

Getting Things Done Summary – David Allen

25 MINUTE READ

[Getting Things Done](#) (2002)

The Art of Stress-Free Productivity

by [David Allen](#)

Getting Things Done is THE classic life-changing manual on getting organised and building a robust productivity system that can handle whatever life throws at you - by productivity guru, David Allen. ([267 pages](#))

[Paperback](#) | [Ebook](#) | [Audiobook](#)

Note: This **Getting Things Done summary** is part of an ongoing project to summarise the [Best Productivity Books](#) and [Best Self Help Books](#) of all time.

Contents

1. Getting Things Done Review
2. BONUS: Interview With David Allen
3. Getting Things Done Summary
4. What Is the Getting Things Done (GTD) Method?
5. STEP 1 – Stockpile (Capture)
11. My System: An Example of GTD “In The Wild”
12. Putting It All Together
13. Best Getting Things Done Quotes
14. Getting Things Done PDF Summary
15. Read More: 5 Books Like Getting Things Done
16. Wish There Was a Faster/Easier Way?

Getting Things Done Review

I still remember the moment I first picked up [Getting Things Done \(GTD\)](#).

I was studying for my final exams at Oxford, running two businesses, managing an investment property and trying to live a normal student life.

Life was good. Things were going well. I should have been loving every moment.

But instead of feeling grateful and happy, I felt like I was being crushed into the ground.

Why? Because I was overwhelmed, overworked and overstretched. I was constantly stressed out by the hundreds of musts, shoulds, coulds and would like to-dos that I was trying to track in my head.

And then I discovered *GTD*.

And it's no exaggeration to say that what David Allen taught me in just a few hundred pages instantly, fundamentally and irreversibly transformed my life.

My degree, my career at McKinsey, this blog, the fact that I'm sat in a beautiful villa here in Bali, looking out over rice paddies, working next to [my amazing fiancée](#)... these are all things I have no doubt would not have happened if I hadn't read, applied and kept working at the system David teaches in this book.

If you've already read *GTD*, then you probably know what I'm talking about.

If you haven't read *Getting Things Done* yet, then I envy you...

Because you're in for a heck of a ride. 😄

Check out my *Getting Things Done* summary below, enjoy [my bonus interview with David](#), ask questions in the comments section at the end of the post...

But most importantly: [READ THIS BOOK](#).

It'll make you happier. It'll help you hit your goals. It'll finally clear out your head.

And I'll look forward to seeing you back here very soon.

BONUS: Interview With David Allen

NOTE: For show notes, links and the transcript, check out [the full interview](#).

Getting Things Done Summary

I know what you're thinking: *"I'd love to [work on my values](#), my mission and my ultimate purpose – but I've already got too much on my plate!"*

And the answer is *you're probably right*.

You probably *are* too busy for that kind of thinking.

Why? Because though your mind is great at *creating* stuff, it's *terrible* at *tracking* it.

And yet there's a good chance you're tracking tons of stuff in your head *right now*. Stuff that drains your energy and clogs your creativity. Stuff that makes it hard to stay afloat day-to-day, let alone find the time and space to think bigger.

The solution? Contrary to common wisdom the answer is *not* to start from the top (mission, purpose, [values](#)) and work down.

It's to master the bottom (getting things done) and *work up*.

Start with *efficiency*.

Then, when you're no longer drowning, think about which way to paddle.

What Is the Getting Things Done (GTD) Method?

David Allen's [Getting Things Done \(GTD\)](#) sets out to tackle exactly this problem.

It's a collection of processes and habits whose main outputs are:

1. A clean and updated **calendar** of time-critical actions;
2. A clear, current and comprehensive **list of next actions** you can take anywhere, anytime, without the need for further thought or clarification;
3. A full **list of outcomes** (big and small) that you're committed to achieving in the next 12 months; and
4. A complete **system** to organise and keep track of all the "*stuff*" in your life.

The result? By implementing GTD you'll:

- Never let anything important slip by again;
- Always have pre-prepared options of actionable and productive things to get on with;
- Have total oversight of everything you've committed to in the near future; and
- Have a totally clear head with no need to mentally track or remember anything.

In short, GTD is a powerful system that anyone (from students to parents to top CEOs) can use to bring “life” under control.

But its benefits go beyond quick, profound and lasting productivity gains. GTD’s greatest reward is a new sense of clarity, stability and flow. By getting everything out of your head and into a trusted system, you’ll trust *yourself* more. You’ll know when to say no and yet still feel confident handling anything that comes up.

Most rewarding of all are the space and energy you’ll buy yourself to take risks. You’ll naturally start working on bigger, more meaningful aspects of life.

I first read [Getting Things Done](#) ~10 years ago and can corroborate all the above. I simply can’t overstate its potential for life-changing impact.

GTD OVERVIEW

So how does it work? The GTD Method can be crunched into **SCORE + Plan**:

1. **Stockpile** (Capture) out-of-place and unfinished stuff in external inboxes;
2. **Clarify** “What is this stuff?” and “What should I do about it?”;
3. **Organise** the stuff into its proper place in a trusted system;
4. **Review** (Reflect) the entire system often enough to keep it current and clear;
5. **Engage** with your stuff efficiently *and* effectively; and
6. **Plan** complex projects to get from multistep outcomes to actions.

Here’s my take in the form of a simple diagram:

Looks like common sense, right? That’s because *it is common sense*.

And yet all too often, *it’s not common practice*. Making it so will bring a

stillness, clarity and energy to your mind that will transform your life.

Naturally, the truth is rarely pure and never simple. Let's work through each step in theory *and* practice below.

STEP 1 – Stockpile (Capture)

Stockpiling means capturing *all* your outstanding *stuff*. To do so, you must gather every out of place and unfinished thing in your head and your world into a few external inboxes. These inboxes then feed your GTD system.

It's a vital step. Why? Because anything that doesn't get in your system will stay on your mind. And anything that stays on your mind eats energy and kills creativity.

But what is *stuff* exactly? What are inboxes? How do you get *stuff* into them?

Great questions. Let's dig deeper.

WHAT IS STUFF?

