the last minute, I am still susceptible to procrastination, so I find that recognizing that I won't have any time next week to complete a task often helps me push to get it done now.

Once you have this view of several months as a whole, you can then engage in what is called reverse planning. That is, you look at a deadline and work backwards, breaking that deadline into smaller steps and assigning mini-deadlines along the way. Let's say that I have a major project due in four weeks. I prefer to have it ready at least one day before the deadline. I never risk completing a project, even just printing it or transmitting it, on the deadline day because technology has a way of sensing our desperation, so printers will fail at the last minute or internet systems will go offline. Planning to complete the project a day

ahead gives me time to avoid or overcome such pitfalls.

Then I identify the next step prior to printing or transmitting or delivering the final product. Often, that might mean I need to carefully proofread/review my work. So I might set the deadline for the proofreading about three days before the deadline. So what needs to happen before proofreading? I prepare the final version a week before the deadline. And before that? I get feedback from a friend or colleague or team, say, a week and a half before the deadline. And before that? I fact-check or cite resources/references, or similar. And before that? I prepare a rough version. And before that? I engage in additional research and preparation.

Every major deadline can be broken down into smaller steps for any major product or project you need to develop. I recommend writing smaller tasks on your daily view or task list rather than on the monthly or quarterly view.

As you look at the months ahead, don't think only in terms of what you *\*have\** to do

# Plan Ahead, Continued

within that time. Think about what else you'd like to achieve in that time period. This is not a day, not an hour, not a week. This is a significant amount of time, yet it will pass almost as quickly as a day, hour, or week. If you don't explore ways to take advantage of this block of time, you may only complete the bare minimum possible.

Look ahead. Consider what could happen in the next few months. While I want you to see the potential there to achieve something new, I also urge you to be realistic about everything on your plate.

Sometimes there are emotional and physical challenges that the calendar doesn't reveal that will limit what you can accomplish. But consider if it might be possible to carve out an hour or even just a half hour a week to whittle away at a longer term goal (it can be personal or professional—write a book, compose a song, or train for a new career, you name it). You can plan ahead for personal goals just as easily as you can for professional. Use the tools of monthly or quarterly views to take advantage of the time that spans ahead of you.

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
March 7	8	9	10	11	12	13
				18	19	20
				25	26	27
				April 1	2	3
			8	9	10	
			15	16	17	
			22	23	24	
			29	30	May 1	
			6	7	8	

## Reflect:

Identify your preferred tool to view 3-4 months ahead. It could be the month view of a computer calendar or the planner pages, a spreadsheet, a desk calendar, a white board, or your own creation. After you mark all major deadlines and events, take a moment to evaluate what lies ahead. When will you be busiest? When would you have more flexibility to carve out time for something extra, possibly a special project? When will events and deadlines collide—how can you plan ahead to avoid an overload?

# Strategy: Plan by week

## Strategy: Plan by week

When I plan my time, I base it on the week as a whole, rather than the current day.

In fact, I look at the week ahead almost every time I look at my calendar, especially during busy weeks. I don't make decisions about what I should do in the moment without assessing what I need to do for the full week. Taking stock of the week helps me prioritize how to spend my time. It also helps me allocate time for activities or projects in between various appointments or other commitments. It may help me realize if I need to change plans, too. I might realize as I look at the week that I no longer have as much time as I thought for a meeting or lunch date, and I can reach out to them in advance to reschedule rather than at the last minute. I can think through how I am going to accomplish whatever I have to do throughout the week.

In addition to planning my time with the full week in view, I find it helpful periodically, particularly at the start of a new year or new work assignment, to plan out an ideal weekly schedule.

Developing a weekly plan is one of my favorite strategies. Whenever a student or colleague asked me to give advice on how to manage a challenging task, this strategy always came first. At least eight times out of ten, creating this schedule provided insight into how to make time to tackle most challenges.

