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To do lists help you track your activities and manage your time. Then again, what happens when your lists grow out of control because they're too long or there are too many of them?

Maybe the solution is using a different kind of list. Take a look at your options for designing an effective to do list, along with suggestions for using any productivity tool more effectively.

Tips for Designing a To Do List That Works for You

1. **Limit the length.** *Many experts recommend keeping your list as short as 3 to 5 items.* Promptly cross off any tasks you complete. Move projects you're unlikely to get to off to a separate wish list.

2. **Consider categories.**If you prefer longer lists, categories are one way to stay organized. Separate business and personal items. Group similar activities like shopping, reading, or making phone calls.

3. **Juggle timelines.**Maybe your projects are interrelated with structured stages and strict deadlines. Calendar functions and color-coding could help you strategize.

4. **Add detail.**When you need more than a simple list, create a full log. Build in supplementary information like daily summaries, phone numbers, and websites you visit frequently.

5. **Block out your time.** Do you tend to waste small blocks of time? *Planning your day in 30-minute increments could help you spot when you'll have 10 minutes free for filing or checking messages.*

6. **Choose paper or digital.** You may already know that GTD stands for Get Things Done, and there are a growing number of GTD apps to choose from. On the other hand, paper journals are still popular too. What matters is using them consistently.

Tips for Using Any To Do List Effectively

1. **Set priorities.** A successful list lets you see your major responsibilities at a glance and approach them systematically. *Arrange your list so your top concerns stand out.*

2. **Distinguish between urgency and importance.** Prioritizing raises some tricky questions. Picking up your dry cleaning before the shop closes in 10 minutes is urgent. Spending time with your friends is less time sensitive, but contributes more to your wellbeing. Pay attention to essentials that may otherwise be bumped.

3. **Automate routine tasks.** Eliminate chores that robots and computers can do for you. Electronic banking frees up your time and gives you peace of mind knowing that your bills have been paid on time.

4. **Build in leeway.** Studies show that most adults underestimate the time it takes to complete many everyday tasks. Give yourself an extra 10 minutes between appointments. Assume that a new dinner recipe may take you 20 minutes to pull together even if the cookbook claims you can do it in 10.

5. **Take a break.** *Put adequate rest and play on your list each day.* It's time well spent when it keeps you in top shape and prevents burnout.

6. **Expect surprises.** However comprehensive your list is, you're sometimes going to run into circumstances that you couldn't predict. Be prepared to shuffle your other obligations to the next week if your car breaks down or you win a trip to a tropical resort.

7. **Evaluate your progress.**Hold onto your lists so you can review them periodically. Repeat the practices that simplify your life and fix the patterns that are causing you delays.

Keep your personal and professional life in order. Whether you prefer writing in a notebook with colored markers or downloading the latest productivity app to multiple devices, there's a to do list that will help you to stay on top of your game.