Stuff is:

- Anything (an action, commitment, project or object) that...
- ... you want, should, could, would like, ought or need to act on, now or later; or
- ... you think of as even slightly unfinished or out of place.

It's:

- The project you're leading at work;
- The promise you made to your partner;
- The pile of unopened letters on your desk;

- The trip to Thailand you've always dreamed of; and
- The old freezer that's in the garage and needs selling.

Your life is full of these “*open-loops*”; the stuff that tugs away at your mind saying, “*Hey! Don't forget me!*”.

These energy killers are the fuel that fire GTD.

WHAT ARE INBOXES?

Inboxes are anywhere that stuff collects or can be collected.

They come in two flavours:

- **Major Inboxes** – The few inboxes that feed your GTD process; and
- **Satellite Inboxes** – Anywhere else that *stuff* naturally collects.

I'm a digital-first, long-term traveller with five major inboxes:

1. **My backpack;**
2. **My personal email;**
3. **My Faster To Master email;**
4. **A DropBox folder** for digital files (e.g., scans, screenshots and downloads); and
5. **A software inbox** for digital notes (e.g., thoughts, ideas and recommendations)

These major inboxes are the last stop for stuff before it enters my GTD system.

I also have a number of satellite inboxes:

- **Physical:**
 - My wallet;
 - My current home; and
 - My PO Box in the UK.

- **Digital:**
 - Scanning apps;
 - Note-taking apps;
 - Messaging apps; and
 - Ancillary email accounts.

- **Psychological:**
 - My mind.

The goal of stockpiling is to empty these satellite inboxes into a major inbox for clarification and organisation.

Depending on your lifestyle and preferences you may have more satellite inboxes, including:

- **Physical:**
 - **In-tray(s)** – At work and at home;
 - **Your home(s)** – Every drawer, cupboard and container in every room;
 - **Your car(s)** – Inside, outside and the cars themselves;
 - **Storage units** – Both in your home(s) and out of them;
 - **Your bag(s)** – Work, travel, gym, children's and everyday bags;
 - **Postbox(es)** – At work and at home; and
 - **Desk drawers** – Worth re-stating.
- **Digital:**
 - Apps; and
 - Social media accounts.

HOW DO YOU STOCKPILE?

Stockpiling is the act of emptying all the *stuff* from all your *satellite inboxes* and capturing it in a few *major inboxes*.

Think of it like a spring-clean for life.

Bringing everything into just a few places has two advantages:

1. It gives you a total overview of everything out of place and unfinished in your life; and
2. It lets you process all those things quickly and effectively in steps 2 (clarify) and 3 (organise) of the GTD method.

If you're new to GTD you'll need to set up. To do so:

1. **Make a checklist of all of your satellite inboxes** – Be specific and use the list above to help. You may be surprised how many you have.
2. **Set up at least one major digital and physical inbox** – A single folder on your computer and a large cardboard box will do.
3. **Schedule at least a full day to take inventory of your life** – A national holiday is a good opportunity for this.

Once your GTD system is running, stockpiling becomes a weekly ritual that should take under an hour as part of a weekly review.

For now, go through each satellite inbox and get it to zero by moving anything out of place or unfinished into one of your major inboxes.

Some tips:

- **Avoid processing** – You will be very tempted to process as you go. Unless it takes less than 2 minutes or you have *a lot* of time – don't. Your efficiency will greatly increase if you batch all your stockpiling first and then do your processing. For now, just move stuff into your major inboxes.
- **Use placeholders** – Sometimes, stuff will be too impractical to move (e.g., an old fridge that needs selling). Other times, an inbox may be too time-consuming or difficult to process right now (e.g., your office, if you're at home). In these cases, leave stuff where it is and use a digital or physical note as a placeholder to get it in your system (e.g.,

sell fridge, stockpile office). Remember, the important thing is to get stuff off your mind and into your GTD system.

That's the basics of stockpiling! By the time you're done your satellite inboxes should feel empty, organised or captured for later processing. Your major inboxes, however, are likely to be overflowing with stuff, which brings us neatly to...

STEP 2 – Clarify

NOTE: Though Clarify (step 2) and Organise (step 3) are separate steps, they actually happen together. Read both sections first, then tackle the top item in your inboxes.

Clarifying *what stuff is* and *what to do about it* is likely the biggest bottleneck in your productivity. It's also one of the most useful habits in the GTD method.

To clarify, you must answer three questions for each thing in your inboxes:

1. **What is it?** It's surprising how often we don't really think about what a thing is or why it's important.
2. **What's the desired outcome?** What conditions would truly let you feel this thing is complete?
3. **What is the next action?** What is the very next physical action you can take to progress this thing?

You *must* answer these questions. Until you do, stuff never moves past the inbox, no matter where you file it. Instead, it will sit in your system or head like an *"amorphous blob of undoability"*.

The result? You will resist acting on it until you are forced to.

Why do we pursue this pattern so predictably? Because we are

naturally “lazy” and answering these questions *does* take a small spike of mental effort.

The good news? In Allen's words: “*You often have to think about stuff more than you realise, but not as much as you're afraid you might.*”

HOW DO YOU CLARIFY?

Clarification is mostly simple, but it can be helpful to work through some examples to see how it works. Here are a few to get started:

Example 1: A presentation that Joanne has asked you to review.

- **What is it?** A document to read and review.
- **What's the desired outcome?** Provide clear and helpful presentation feedback to Joanne.
- **Next action(s)?** Read and annotate Joanne's presentation.

Example 2: An invitation to Mike's Pirate-themed birthday dinner on the 28th of April.

- **What is it?** An event that needs attending.
- **What's the desired outcome?** Be a great friend on Mike's birthday (28 Apr).
- **Next action(s)?** RSVP to invitation; brainstorm gift ideas; research costume ideas online.

Example 3: A reminder that you need to get the car serviced.

- **What is it?** A project that needs starting.
- **What's the desired outcome?** Get the car 'all-cleared' by a certified mechanic.
- **Next action(s)?** Call garage to book in a service.

Can you spot the mistake in the last next action? There's no phone

number!