Find or create a weekly grid or spreadsheet to budget how you wish to prioritize your time on a weekly basis. You can find a blank plan on my website [camaduke.com](http://camaduke.com) as well as other time management tips and tools. This weekly plan should be a set of general routines unrelated to any specific week's events: consider this weekly plan as a thinking tool, a way to see how much time you have available each week and prioritize how you should navigate the week.

This view of my week helps me gain insight into when and why I am busy, and when and why I am most productive (or not) at different points in the week. This view of the week also helps me get a sense of if and when I could use my time better.

# Plan by Week, Continued

**First**, record any appointments that occur every week, such as consistent work hours, car pool obligations, classes, meetings, date nights—anything that takes place every week.

Commitments that take place every other week can be added, too, though I usually put an asterisk on the grid to remind myself that this appointment doesn't occur every week.

**Then**, assign or budget time for activities that are important but not fixed in time, such as exercise, meals, errands, chores, sleep, and prime focus times that you save for your hardest tasks. If your schedule is especially tight, it might be smart to save a little down time that you can use in any way you decide in that moment because most of us need some flexibility and spontaneity even in the busiest of weeks.

In the process of filling out this plan, you might see that you have more time than you thought if you have been using your time more spontaneously up until now. This happens perhaps more often to those who wait to be inspired to work towards a deadline, inspiration that doesn't arise until most of the day, week, or month has flown past. You can

also use this plan as a way to save time for specific tasks (such as whittling away at a major project or career development activities during less busy moments in the week). This helps you use time that might otherwise slip away in the weeks prior to a major deadline.

As you plan your week, keep in mind Grandmother's Rule: Eat your vegetables before your dessert. That is, if I have a daunting task that I might want to avoid such as writing a report, and I have another one that I might enjoy such as taking my lunch break, I tend to be more successful if I write the report before I take my lunch break. As you look at your schedule and how you budget your time, consider the order in which you tackle each activity as a way to boost follow-through.

On the other hand, filling in every commitment will reveal that some of you don't have wiggle room. Indeed you literally might not have enough time for everything you need or want to do. In this situation, then, you have to prioritize. Look at the plan of the week to see if there are any tasks or activities that you can

# Plan by Week, Continued

cut out or at least cut down. Or see if you can get double duty out of one activity, such as exercising with a friend as a way to socialize at the same time as you take care of your health. This weekly plan can help you think through how you might be able to reach your goals as well as to see what obstacles may lie in your way.

Filling out the plan offers the possibility to create a routine for your weekly workload. For example, I might use my grid to decide that the best time for me to exercise at a specific time, such as between appointments or before lunch. Even though I don't actually have to exercise every day at noon, for example, I decide I want that activity to become part of my routine, so I make it a point to do so every day until it becomes automatic. Automaticity is so helpful. Instead of wondering, "Should I exercise now or later?" I start doing it without thinking about it. It happens without extra effort on my part.

I have found that routines tend to benefit the people who think they like routines AND the people who are sure they don't. That is why I

recommend you experiment with this strategy to see if you gain more control over your time in general.

Schedules, especially more structured schedules, protect me from forgetting a deadline because I know I only have a certain amount of time to get a task completed. If I have too much flexibility and if I get the impression that I can do the task at any time, I find it too easy to forget what I needed to do.

Another advantage is that once I create/identify/troubleshoot/streamline my weekly plan, I no longer have to spend as much time making choices. Constantly having to decide how to spend every minute can be distracting.

I get the irony. Freedom is what we want. So constantly having a choice of how to spend each hour may seem desirable. Yet the opposite can occur. Not following a schedule can be more confining because you always fall behind and must rush to complete deadlines or give up on more challenging goals altogether. You become less free, not more.

# Plan by Week, continued

Remember, you still have choices. You don't have to follow the plan precisely or at all. Just remember that each choice has consequences. In my defense—since you likely think I plan too much—please note that there should be some blank spaces in these weekly schedules. You can and should leave some of your time unscheduled to use as needed.

My husband tells me that houses need attention, not just occasional maintenance, but literally someone who lives inside and is aware of what is happening in the house. Without this attention, the house starts to fall apart. Schedules are similar. They are liberating, but they won't stand forever. You will need to reassess and make changes periodically. Create the weekly plan that will set you free. Then when things change, create it again.

