

8,760 hours

how to get the most from the next year

2012/2013 edition

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Introduction

This is a guide for planning the next 8,760 hours—one full year—of your life. More importantly, it is about creating a detailed plan and optimizing for success, based on an understanding of what works.

For the last few years this system has worked very well for me. My hope is that you will find it useful too.

I can't claim to have originated many of the ideas here. It builds off many hours of reading many articles and blogs about productivity, goals, and the brain, which are attributed when possible.¹

The end result is a system for keeping yourself constantly moving towards your goals over the next year, and constantly staying on track.

Why plan at all?

Never put off till tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow.
—Mark Twain

Want to solve world hunger? Want to write a book? Want to beat every computer game

¹ One of the strongest influences is Chris Guillebeau who has written about his yearly planning process at <http://chrisguillebeau.com/3x5/category/annual-review/>.

ever designed? Want to cure cancer? Do you have something to protect, something that gets you out of bed in the morning?²

Whatever your primary motivations are in life, you won't get anywhere by waiting for something to happen. We plan because we have sh*t we want to do with our lives.

Humans do not think strategically by default. Even when we *know* what our goals are (and we often don't even know) we are *still* bad at asking things like:³

- ☐ What *exactly* do I want to achieve?
- ☐ How can I measure success?
- ☐ Am I actively seeking out information about this?
- ☐ Can I break this down into more manageable parts?
- ☐ Is this really my goal? Am I constrained by fears or uncertainties?

Our brains are not optimized for achieving our larger goals in life. They have been sculpted by evolution for *survival* and *reproductive abilities*, but not much else!

² See *Something to Protect* by Eliezer Yudkowsky: http://lesswrong.com/lw/nb/something_to_protect/

³ See *Humans are not automatically strategic* by Anna Salamon: http://lesswrong.com/lw/2p5/humans_are_not_automatically_strategic/

We need systems and processes in place to help us get around these evolutionary “abilities” so that we can get the most out of our lives.

Your life in a nutshell (“life is short”)

If you live to be 80 years old, which is about the first-world average life expectancy, then you will experience about 30,000 days or 700,000 hours of life (if we take out sleeping time the number drops to more like 450,000 hours).⁴

The point is that we have limited time and we must choose how to spend it. Unfortunately, from personal experience, I rarely take the time to consciously do this.

The only way to decide what to work on is to *prioritize*. That's why I take a big picture approach to life and break down the big picture into present year and day actions.

This is part of my motivation for calling this guide “8,760 hours” rather than “one year.” Even if there is a sense that life is incredibly short, there are *still* 8,760 hours in a single year! That is a *lot* of time to get some real stuff done.

Given that our natural life-planning skills are... *lacking*, this guide hopes to help us

⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_expectancy. I, for one, plan to live to be at least 1,000 years old, but that's a story for a different guide.

overcome that limitation and get things done *anyway*.

We need specific goals and a concrete plan for obtaining them that is optimized for success. What better time to do some fresh planning than at the start of a new year?

The problem with new years resolutions

We've all made them and we've all failed to achieve them. The number of times I've resolved to take up regular exercise or stop procrastinating—and failed miserably—is embarrassing.

New Years resolutions often have at least one of the following problems:

- ❑ They are vague, non-specific goals like “be fit,” “be nice to people,” or “read more books.”
- ❑ They are overly pessimistic and stem from self-critical admonitions for still not doing That Thing you always wanted to do or felt you *ought* to do—*I'm such a slacker, but this year will be different*.
- ❑ They take on too much at once—“I'm committing to these ten big, vague, *life-changing* things and start them all on January 1st.”

This guide outlines *my* process for avoiding all of these shortcomings and trying to make some *real* changes over the next year.

The start of a new year is useful. There tends to be a positive “change can happen” atmosphere that explains why people make their new years resolutions in the first place. A new year. A clean slate. A time to make some changes. Let's *still do* that, but let's do it *right*.

How to use this guide

I'm going to illustrate what it is that I do, and I invite you to follow along.

First I do an initial overview of my life. This helps get the mind ready to do the whole process and starts me thinking about the next year.