A next action should be complete enough that someone else could do it without needing further clarification or thought.

If you have the phone number, add it to the next action: *"Call garage (+XX-XXX-XXX-XXXX) to book a service."*

If you don't yet have the number then *"Call garage"* is not the next action. Instead, the next action is *"Find garage number online"* or *"Ask Joe for the garage phone number."*

Remember: A GTD next action is the very next physical thing you can do, without further thought or clarification, to make progress on an outcome.

GRINDING TO ZERO

Processing your major inboxes may feel like a daunting task. But the act of clarifying what stuff in your life is and the next thing you can do about it is magic. Doing so will unlock deep pockets of energy, clarity and productivity.

To help grind your way through steps 2 and 3, stick closely to the following rules:

1. Always start with the top item on the pile.
2. Always handle only one item at a time.
3. Never put anything back into an inbox.

No cherry-picking; no pile making; no putting back stuff that forces you to think.

Capisce? All right, awesome.

Because with clarification in-hand it's time to...

STEP 3 – Organise

Organising is the process of:

- Doing, delegating or deferring next actions;
- Tidying useful but non-actionable “*stuff*” into its proper place; and
- Trashing what’s left.

With the right buckets, your system will flow like good plumbing. Without them, it will back-flow into your head.

SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS

To get organised, you’ll need some tools to get started:

- **A calendar** for time-critical meetings, events and actions;
- **A way to take notes** for lists of actions, outcomes, plans and ideas;
- **A filing system** to store information you may need to reference but can’t act on; and
- **A trash can** (plus, optionally, a shredder if you handle sensitive documents).

Should you go physical or digital? That’s totally up to you.

Allen likes physical bases, filing cabinets and paper. My system is location independent and paperless. What matters is that your setup is fun, simple and easy *for you*.

Now, open up your note-taking tool and create four notes with the following headings:

- **Waiting for** – A list of all things you are waiting for from others;
- **Next actions** – A list of every doable next action to progress an outcome;
- **Outcomes** – A list of every multi-step outcome you’re committed to

realising in the next 12 months; and

- **Someday** – Outcomes or actions you may like to take one day, under different circumstances.

Next, open your filing system – your personal library of resource and reference materials.

For now, make two new sections or folders inside it:

- **Plans** – Visualisations, milestones and next steps for more complex multi-step outcomes; and
- **Ticklers** – Stuff you will “mail-to-self” for later re-processing.

Within your ticklers, set up 43 folders:

- Label folders 1 through 12 with month names (January to December); and
- Label folders 13 through 43 with the numbers 1 to 31.

How do these work? Let’s say it’s March and you have a flyer for an event you might want to attend in September. It doesn’t really make sense to process that now. Your tickler system lets you file the flier away into one of your month-folders (e.g, “August” or “September”) for later re-processing.

Meanwhile, the 31 day-folders are used to subdivide your stuff into the days for which it’s relevant in the current month (e.g., “March”).

Each week you review and reorganise your ticklers as part of step 4 (Review). Discarding stuff that’s no longer relevant or splitting stuff from a new month into the appropriate day-folders.

The result? A simple, handy and granular way to surface anything that needs stockpiling or processing at the start of each day.

And there you have it, the bones of your GTD system.

GETTING ORGANISED

With your tools in place, and your first inbox item clarified, you now have five choices:

- **Do** – If a next action takes less than 2 minutes, do it now;
- **Delegate** – If a next action is not something “only you can do”, delegate it;
- **Defer** – Commit to a next action at a specific or general time in the near future;
- **Tidy** – Find a proper place for everything and put everything in its proper place; and
- **Trash** – Dispose of anything no longer important or needed.

Clearing an inbox item may be as simple as:

- Performing one < 2-minute action (e.g., tidying something away); or
- Trashing an idea that no longer seems relevant or important.

But normally, organising stuff in your GTD system usually takes a little more work.

A PROPER PLACE FOR EVERYTHING

Let's review example 2 from step 2 (Mike's pirate birthday) to see what this means:

Example 2: An invitation to Mike's Pirate-themed birthday dinner on the 28th of April.

- **What is it?** An event that needs attending.
- **What's the desired outcome?** Be a great friend on Mike's birthday (28 Apr).

- **Next action(s)?** RSVP to invitation; brainstorm gift ideas; research costume ideas online.

Let's assume today is the 3rd of March. Based on the clarification above, you might:

- **Do:**
 - Check your calendar and email Mike to confirm you'll be there (< 2 mins); and
 - Add the details of Mike's birthday to your calendar (< 2 mins, time-critical).
- **Delegate:**
 - Email John (your assistant) to ask him to research 3 options for pirate costumes under \$100; and
 - Add "Wait for John to reply w 3 pirate costume options (email, 3 Mar)" to your "Waiting for" list.
- **Defer:**
 - Add "Brainstorm gift ideas for Mike's birthday" to your "Next actions" list (> 2 minutes).
- **Tidy:**
 - Add "Be a great friend on Mike's birthday (28 Apr)" to your "Outcomes" list (as a reminder to set new next actions when the current ones are done);
 - File Mike's physical invitation (that you'll need to show on the night) in your April "Tickler" folder; and
 - If needed, create a new note titled "Be a great friend on Mike's birthday (28 Apr)":
 - Write any later-actions or notes (e.g., instant gift ideas) on your mind to this note; and
 - File the note in your "Plans" folder.
- **Trash:**
 - Throw the envelope containing Mike's invitation away.

Though that may seem like a lot of work, in reality, this whole process might take 3 or 4 minutes.

The reward? You can now forget about Mike's birthday entirely, confident that every aspect is neatly nestled in your system.

Result? More energy, space, peace of mind and clarity to focus on other things in life.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Almost without exception, the best approach in GTD is to *simplify*.

This is so important it's worth restating: *keep your system simple*.

Here are a few rules to live by:

- **Keep your lines bright and consistent** – Have one proper place for everything and put everything in its proper place.
- **Favour 'less' over 'more'** – Use one list and fewer folders wherever possible; minimise sublists and filing structures; and
- **Sort alphabetically** – Resist the temptation to order or categorise by sequence and priority.