A word of comfort to those who don't want to follow a weekly schedule in lockstep and a word of caution to those of you who do: It is rare to follow the plan perfectly even when everything is going right.

## The Anti-Routine Routine

For some of you a set schedule does not make sense because you have too few fixed commitments and simply do not need to be that strict with your time or because you resist every attempt to follow an hour by hour plan. In some cases, your work hours vary so much that no routine is possible. Or you have health challenges or personal challenges that disrupt your attempts to create order in your day. You may want to try to create what I call the "anti-routine."

For this approach, identify daily goals to complete every week on specific days of the week. For example, you might decide that you will exercise every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. You don't have to decide in advance what times you will do it. Instead, you just know that you have to exercise at some point on those days. You could knock it out early in the morning. On other days, you may have to take a midnight run. Either way, you will have exercised.

This approach does not tap into the power of routine, but it still taps into the power of habit because you know what you want to get done per day. Once you get those goals met for the day, you also can feel a sense of satisfaction that you've done what you needed to do, whenever you got it done.

# Plan by Week, Continued

You will need to work around the unexpected almost as often as you will be able to say, “Oh, right, it’s noon, time to work out.” You aren’t failing if you don’t follow the schedule perfectly. It is a plan, a routine, a resource—not a test that you either pass or fail. Experiment to see how this approach can help you rather than worrying about whether or not you are doing everything exactly the way you planned.

The value of this weekly plan is not that suddenly your use of time management will be precise, but rather that you will

have a better grasp of how much time you actually have and insight into strategies that might help you tackle your top priorities every week.

Based on my experiences and what I have observed in others, there is no single way to manage time; the strategies that work during one period of your life may not exactly fit other times. Nonetheless, systems, schedules, and plans can help. Keep exploring. And sometimes, just grit your teeth, dust off that task list, pull out the calendar, and get started.

4 am						
5 am						
6 am		yoga	yoga	yoga	yoga	yoga
7 am				Eat		
8 am						
9 am		Team meeting	calls	Project time	calls	
10 am					webinar	
11 am		Save for follow-up				hike
noon				Eat		
1 pm		Project time	emails	Project time	emails	
2 pm						
3 pm						
4 pm	groceries					
5 pm		weights	Bike ride	weights	Bike ride	
6 pm						
7 pm						

*Sample plan showing time saved for specific goals, rather than everything one has to do during the week.  
More available at [camaduke.com](http://camaduke.com)*

# Strategy: Create Lists

## Strategy: Create lists.

I may not need to tell you anything more than this phrase: Create a to-do list. Look at it often during the day, especially when you have an opening in your routine to make some choices of what to do next. Let the list help you make those choices.

Is that enough? Probably, but you know me. I will have to say more. In the past when I have coached students on time management, one strategy that made a significant impact was when I asked that they spend time developing a to-do list at least once a week.

I use an app to manage my to-do lists, and I know there are many free ones that come with Google or Apple that can serve this function. My app allows me to sort tasks into categories as well as by date. I even have a category for “someday.”

These lists work, even if there are some items that have been there for years. Years! But those are tasks that I want to keep in mind for the future. It's also true that sometimes I delete a task without completing it because I realize I just don't want to do it.

Yet even though I use this app, I sometimes sit down with a scrap of paper and jot down a new list. That's because a to-do list can be a tool or a process. As a process, creating the to-do list helps me focus and prioritize. As a tool, I can refer to my to-do list throughout the day to see what needs to be done and if I can squeeze anything else in.

Perhaps some people's minds work like clockwork, telling them everything they need to know the minute they need to know it, but mine sometimes resembles a squirrel, bouncing from one thought to the next. It's not chaos, and my squirrel mind will hold still some of the time to help me capture all my tasks on a list, but more often than not, later in the day or week I realize one or one hundred more items that I should put on the task list, usually related to something I already wrote down.