Next I review, in detail, the state of all areas of my life, and specifically any major projects completed in the past year or still underway.

Then I spend some time thinking about the ideal future—how I *want* my life to look.

Finally I extract from my ideals what I ought to focus on for the next 8,760 hours (1 year) of my life, and optimize those plans for success by taking advantage of several motivation and anti-procrastination tools and tricks.

I try to spend at least a few days using this process at the end of every calendar year. The more time you spend on it the more value you will likely get out of it. Also, spreading it over several days gives the mind lots of time to process what it's thinking about, which I find useful.

Before we get started, I should mention what this guide is *not* for:

- ❑ Determining what your bigger goals in life *should* be—this is something I can't get into here, and something I highly recommend you spend some time thinking about if you haven't already.
- ❑ An excuse when things don't work out. “But I *tried*. I even used this guide!” You are responsible for your life; if things don't work out then figure out *why* and do something about it.

The number one way to use this guide *wrong* is to be *dishonest*. You need to be willing to face yourself, dirt and all. If you're not up for that, then file this guide away and continue on with life as you see fit.

Who this is for

I'm a very analytic person, and this guide strongly reflects that. In the process of reviewing my past year and planning the upcoming year I break down my life into

fourteen areas, repeatedly mind map my goals and projects in great detail, develop ways to track my progress, and try to optimize my life for success.

The whole process is very analytical and systematic, and won't work for everybody. There is some risk with trying to optimize other peoples' lives, because we don't all work the same.⁵ People are complex. This process, which I enjoy, might be unpleasant for you.

But even if you find specific parts of this guide useless, I believe you can still get some value out of it.

This method *will not* work for everybody. Part of the reason this is successful for me is because I *enjoy* using it. If you don't like using your system then it will not survive for long. If at any point there is a part of the process that you do not want to do or would like to modify, then *please do*.

No matter what, do what works for you. The whole point of this process is to help you get the most out of the next year. As you follow or deviate from this process, don't forget the reason why you're reading this in the first place.

A quick personal introduction

You can read a longer background at <http://alexvermeer.com/about-alex/>.

For the purposes of this guide it is sufficient to say that I enjoy reading and writing about various topics ranging from understanding how our minds work, being more rationality, improving productivity and motivation, and learning cool things.

Life is short, and I'll be damned if I don't at least *try* to make the most of my time.

Planning out my year and optimizing it for success are natural actions in the pursuit of my interests.

⁵ See <http://alexvermeer.com/beware-of-other-optimising/>.

The Tools

Before we go ahead and *do* any life planning we need some tools to help us out.

The process outlined in this guide is flexible. You can easily adapt it to use whatever tools you prefer. I always require the following:

- ☐ Pen and notebook
- ☐ Privacy
- ☐ Time
- ☐ Mind mapping software (optional)

Note: If at any point in this guide you would rather use a different set of tools—such as paper and pen rather than mind mapping software—then do it!

A note on mind mapping

Mind mapping consists of starting with a central idea in the middle of the page and branching out ideas from there. For example, the following two figures are of an early pen and paper mind map I made when outlining this guide and my review mind map from last year, respectively.

Figure 1: A sample paper & pen mind map

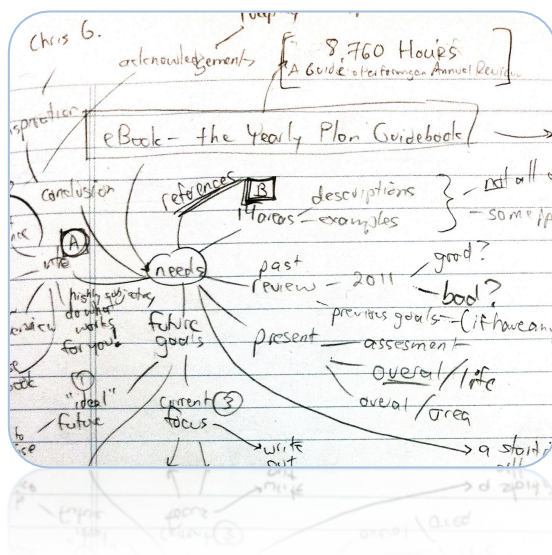


Figure 2: A sample Mindmanager mind map



For things like outlining, big picture thinking, and connecting ideas, mind mapping is vastly superior to linear note taking, whether it's with pen and paper or a software on your computer.