How do you know if your system is getting complex? Here are some common red-flags:

- **Next actions you can't action** – If you couldn't or shouldn't do it now, put it in your "Plans", "Ticklers" or on your "Someday" list;
- **Folders containing one folder or document** – Use as few layers and folders as possible to get your head to empty. Less is always more; and
- **The same stuff appearing in multiple places** – Have only one instance of everything, if it could go in multiple places, make a decision and stick to it.

Why is this so important? Because complexity adds thinking, thinking adds resistance, resistance creates incompleteness and incompleteness leads to uselessness.

Avoid creeping complication. Keep your system simple and that simplicity will spread to your life.

ORGANISING NEXT ACTIONS BY CONTEXT

The *one* place where “many” can be *more* useful than “one” is on your “Next actions” list(s).

In practice, Allen suggests splitting next actions across several lists by *context* – hard limits based on:

- **Place** – Where you must be;
- **Person** – Who you must be with; or
- **Tools** – What you must have to hand.

Next action lists I commonly use include:

- @ Anywhere (catch-all)
- @ Errands (place)
- @ Home (place)
- @ Office (place)
- @ Calls (tool)
- @ Computer (tool)
- w Erin (person)

Again, the trick here is to *keep things simple*:

- **Keep bright lines** – Avoid soft contexts (e.g., priority) that change or make you think;
- **Make contexts current** – Add and remove contexts as they gain or lose relevance; and

- **Be a minimalist** – Use the fewest number of contexts you can get away with.

Contexts are valuable because they help you:

- Remember to do the right things in the right place, at the right time or with the right people; and
- Batch similar actions together to avoid switching costs.

Remembering the milk when you're out, crushing "calls" while in "phone mode" or having a pre-prepared list of "offline" tasks when the internet breaks are all great examples of how *contexts* can dramatically improve engagement (step 5).

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

The first few times you clarify and organise your inboxes will feel difficult. The reward in clarity, energy and headspace, however, make this brain squeeze well worth the effort.

What's more, with time, testing and practice, you'll find tools and structures you like, you'll process stuff faster and what once felt hard will become second nature.

One last time: *keep your systems simple*. It happens to everyone, at some point your GTD system will become a monster. When it does, start again and come back to basics. You'll be amazed how far you may have strayed from the original vision.

STEP 4 – Review

Steps 1 – 3 supercharge your clarity and creativity by getting your stuff out of your head, defined and organised.

But keeping stuff out of your head you means trusting your system is

current and clear. And to keep it current and clear you must review it often and in full.

In practice, this means protecting *~a few hours ~once per week* (Friday afternoons are great) to:

- **Get clear** – Re-run steps 1 – 3 of the GTD method;
- **Get current** – Review, update and refresh *each* and *all* of your buckets; and
- **Get creative** – Use your new headspace to dream, think big and maybe even start a project on your someday list.

Where am I on this? Is it still relevant? Is it still in the right place? What's the next action?

Your “Weekly Review” is the oil that keeps your pipes flowing; it's the heartbeat of the GTD method.

STEP 5 – Engage

Finally – engagement! Though it's step 5, every step of GTD leads to actually *Getting Things Done*.

When your GTD system is simple, clear and complete – engagement is where you'll spend most of your time and energy.

At this point, you may realise what's held you back was never *engaging* at all. It was trying to collect, clarify, organise *and* engage all at once.

But now, with your stuff *pre-collected*, *pre-organised* and *pre-defined*, all that's left is the *doing*. And it turns out that *doing* is *easy*.

What's more, unlike many systems GTD doesn't rely on complex prioritisation or planning. Instead, every *“thing”* you can do to make progress is funnelled to:

1. Your **calendar**, and
2. Your single master-list of **next actions**.

This makes execution light, robust, responsive and fun.

DECIDING WHAT TO DO NEXT

So how do you decide what's *right* to do, *right now*?

First, rule out the things that you can't or shouldn't do, based on:

1. **Context** – What can't you do based on where you are or the tools you have available?
2. **Time available** – What can't you do based on the time until your next appointment? and
3. **Energy** – What shouldn't you do based on your mental or physical state?

Now, work on your remaining next actions. *Trust your gut and do what feels most important right now.*

[Even if you procrastinate](#), so long as you work from your list you'll always be making progress on *something*.

What's more, with your new productivity powers, you'll quickly run short on reasons to avoid [eating frogs](#).

ADVANCED ENGAGEMENT

In the real world, there are only three kinds of work you can do. You can:

1. **Do predefined work** – Work from your next actions lists or calendar.
2. **Do work as it shows up** – Respond to life's daily, external demands.
3. **Define your work** – Update your system and adding to your lists.

The more of the second type you face, the trickier engagement can get.

For a great breakdown of this challenge, see [Habit 3](#) of [Stephen Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#).

Meanwhile, the short answer is this: *never respond instantly to work as it shows up, no matter how "urgent" it is. Instead:*

1. Take a deep breath.
2. Spend 2 minutes running the demand through steps 1 – 3 of GTD.
3. Review any next actions you identified in the context of all your next actions.
4. Engage with the new demand if it's still the most urgent *and* important thing on your plate.

Adopting [this habit creates a gap between stimulus and response](#). Mastering it will make you more efficient *and* more effective.

STEP 6 – Plan

All it often takes to identify a project's next action is a moment of effort and thought.

Sometimes though, it helps to have a plan.

In these cases, the best approach (as always) is to keep things simple.

How? A good place to start is *the natural planning model*:

1. **Define purpose and principles** – Why are you doing this? What are the constraints?
2. **Visualise outcomes** – What does success look like? How about wild success?
3. **Brainstorm** – What are *all* the ideas you can think of? Get the bad ones out of your head too.
4. **Organise** – What ideas will you use? Which are the most important? What order will you do them in?

5. **Identify next actions** – What is the very next physical action you can take to progress the project?

Why is this the *natural* planning model? Because we use it *all of the time*: when we go out for dinner, when we decide what film to watch, when we plot a route to the shops.