In fact, as someone who enjoys creative work, I always feel a bit sheepish about how much I love everything related to time management, as if I will never measure up to those creative people who would never use a

# Create Lists, Continued

to-do list. Yet for me, creating the to-do list is a creative process, generative even. The more I capture in the list, the more I can build from there.

The list itself can be a tool for organization. I can gather everything I might need to do, and then I can organize those tasks by date, by priority, and/or by category. I can also have a few goals, as I mentioned, that I want to keep in mind but that I am happy to set aside for a time.

Using a to-do list helps relieve stress because I do not have to remember everything. I rather like the process of prioritizing because some days, I read over my task list as if engaging in some kind of popularity contest—don't like it, don't like it, hmm, interesting....

Of course, having the list is not enough: I have to cultivate the habit of 1) designating one main system to store my to-do list(s), such as digital lists, a simple paper notebook, or nested within my existing calendar, 2) adding to the list as soon as I think of anything that I want to do (or as soon as social etiquette allows, because oddly enough, some people take offense when you stop everything to add something

to your task list), and 3) looking at the list at least twice a day.

If I do so, I am less stressed and more focused. I am less stressed because I don't have to worry about forgetting something important. I am more focused because it's a way to dump a bunch of potential distractions onto the list. Once I choose what I need to work on, I don't have to think about them anymore. I know the list is holding on to them. It works for me.

Okay, time for that "except when..." I have heard from a few students who feel discouraged when they look at their to-do lists because the list goes on and on, and they feel as if there's no way they will ever get it all done. To which I have to nod and say, yes, I definitely know what you mean.

I have been able to address that challenge thanks to the capacity of digital task lists that allow me to tag some items as "today" or "now" and others as tomorrow, later, or eventually. I sometimes drill down and view only the tasks I most want to see. That helps a lot. I know the other tasks are there, but I can see only what I need to see to get moving right now.

# Create Lists, Continued

It doesn't have to be a digital tool, though. You can create lists on paper divided by the categories of "Today," "Next Week," and "Whenever Possible," as well as lists based on various categories, such as work, club, family, financial, etc.

I should add there are days when I complete one hundred tasks and others when I complete two. Sometimes, I only complete a few tasks due to interruptions, illness, family emergencies, or non-emergencies that one cannot refuse. Or sometimes, life just happened. But other days, I realize I only completed two tasks because they were extremely time-consuming tasks or emotionally-draining tasks, and I should still be very satisfied with what I accomplished. It takes some self-coaching for me to realize when that happens, because it feels much better to get one hundred tasks done than only two. But sometimes those two, or even just one, is all I needed

to do that day. It's enough to celebrate. It was quality work, not quantity. Be aware of that so you won't feel discouraged. Be aware so you know that you are making progress on commitments you have made to yourself and others. You are sometimes the only one who will be aware of it. Others may look at you or your output and not realize what they are seeing.

I also like to keep in mind a concept that I have learned from high school cross country and track, now that I am the parent of runners. It's called, at least around here, the PR. It means, sorta, Personal Best, and you, like me, might wonder why it's an R not a B, but R stands for record. Which is probably better than best because best is a limiting word. Let's not strive for best because then there's nowhere else to go. Just try to do better than last time. And if you don't make it, no worries. There will always be another race.

## **Don't reflect:**

Just sit down and make a list right now. Make several. Don't wait—just start.



# Just Start

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If you have questions, please contact me via my website [camaduke.com](http://camaduke.com). You will also find more guides, reflections, and tools related to time management, reading, writing, and learning.

**About Cama Duke:** For most of my career, I taught college success strategies at Appalachian State University, which led me to develop specific classes on time management. I also provided time management coaching on an individual basis. Early in my career, I worked as a reporter and a middle school teacher. I have a doctorate in educational leadership, a graduate certificate in rhetoric and composition, and a master's degree in reading from Appalachian State. My bachelor's degree in comparative literature is from Haverford College. I retired from teaching to write full-time, working on fiction when I'm not posting time management tips and/or random reflections on my blog.