Paper has the benefits of flexibility and creativity, whereas software has the benefits of any electronic tool—mobility, copying & pasting, printing, resizing, easy scaling, etc.

Some mind mapping software options are:

- ☐ *Mindmanager* by *Mindjet*—expensive but powerful. (This is my current program of choice, though I have some reservations.⁶)
- ☐ *FreeMind*—open source and free.
- ☐ *MindMeister*—free and online.

You must also be sure you will have enough time. As mentioned in the introduction, I stretch out this process of at least a few days to get the most out of it.

The fourteen areas

One last thing before we get to the core content of this guide.

⁶ Specifically, when I switched from Windows to OSX I discovered that the Mac version of Mindmanager is *not* as good as for Windows. Some key features I enjoyed using were missing, and it is all-around more buggy. Still powerful, but less good.

Just as an airplane has wings, engines, windows, controls, and landing gear, your life has various components. Ignoring some of them is like trying to fly without wings.

There are an infinite number of ways you *could* break down your life. Over time I have collected and combined various methods and ended up with fourteen categories:

Worldview & Purpose

Your worldview is your complete set of beliefs about the world—its past, present, and future. It also covers your goals, values, desires and beliefs. Do you have clarity as to your existence, purpose, and place in the universe? What is your philosophy of life? What do you want to get out of life?

Contribution & Impact

How are you giving value to the world? Are you making a difference? How much impact does your existence have (environmentally, socially, cognitively)? Are you contributing to important and worthy causes?

Location & Possessions

Are you tied to one location? Are you readily mobile? This includes your current living situation; where you are in the world; your home, possessions, electronics, and toys; and your material sufficiency.

Money & Finance

Do you have savings, investments, assets, and debt? Do you have a budget and do you

follow it? Are your finances organized and managed? Where does your money come from? Where is it going?

Career & Work

Your work, job, career, or business; your source of income. Is what you do your calling? Are you engaged? Are you networked within your industry?

Health & Fitness

What do you eat? Do you exercise regularly? How often do you get sick? What is your overall energy level and resistance to illness? What are your major health issues and susceptibilities?

Knowledge & Education

What do you know? Are you developing your mind and learning new things? Do you have any talents or skills? Are you being educated?

Communication

Are you spreading ideas? Do you spend time discussing, influencing, persuading, arguing, philosophizing, debating, interacting, writing, or speaking?

Intimate Relationship

The intimate relationship(s) you have or want to have; your partner; the quality of your relationship.

Social Life & Family

This covers your home life and relationships with family members; your friends and social

experiences; networking; and club and organization memberships.

Emotions

Your general feeling about life. Are you optimistic or pessimistic, positive or negative? Are you aware of your emotions as they happen?

Character & Integrity

Your intelligence, integrity, honesty, courage, compassion, honor, self-discipline, and so on.

Productivity & Organization

Your memorized solutions, daily routine, and schedule. How good is your productivity? Do you act effectively? Are you organized? Can you get yourself motivated? How much do you procrastinate?

Fun & Adventure

Are you experiencing what you want to experience? Are you *enjoying life*? Are you doing things for fun? Do you have any hobbies or regular recreation? Do you have any creative pursuits?



Yes, fourteen is a lot of categories. Some of you may prefer a smaller breakdown. Chris Guillebeau, for example, uses the following categories: Writing, Business, Friends & Family, Service, Travel, Spiritual, Health, Learning, Financial (Earning), Financial

(Giving), and Financial (Savings).⁷

Whatever categories you choose to use, the rest of the guide should be easily adaptable to suit.

Note that there can be a bit of overlap between the categories, and that this is okay. Different aspects of your life clearly fall under multiple categories above.

For example, rock climbing has elements of Social (it is quite communal), Character (facing fears), Fitness (makes you stronger), and Fun (because it is!). For me, I climb because of how much fun it is, but I think of climbing as *primarily* great for my mental and physical health, so I classify it under Health & Fitness. This overlap is perfectly okay.