The secret (once again) is to *make common sense, common practice*. Trust your natural planning mechanisms and they will serve you well on projects big and small.

Feeling stuck? If a project lacks clarity, work up the model towards purpose and principles. When a project lacks progress, drive down towards action.

As always, the goal of GTD is to *get things done*. Don't make planning an end in itself. Do it to *draw out next actions*.

BIG PICTURE THINKING

The most rewarding aspect of the GTD method is the space and energy you'll buy to take risks. You'll naturally start working on bigger, more meaningful aspects of life.

When it comes to big-picture thinking, Allen suggests working on 5 increasingly top-down horizons:

- **Horizon 5: Purpose and principles** – The purpose, mission and values at the heart of your existence;
- **Horizon 4: Vision** – A broad overview of what success looks like for you on a 3 – 5 years timeline;
- **Horizon 3: Goals** – The larger outcomes you'd like to make manifest in the next 1 – 2 years;
- **Horizon 2: Areas of Focus and Accountabilities** – The roles and [areas of life](#) you're committed to focussing on in the next 12 months;

- **Horizon 1: Current projects** – The list of any outcome you are committed to realising in < 12 months; and
- **Ground: Current actions** – The comprehensive action list at the core of getting things done.

For some great ideas on higher-horizon-thinking check out [Stephen Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#) and [Brian Johnson's Optimal Living](#). (Or come join us in [TAoL's TRACKTION Masterclass](#).)

Allen's own suggestions are limited but valuable: plan Horizons 2 – 5, he recommends, *as often as you need to keep them off your mind*.

In the meantime, focus on mastering your life at the ground and Horizon 1 levels. Do this, and you'll naturally find the space and trust that you need to think bigger, broader and bolder.

My System: An Example of GTD "In The Wild"

There are many, many ways to put GTD into practice:

- *Allen's* system and experience lies mainly in physical bases and paper;
- *My* system is heavily shaped by my nomadic lifestyle and love of tech; and
- *Your* system should and will be different because *you* are different.

In truth, there's only *one right way* to implement GTD – *the way that works best for you*.

That said, examples are always helpful so here's a snapshot of my GTD system – one that's been 10+ years in the making.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

My productivity system is built on four design principles. It should be:

1. **Simple** – GTD should never become a time-sink;
2. **Paperless** – I hate accumulating physical “stuff”;
3. **Portable** – It should fit in the palm of my hand; and
4. **Cloud-based** – I should be able to access it from anywhere.

TOOLS

To put these principles into practice I use three bits of hardware:

- [iPad Pro + Apple Pencil](#) for everything I would use paper for (e.g., thinking, brainstorming);
- [iPhone](#) to capture ideas on the go and scan documents; and
- [MacBook](#) for the bulk of my writing and work;

And seven bits of software:

- [BusyCal](#) (Mac) to keep appointments and track my time across all my devices;
- [DropBox](#) (All devices) as my main filing cabinet for pdf, txt and any other files;
- [Notability](#) (iPad) for handwriting tasks (e.g., thinking, brainstorming);
- [Notes](#) (All devices) to capture ideas and as my main writing tool;
- [ScannerPro](#) (iPhone) to quickly scan documents and upload them to Dropbox;
- [TextEdit](#) (Mac) to record my lists, plans and long-term thoughts in plain .txt files;
- [Things](#) (All devices) to capture new “stuff” and track next actions.

All these tools are simply means to an end. I can and do change them if I find something more practical and simpler (though this doesn't happen often).

BUCKETS

My GTD buckets are organised in three places as follows:

- **Major Inboxes** – Things, DropBox;
- **Calendar** – BusyCal (Mac);
- **Everything Else** – DropBox (digital), Backpack (physical)

Here's a snapshot of my main DropBox folder with most of the GTD buckets in sight (N.B., My outcomes list is in the file labelled "5. Projects (1y)")...

... and some drill-downs into my Inbox folder (only screenshots for now) ...

... Someday folder ...

... Ticklers folder ...

... Plans folder (NYTBS is a long-term dream to write a New York Times Bestseller) ...

... Reference Files folder...

... and, finally, the contexts I'm currently using in Things...

PROCESSES:

To keep my system (and life) in shape I use the following five processes:

- **AM reviews (Daily, 15 mins)** to clear my head and review my mission;
- **PM reviews (Daily, 30 mins)** to clear priority inboxes, reflect on the day and [plan ahead](#);
- **Weekly reviews (Weekly, 3+ hours)** to review everything, reflect on the week and plan ahead;
- **Project planning (As needed)** to keep larger projects out of my head and moving in the right direction; and
- **Big picture thinking (As needed)** to feel confident horizons 1 through 5 are aligned.

EXTRA HABITS:

And over the years I've also woven some extra, non-GTD habits into those processes:

- **Gratitude journaling** to remind me of 3 things each AM and PM that I'm grateful for;
- **Mindfulness journaling** to clear my head and solving problems (see [this post](#) for more);
- **Reflection** to identify what went well, what I learned and what opportunities I have to improve each day and for each project;
- **Tracking** of time, habits and value infractions to measure how I'm comparing against my best self; and
- **Scheduling deep-work** to make sure I get at least 6 hours of undisturbed time each day.

TIPS:

If I were starting with GTD again today here is what I'd tell 20-year-old Arthur:

- **Master the basics** – Right from day 1 you'll be tempted to make big changes to the GTD system. *Don't.* [Read the book](#) and master the basics first, even if it's not your forever system. Then, when you start feeling confident...
- **Experiment** – Don't be afraid to make your system yours. That said, don't change too much at once. Understand the baseline, then make small, specific changes. This will let you identify improvements clearly and retreat from bad ideas fast.
- **Simplify** – Reduce your satellite inboxes. Prefer one list over many. Sort things alphabetically. Keep contexts and filing simple. Avoid devising "awesome" tagging and folder structures. Especially if they're to handle problems that don't even exist yet. Focus on now. Remember, less is more.