Now that we have the tools we can begin the actual review and planning.

⁷ See <http://chrisguillebeau.com/3x5/how-to-conduct-your-own-annual-review/>.

A Snapshot of Your Life

The initial overview

Pull out that pen and paper. To start off, you want to get the brain thinking about this stuff by answering the following four questions about *this past year*:

1. What went well?
2. What did not go well?
3. Where did you try hard?
4. Where did you not try hard enough?

You don't need to get into heavy detail quite yet. This exercise is for doing an initial pass of your life.

I spend at least a few minutes brainstorming (using mind maps) answers to each of these questions. Once I have around ten items I move on.

Getting specific: your present reality

Now it's time to get specific. For each of the fourteen areas we will map out a complete “status report” that includes an assessment of that area and any relevant information or metrics.

For example, for *Career & Work* you would assess your current career, your standing

within your company, your options, and your passion for what you do.

For *Location & Possessions* you would assess where you're living, the quality of your home, the amount of possession you have (too much or too little?), and your mobility.

To do this, create a mind map with something like “Life Status – End of 20xx” in the center with the fourteen areas branching out.

For each area include:

- ☐ Detailed answers to each of the four questions to the left.
- ☐ A short paragraph summarizing your thoughts about that area of your life.
- ☐ Project status updates.
- ☐ Projects completed in the past year.
- ☐ Milestones from the past year.
- ☐ Important events from the past year.
- ☐ Accomplishments.
- ☐ Failures.
- ☐ Other life metrics such as income, quality of relationships, amount of donations, etc.
- ☐ Your overall rating for this area—I rate from one (horrible) to ten (perfect).

As you brainstorm for each of the fourteen areas, review the descriptions outlined earlier. Also, feel free to use the following

questions and metrics that I use in my review mind map.

Ideas and future plans often pop into my head while doing this. When that happens I quickly jot them down on a separate piece of paper and continue on with the current task.

Worldview & Purpose

- ☐ Do you have a sense of purpose and direction in life?
- ☐ What is your philosophy of life?
- ☐ What are your fundamental goals, beliefs, and values?
- ☐ How do you want the world to be different when you're dead?
- ☐ Where are you right now (both physically in the universe and temporally)?
- ☐ What do you want out of life?
- ☐ What is a summary of your beliefs?

Contribution & Impact

- ☐ How are you giving value to the world?
- ☐ How much money did you give away in the past year? Who did it go to? Did it have the most possible impact?
- ☐ Do you take responsibility for your environmental impact on the world?

Location & Possessions

- ☐ Where do you live?
- ☐ Where is your home?
- ☐ Where in the world are you?
- ☐ What is your living situation like?

- ☐ How much stuff do you own?
- ☐ Approximate value of all possessions?
- ☐ What are your toys?
- ☐ Is your life cluttered?

Money & Finance

- ☐ Do you have savings? How much? Where are they?
- ☐ What is the status of your assets and investments?
- ☐ Do you know where you spend your money?
- ☐ Do you budget?
- ☐ What is your budget?
- ☐ Are you aware of where you spend your money?
- ☐ Are your finances organized?
- ☐ Do you have any debt?

Career & Work

- ☐ How do you make your money?
- ☐ What do you do?
- ☐ Do you like your job?
- ☐ Are you engaged by your work?
- ☐ Are you well networked within your industry?

Health & Fitness

- ☐ Typical foods?
- ☐ Are you generally tired or alert?
- ☐ How often do you get sick?
- ☐ Do you exercise?
- ☐ How much do you sleep on average?
- ☐ How much do you weigh?
- ☐ What is your standing heart rate?

- ☐ Do you regularly eat fast food or make healthy home-cooked meals?
- ☐ Do you research healthy foods and choices?
- ☐ What is your source of health information?

Knowledge & Education

- ☐ How much time do you spend learning new things?
- ☐ How much have you read in the past year?
- ☐ How much education do you have?
- ☐ What talents and skills have you recently developed?

Communication

- ☐ How much have you written in the past year?
- ☐ Do you ever discuss controversial topics with others?
- ☐ Do you ever give presentations to friends or coworkers?
- ☐ Are you confrontational or open to discussion?
- ☐ Do you have influence and status in your social circles? In society?

Intimate Relationship

- ☐ Are you in a relationship?
- ☐ How is it going?
- ☐ How much do you know about the other person?
- ☐ Are you aware of each other's needs and desires?

Social Life & Family

- ☐ How is your home life?
- ☐ What is your relationship like with your family?
- ☐ How many core friends do you have?
- ☐ How many acquaintances?
- ☐ What clubs or organizations are you a member of?
- ☐ Are you a good friend?

Emotions

- ☐ How do you feel about your life?
- ☐ Are you generally optimistic or pessimistic?
- ☐ Are you generally positive or negative?
- ☐ Are you easily aware of your current emotional state?
- ☐ Are you quick to notice how your emotions are influencing your thoughts, actions, and decisions?
- ☐ Do you do any sort of regular mindfulness practice?

Character & Integrity

Rate yourself in the following:

- ☐ Compassion
- ☐ Integrity
- ☐ Empathy
- ☐ Honor
- ☐ Self-discipline
- ☐ Self-awareness
- ☐ Communication skills
- ☐ Responsibility
- ☐ Focus
- ☐ Authenticity

- ☐ Confidence
- ☐ Persistence
- ☐ Effectiveness
- ☐ Etc.

Productivity & Organization

- ☐ What productivity systems do you use, if any?
- ☐ How well are they working?
- ☐ Is your life organized?
- ☐ What sorts of daily routines do you have?
- ☐ Is there too much complexity in your life? Do you need to simplify?

Creativity & Adventure

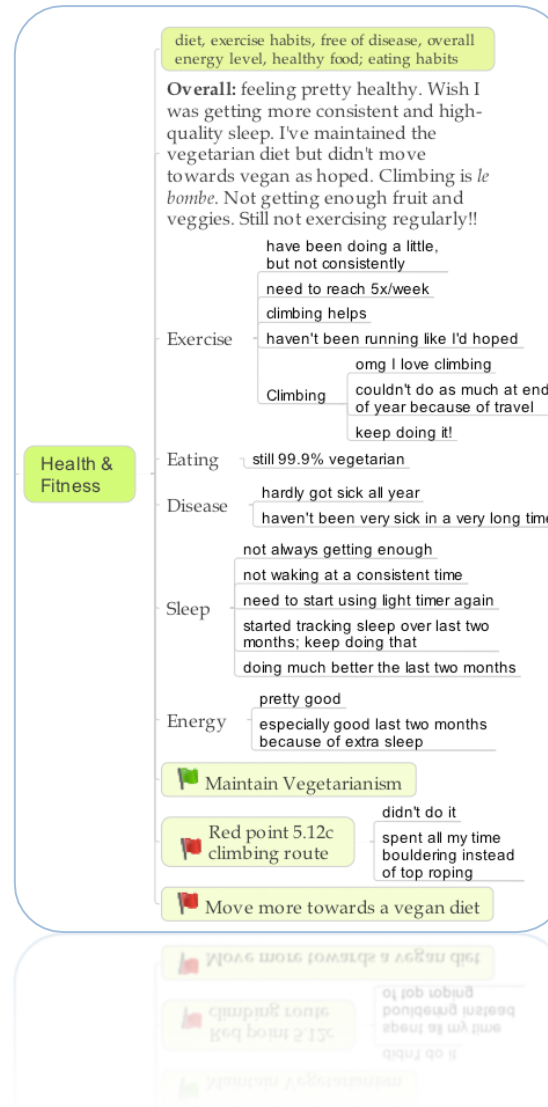
- ☐ Are you experiencing what you want to experience in life?
- ☐ What fun things have you done lately?
- ☐ What creative things have you done lately?
- ☐ What are your hobbies?
- ☐ What do you do for recreation?

This whole process can *easily* take several hours. Once I've gone through every area I do a second pass to catch the things I inevitably missed on the first pass.

The end result is a massive mind map with a complete picture of the current status of your life. The following figure gives my *Health & Fitness* review from last year as an example.

When you are satisfied with your awareness of the present state of your life, you are ready to move on to planning.