- **Use the space to think big picture** – GTD will quickly buy you a lot of mental and physical space. Use it to [identify what's important](#). Then prioritise ruthlessly. Otherwise, the gap will fill with unimportant things and you'll be twice as efficient, just as busy and no more *effective*.
- **Re-read GTD once per year** – Each reading will bring some new and more subtle aspect of the system to your attention. Or help you simplify a system that's out of control.

And there you have it! A quick tour through the paperless, mobile GTD system that keeps my head clear and life humming.

Putting It All Together

That's it! There's lots to take in and plenty more that I've missed. Luckily, there's a huge community around GTD so if you come across something tricky, there's often plenty of answers a quick google away. Allen's own site gettingthingsdone.com is full of resources to help you get started. And of course, nothing beats [reading the original book](#).

If you're new to GTD I hope you found something here that was interesting or helpful. I really can't recommend reading Allen's book strongly enough. It totally changed my life.

If you're a GTD user already – what did you think? What are your favourite tips? Have I said something here you think could be clearer? What important points did I miss? Perhaps you disagree with this book *crunch* entirely! In which case, let me know! I'd love to hear your thoughts and suggestions.

For now, though, I'll leave you with one final thought. GTD and productivity systems may change your life, but *they aren't your life*. Your system is only as useful as the improvements it makes in you and the world around you. If you're spending 20 hours per week building and

maintaining the perfect GTD process, something's not right.

The inverse is also true, so long as you feel clearer, happier, more confident and more effective – you're heading in the right direction. Have fun, experiment and trust your instincts.

And finally, whenever you get lost in the details just remember Jacob Bronowski's wise words, *"The world can only be grasped by action, not by contemplation. The hand is more important than the eye... The hand is the cutting edge of the mind."*

And until next time, be awesome, take action and go well.

Best Getting Things Done Quotes

These Getting Things Done quotes come from **The Art of Living's** ever-growing central library of thoughts, anecdotes, notes, and [inspirational quotes](#).

"If you're like me, you like getting things done and doing them well, and yet you also want to savor life in ways that seem increasingly elusive, if not downright impossible, if you're working too hard."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"Healthy skepticism is often the best way to glean the value of what's being presented — challenge it; prove it wrong, if you can. That creates engagement, which is the key to understanding."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"A paradox has emerged in this new millennium: people have enhanced quality of life, but at the same time they are adding to their stress levels by taking on more than they have resources to handle."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"Your ability to generate power is directly proportional to your ability to relax."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"Anything that causes you to overreact or underreact can control you, and often does."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"If it's on your mind, your mind isn't clear."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"You have to think about your stuff more than you realize but not as much as you're afraid you might."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"Many projects seem overwhelming—and are overwhelming because you can't do a project at all! You can only do an action related to it."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"Horizontal control maintains coherence across all the activities in which you are involved... Vertical control... manages thinking, development, and coordination of individual topics and projects."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"There is usually an inverse relationship between how much something is on your mind and how much it's getting done."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"The quality of our workflow management is only as good as the weakest link in this five-phase chain."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"Complete the projects you begin, fulfill the commitments you have made, live up to your promises—then both your subconscious and conscious selves can have success, which leads to a feeling of fulfillment, worthiness and oneness."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"If you're waiting to have a good idea before you have any ideas, you won't have many."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"People love to win. If you're not totally clear about the purpose of what you're doing, you have no game to win."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"Determining what might go most wrong in a situation is at times the best way to generate the best ideas about how to make it successful."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"One of the best tricks for enhancing your productivity is having organizing tools you love to use."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"Trying to create goals before you have confidence that you can keep your everyday world under control will often undermine your motivation and energy rather than enhance them."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"The most important thing to deal with is whatever is most on your mind. The fact that you think it shouldn't be on your mind is irrelevant."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"The middle of every successful project looks like a disaster."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"A renegotiated agreement is not a broken one."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"Use your mind to think *about* things, rather than think *of* them."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

"You can only put your conscious attention on one thing at a time. If that's all that has your attention, you're in flow."

- [David Allen](#), Getting Things Done

Getting Things Done PDF Summary

Want to save this Getting Things Done summary for later?

Click the link below to get this whole summary as a handy FREE PDF...

[Get the latest FREE Getting Things Done PDF Summary →](#)

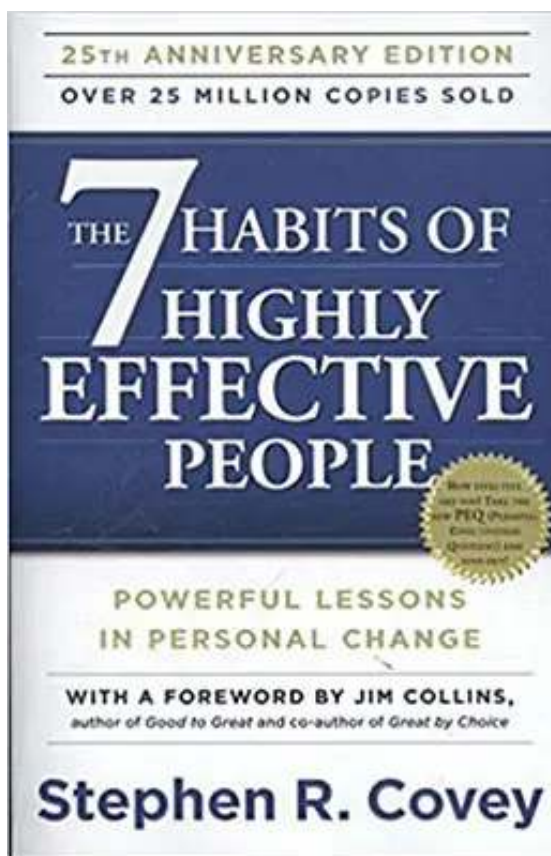
Note: Direct link to PDF. No email required.

Read More: 5 Books Like Getting Things Done

Enjoyed this Getting Things Done summary? You might enjoy the rest of the books on these lists of the [Best Productivity Books](#) and [Best Self Help Books](#) of all time.

And in the meantime...

Here are 5 top books like Getting Things Done...