Figure 3: My Health & Fitness review



The Next 8,760 Hours

Your ideal future

Now that you have a good assessment of our present state of existence you are ready to begin planning for the future as a whole, and specifically the next year.

The first thing to do is to know what ideals you are aiming for.

I go through all fourteen areas of my life and review how I would want them to look in a perfectly ideal world. What kind of career would I have? How much money would I make? What would my social circles look like? How much impact would I be having on the world?

I put all of this in another new mind map called Future Vision and Goals.⁸

Since I have already done this for several years, nowadays I tend to review my existing mind map and make any changes as needed.

⁸ If you've already done this before, now is a good time to review and update your "ideal future," but there may be no need to go through the entire exercise again.

Don't fill up a mind map with things you would *like*, that would be *nice*. For example don't put "Make \$1,000,000,000 per year"—unless that *really* is a goal you're striving to reach.

The point isn't to think, "Well, I *might as well* set my ideal as having 1,000 cars."

Seriously ask yourself what you want your life to look like! Some questions to help you think about each of the fourteen areas:

- ☐ What would you like this to be like?
- ☐ What would be awesome?
- ☐ What would this look like if it was perfect?
- ☐ What is something you've always wanted to do here?
- ☐ What would your ideal life look like?
- ☐ Are there any specific projects to finish or goals to accomplish in this area?

When you're done you should have a good sense of what the ideal you looks like. It should be full of big lofty goals and coolness.

Now it's time to start extracting what to do over the next year from your ideals.

The next 8,760 hours

What will you do with the next 8,760 hours of your life? Not twenty years, not the next five years, but this coming year?

Yearly theme

It may help to start off with a theme in mind for the upcoming year. This next year can be your "Year of _____." This could be a specific accomplishment (*finish school, run a marathon*) or a general goal (*learn about cognitive psychology*).

If your life is in a state of flux or uncertainty then this may not be useful. In the first few years of doing this, my yearly theme ended up having no bearing on my projects and actions; life was constantly changing, as were my interests and goals.

Last year, however, was a little different. My 2011 theme of the year was "independence" because I wanted to take a break from my job, do some backpacking in South America, become "lighter" (sell or get rid of most of my possessions) and free myself from all debt.

Having the theme helped remind me what I wanted the main thrust of my year to be.

Setting a focus

There are a lot of different aspects of your life. Even the fourteen areas could be broken down further if we wanted to, but then it may get unwieldy.

We have only a limited amount of time, so we need to decide what we will focus on for the upcoming year.

Now you should take some time to figure out what the most important areas of your life you want to focus on in the next year.

I like to rate each category out of ten in terms of importance. This should help give an idea of what parts you think are less ideal than others.

Your major goals

Do you have any specific 1–2 year goals? Both a benefit and a flaw from picturing your ideal life is that it tends to lack concreteness. Goals tend to resemble new years resolutions in that they are vague, non-specific, and hard to measure: “regularly exercise,” for example.

Go through your mind map of your ideal life and extract some specific important goals from it. List some key things that you want to do in the next year. Can they be organized into projects? Are they specific and measurable?

What about longer-term goals?

At least for the present, I am done with specific long-term goals. My life is in too much flux to realistically plan what I'll be doing in next twenty years or even five years. My interests are too diverse to know how I will want to be spending my time five years from now. That said, I *do* still have some pretty specific medium-term goals for the next year or two that I want to focus on.

If you have long-term goals that's fine, but you may want to break them up into smaller major goals that can be completed in 1–2 years.

Now that you have an idea of what you want to focus on next year, what are your *most important* major goals? Try to limit it to 3–5 things. Remember, if you end up accomplishing those over the next year then you can always add more, but do not bite off more than you can chew.

Now create a new mind map called Current Major Goals and add your most important goals to it.

Some examples of my major goals from previous years:

Travel—Get off this continent and experience another culture; expand my knowledge & awareness of humanity; live out of my backpack; meet cool people; have fun. [Success! I backpacked through the highlands of Ecuador for seven weeks at the end of 2011.]

Write 100,000 words—Get some practice writing; complete NaNoWriMo; write regular blog posts. [Partial success: I wrote over 100,000 words and completed NaNoWriMo, but did not write

nearly as many blog posts as planned.]

Red point a 5.12c climbing route—Lead climb a 5.12c difficulty climbing route, using as many attempts as needed. [Failed: spend all my time bouldering (shorter problems, no rope) rather than lead climbing. In this case I dropped the goal half-way through the year because my interests changed.]

Eliminate ALL financial debt—Student loans, money owed parents, money owed others; avoid all credit card debt. [Success as of mid-2011.]

Spend the time to really think about this! What are the most important things you want to do over the next year?

A note about meta-skills

Meta-skills are those that help you achieve *all* of your goals. For example, exercise is overwhelmingly shown to improve many areas of your health and overall life. This better enables you to do *everything* else that you want to do.

Likewise, taking the time to learn about human motivation and procrastination has more than doubled my productivity.

Every time I set my major goals for the year I try to have at least one meta-skill goal.

Last year it was to consciously work on fighting my procrastination tendencies, this year I think it will be mindfulness and exercise.



Now that we have a good awareness of our present reality and our important major goals, we are ready to set ourselves up for success over the next 8,760 hours.

Optimizing for Success

This is probably the most important part of the whole process outlined in this guide. Reviewing our lives and outlining our major goals for the upcoming year is great, but it is far from the most we can do.

The internet is *full* of life-hacking and optimization tips and tricks, and I can't possibly cover them all, so here are just a few of my favorites.

The procrastination equation

The procrastination equation is a way of illustrating how our motivations work. This equation accounts for every major finding on procrastination.⁹

$$\text{Motivation} = \frac{\text{Expectancy} \times \text{Value}}{\text{Impulsiveness} \times \text{Delay}}$$

What this shows is that we are more motivated (less likely to procrastinate) when either our expectancy of success or how much we value a task are higher. Likewise, if we can decrease our impulsiveness (in short:

⁹ See *The Procrastination Equation* by Piers Steel, available from any bookstore. For an *amazing summary* of the procrastination equation see http://lesswrong.com/lw/3w3/how_to_beat_procrastination/.

our inability to focus on one thing) and decrease the delay until we are rewarded or a task is accomplished, we will be more motivated.

(See the *Additional resources* at the end of this guide for more anti-procrastination info.)

Building on the major goals

For each of your major goals (and as many sub-goals or sub-projects as you see fit) address all of the following things.

"Success," details, and metrics

For each specific goal or project try to answer the following:

- ☐ What *exactly* is the project or goal?
- ☐ What will success look like?
- ☐ How can you measure it?
- ☐ What sort of metrics (measurements) can you use to track progress and success?

Addressing uncertainties

What are the uncertainties involved? If a major goal is to begin writing full-time, an uncertainty may be, "My writing won't be good enough."

These constantly creep up in the back of my mind, and having already addressed them at the start of a project is very helpful.

For each uncertainty, write out the following:

1. What you think could happen—I'll *be a terrible writer*.
2. Your reasons for thinking this—I'm *not a pro; I don't have much experience; there are lots of better writers out there*.
3. The "worst case" scenario—I *won't become a full-time writer, and I'll have to revert to flipping burgers*.
4. The reality—*Come on, I've made it this far, my writing can't be that bad; everyone has to start somewhere*.
5. Your action plan for dealing with it—*Practice, practice, practice; get feedback; read good writers and examine how they write; write 1,000 words per day*.

Creating sub-projects

Major goals are often exactly that: major. Meaning, they can probably be broken down into smaller, more manageable goals and projects. Review your major goals and break them down if possible.

Yearly calendar

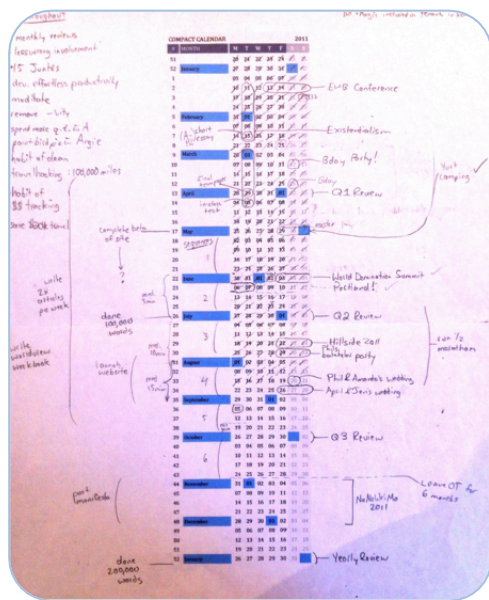
I use a compact single page year calendar from David Seah, available at <http://davidseah.com/compact-calendar/>. This holds my "big-picture" for the upcoming year. On it I place things like:

- ☐ Major project milestones.
- ☐ Specific events and important dates.

- Monthly habits to focus on and develop.
- Anything else you want to see, such as metrics, quotes, or major goals.

Somewhere on the page I also write a very short summary of my major goals for the year. This helps me keep the big picture in mind; I keep it on hand at all times. It is the only form of paper organization I use—everything else is digital. The following figure shows my year layout for 2011:

Figure 4: A sample compact calendar.



Ongoing reviews

Monthly and quarterly reviews

Every month I spend at least a few hours to do a big picture review of all my projects and progress for the last month. Plan *now* to do them by scheduling them on your yearly calendar, because they are very important.

At the end of every third month—every quarter—I do the above monthly review but in greater detail, spending an entire day on it if possible.

These reviews primarily consist of answering the following questions:

- What is the status of my goals and projects?
- Am I on track?
- Are my major goals still my most important goals?

Some thoughts on weekly reviews

I don't really do weekly reviews, but you may prefer to do them. Many times I've planned to do them and tried to schedule them in, but they just never happen because I can never find the time to sit down and properly do them. I'll stick with the monthly reviews for now. Do what works for you.

Prioritizing

Busyness is a lack of priorities.

—Tim Ferriss

One of the most important ideas to take away from this guide and this chapter in particular is the value of *prioritizing*. We have limited time, and many things we want to do with it, so we *must* prioritize. If you're finding yourself too busy or stressed, then *reduce your commitments and goals*. Generally speaking, busyness (the stressful kind) is a choice, and I choose to avoid it.



That's about it! If you went through this entire process and made the mind maps or notes, you should have:

- A first-pass review of your life.
- A detailed review of the current state of your life and the last year.
- A review of your “ideal you,” your ideal future, your major goals and desires in life.
- An overview of all your goals and projects for this coming year.
- Your major goals, with concrete details and plans for achieving success.
- A compact calendar outlining your major milestones and events for the next year.

I hope you find these resources as useful as I have. Here's to the next 8,760 hours!

Resources and Thanks

If you found this useful...

Share this guide with anyone else you think might find it useful. It's completely free. Hopefully it will help some people get more from life.

Feedback

Any and all feedback is always welcome. Was this guide useful? Did you have to heavily adapt it for your own uses? Let me know at alex@alexvermeer.com.

Acknowledgements

Chris Guillebeau is a big inspiration for writing this guide, and my life review and planning process primarily came about from reading about his own yearly review process: <http://chrisguillebeau.com/3x5/category/annual-review/>.

Additional resources

- I highly recommend taking a look at the entire sequence of articles called *The Science of Winning at Life* by Luke Muehlhauser, available at http://wiki.lesswrong.com/wiki/The_Science_of_Winning_at_Life at Less Wrong (<http://lesswrong.com>).

- The compact calendar comes from David Seah (<http://davidseah.com>) and is available on his site at <http://davidseah.com/compact-calendar/>.
- *Focus*, by Leo Babauta, is a great free guide to simplifying your life and creating more focus, a good meta-skill: <http://focusmanifesto.com/>
- *How to Get Motivated: A Guide for Defeating Procrastination* is a free poster I made, available at <http://alexvermeer.com/getmotivated/>, based on *The Procrastination Equation* by Piers Steel.
- I'm having a lot of success with the *Pomodoro Technique* for managing and tracking my productivity, time, and successes. Read more about it at <http://www.pomodoratechnique.com/> and <http://alexvermeer.com/my-pomodoro-project/>.



This is version 1.0 of this Guide. In the future I plan to make updates based on changes to my own system and reader feedback.