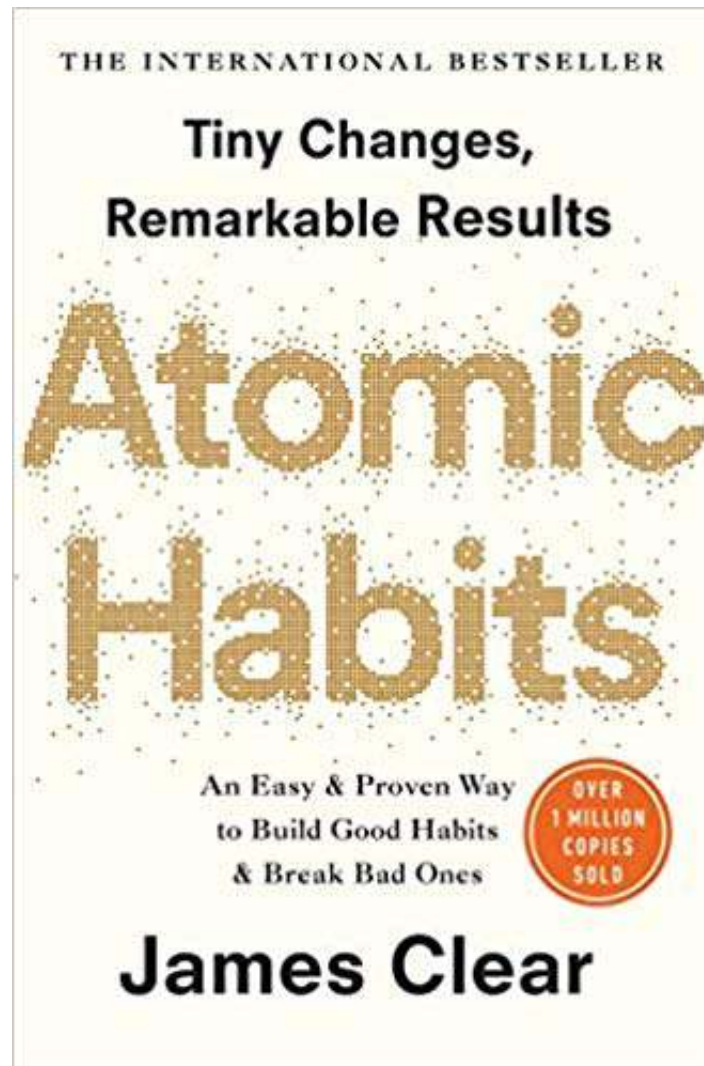


1. [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#) - [Stephen R. Covey](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

Powerful Lessons in Personal Change

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People is a perennial masterpiece on leading a happy, productive and purposeful existence and an unmissable stop for any pilgrim of personal improvement - by educator, author and speaker, Stephen Covey.

Published 1989 // 372 pages // Rated 4.1 over 611,600 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

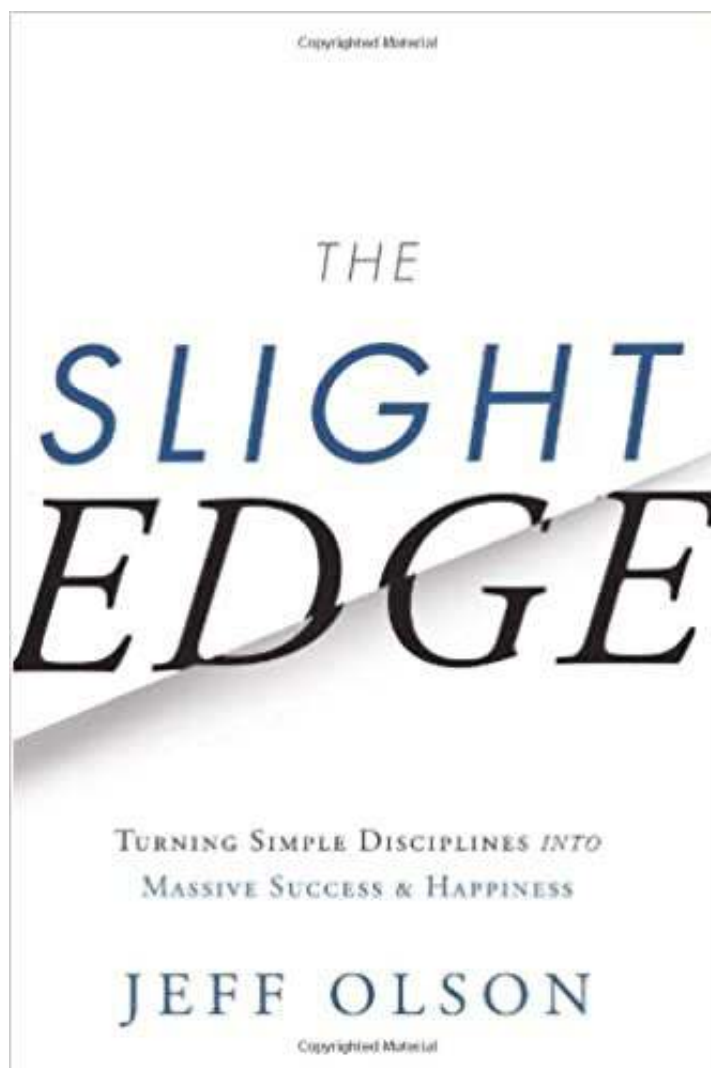


2. [Atomic Habits](#) - [James Clear](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones

Atomic Habits is a powerful and practical guide to transforming your habits, making change stick and achieving remarkable results – by author and habit-guru, James Clear.

Published 2018 // 319 pages // Rated 4.4 over 273,900 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

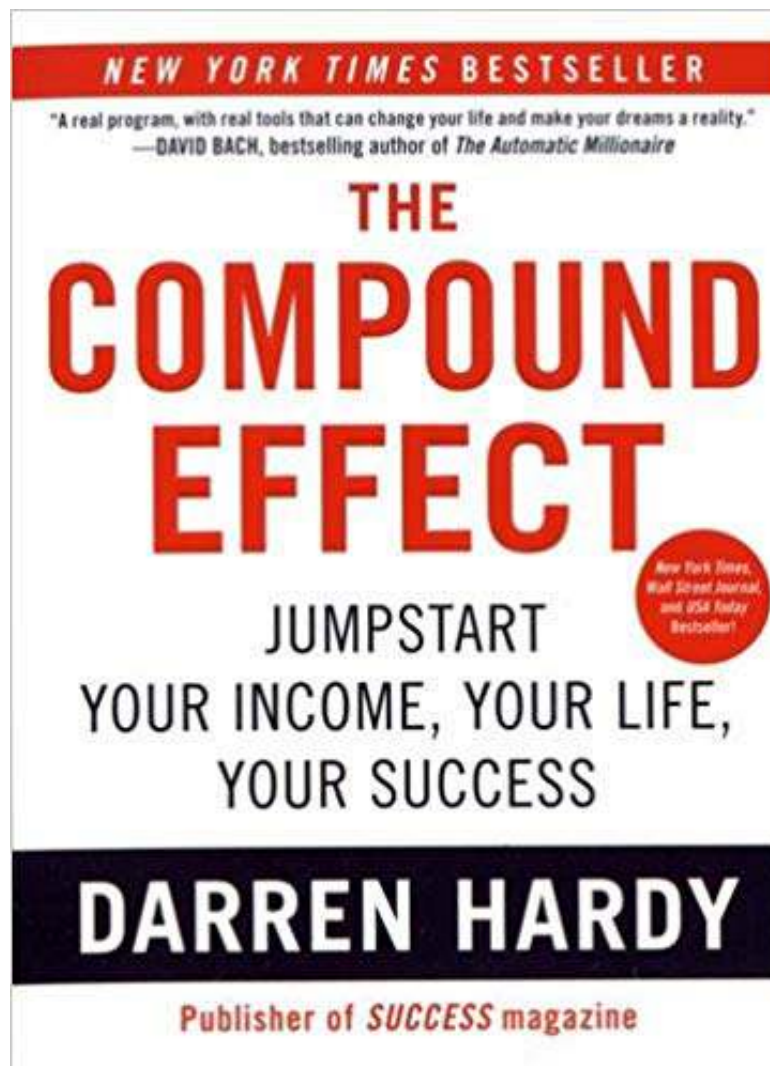


3. [The Slight Edge](#) - [Jeff Olson](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

Turning Simple Disciplines Into Massive Success & Happiness

The Slight Edge is a short, punchy, practical guide to the why, what and how of using simple daily disciplines to achieve breakthrough success - by serial entrepreneur, speaker and author, Jeff Olson.

Published 2005 // 168 pages // Rated 4.3 over 21,600 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

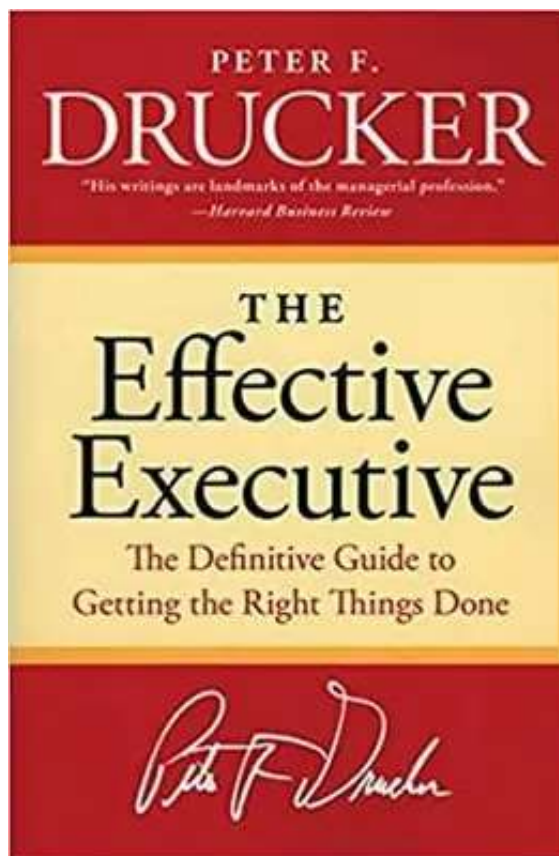


4. [The Compound Effect](#) - Darren Hardy ([FREE Summary](#))

Jumpstart Your Income, Your Life, Your Success

The Compound Effect offers a concise, practical guide to mastering small choices that determine big outcomes which dictate the course of your life - by best selling author, publisher and motivational speaker, Darren Hardy.

Published 2010 // 162 pages // Rated 4.3 over 37,800 reviews [on Goodreads](#)



5. [The Effective Executive](#) - [Peter F. Drucker](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done

The Effective Executive is THE timeless classic on leadership and management; on getting the right things done - by the dean of business and management philosophy, Peter F. Drucker.

Published 1966 // 208 pages // Rated 4.1 over 32,400 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

Wish There Was a Faster/Easier Way?

Whenever you're ready, here are four ways I can help you be more productive, find more balance and live life more on purpose...

1. **Curious? Discover how productive you really are...** Take this free, 2-minute assessment to unlock your PQ and discover the top 25 habits you need to get big things done. [Take the 2-minute quiz →](#)

2. **Overwhelmed? Get a free chapter of my book...** Let me show you how to beat procrastination, permanently, with this free sneak peek inside **TAoL**'s ultimate productivity primer. [Download your free chapter →](#)
3. **Stuck? Grab a 90-Day TRACKTION Planner...** Get the tool thousands trust to help them take control of their time, master their habits and hit goals in every part of their lives. [Order your 90-day planner →](#)
4. **Burned out? Join the TRACKTION Community...** Take the 6-week masterclass, get weekly group coaching, find accountability partners and connect with like-minded self-starters. [Get started FREE →](#)

[Arthur Worsley](#)

I founded **TAoL** to discover and share the best wisdom on how to live long and prosper. Before that I studied Psychology, Philosophy & Physiology at Oxford and consulted at McKinsey. **Still curious?** [Learn more](#) or [take my FREE productivity quiz](#).