Time mapping: learning to "tell time"

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Many of us who have trouble getting things done have a problem "telling time." Consider these examples. Have you ever said to yourself "I'll get that done over the weekend - I have lots of time then." But when the weekend comes, you discover that in fact, the weekend is already full. Or, you have been asked to write a chapter; you look ahead to the weeks near the deadline and see "nothing scheduled," and you cheerfully agree. Of course, as the deadline approaches, you find that you are (predictably) swamped. Finally, have you looked at what appears to be a fully scheduled week, and thought to your self, panic rising, "I don't have time to get *anything* done!" In this essay, I will describe techniques that will help you learn to tell time so that you can get big projects (writing, grants, budgets, etc) done in the midst of all the other urgent, important thinks you must do every day.

The basic time grid / map

The basic technique was first described by Neil Fiore in *The Now Habit*. We'll start with this original method, and then add other ways that it can be used.

1. Create a grid of the week, or print a week view from your electronic calendar. The days should be divided into 30 or 60 time slots.   The grid should include seven days, and all the hours you will be awake (Figure).

2. Using a pencil or neutral colored marker, mark out the time you need for the following:

> Time committed to meet with others (meetings, conference calls, class, clinic, operating room, etc.
> Time committed to eating/cooking, exercising, commuting, taking the kids to school or soccer practice - all the time you spend in routine daily activities that is not available for anything else.

3. Add in buffers between activities. A couple of years ago I started a new position which required me to meet with people all over campus. In the first month I came to work on a Monday morning, and discovered I had 3 back to back meetings in buildings that were one mile away from each other. It didn't work very well! Ever since, I have made a point of blocking off 30 minutes on either side of meetings outside my building. I don't always need that much time, but it ensures that there will be time to travel without rushing. Avoiding back to back meetings anytime, even if in the same room, gives you time to breath.

4. Depending on your life, some portion of that "free" time will be needed for emergent work that shows up during the day. The emergency room calls you to come and see a patient, the boss drops in and asks for a report by the end of the day, you receive many more phone calls that usual, and so on. Although none of these specific things are expected, it turns out that

most people have approximately the same average amount of unexpected events per day - thus the amount of time is *not* unexpected. Thus, depending on your job, you should block off between 25% and 75% of this "free time" in anticipation that it will be used. (And, there is nothing more wonderful that the gift of extra time - so if the emergencies don't materialize, that's great.)

You don't need to write on this grid *what* you will be doing during these blocked off times, although you may. The end result of this grid is the identification of all the time that is not committed, and that is potentially available for either work or play.

You can benefit even if you stop at this point: just being aware of where the openings are in the week will lead to improved focus during those times.

Time blocking – basic grid

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
6:00	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓
7:00	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓
8:00					▓	▓	▓
9:00	▓		▓		▓		
10:00			▓	▓			
11:00			▓				
12:00	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓
1:00						▓	▓
2:00			▓	▓	▓		
3:00	▓		▓		▓	▓	
4:00	▓		▓	▓	▓	▓	
5:00	▓		▓				
6:00	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓		
7:00	▓					▓	▓
8:00						▓	▓
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							

Technique #1: Add personal time

Fiore's major contribution to time blocking methodology is to require the addition, at this point, of   non-work personal, recreational, and social activities. He worked with graduate students

who were unable to complete their dissertation. He observed that these students spent a large part of their day worrying about writing, and not only did they *not* write, they did not do anything else. The result was constant worry, no relaxation, and eventual burnout. His first brilliant idea was to have these students to put rejuvenating activities on the calendar at the beginning of the week, *before* thinking about when they might write.

This technique is one of the ways you can create balance in your life. Time for family, and especially time for ourselves, often ends up at the bottom of the priority list. This method puts these activities at the top.

Time blocking – add personal time

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
6:00	meditate						
7:00							
8:00						work out	work out
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
1:00	work out	work out					
2:00							
3:00							
4:00							
5:00							
6:00							dinner
7:00				art			with
8:00	movie			exhibit			friends
9:00							
10:00							
11:00	Reading	for	pleasure				

Technique #2: Set a time to go home.

This time take a *thick permanent marker,* and draw a line at the time you will stop work for the day. Aim to stop when the time comes on most days. Yes, occasionally you will need to go over, but make sure you do it for essential tasks, not merely because there is more you could do.

Parkinson's Law states that "work expands to fill the time allotted." If you set no end time, your work will simply go on, another cause of burnout.

Technique # 3: "unschedule"

Fiore's second contribution is the idea of "unscheduling;" that is, recording, rather than planning, the time actually spent in desirable activities. He asked students not to schedule

writing time, but rather to record on the grid any time they did 30 minutes or more of writing. This method helps reduce resistance to writing, and, instead makes a game of it.

This monitoring technique can be used for any habit you are trying to establish. For this purpose, use your favorite bright color so that these times jump out from the time map. In addition to doing more writing, you might monitor e-mail use in order to spend less time. Exercise, professional reading, and planning /thinking time are all worthy candidates for this method.

Technique #4: Target open blocks for specific work

First, identify between one and three major projects you want to work on for the week. Then, look at your weekly map. Find the openings of 60 minutes or more, and pencil in (really – you need to use pencil so that you can erase and make changes during the week) – the name of each project into one of these slots. Because your week may not go the way it is planned (!), you may end up moving to another time, or even to another week.

You can also target other blocks of open time to do high priority tasks. Circle the time, and write in a short list of tasks to complete in that block. Setting the goal of completing the entire list in that block increases the odds that you will finish.

The point with this method is not that you will always do the work when planned, but that you have looked ahead of time to see if there is time for each of the major projects you have planned. Having the project penciled in also increases the odds that you will work on it if that time stays available.
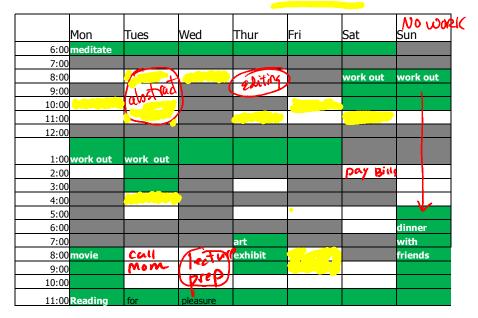
Don't make the mistake of putting a recurrent appointment on your calendar for project work, and then ignoring it most days. On the other hand, if you find that there is a day with open time in most weeks, and if you are religious about keeping that appointment with your self, give it a try.

Technique #5: Keep a time log

With a pencil or pen, jot down the main thing you did in each 15 or 30 minutes time slot for the day. Keep for the whole week, and include the evenings and week end.

You may think you know how you spend your time, but if you have not done this exercise, you probably underestimate the time you waste. I don't mean time that you spend thinking, or planning, developing valuable relationships with your co-workers, playing with your kids, or relaxing. I mean time spend surfing the web, reading the newspaper, cleaning out a drawer when you had not planned to do it, or watching TV you don't even like.

No work *(handwritten, near Sun)*

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
6:00	meditate						
7:00							
8:00		*abstract*		*Editing*		work out	work out
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
1:00	work out	work out					
2:00						*pay bills*	
3:00							
4:00							
5:00							
6:00							dinner
7:00				art			with
8:00	movie	*Call Mom*	*Lecture prep*	exhibit			friends
9:00							
10:00							
11:00	Reading	for	pleasure				

A warning: be prepared to find that some days – or in the entire week – you may have little or no open time. Don't let this knowledge lead to paralysis. Instead, realize that knowing in advance when your chances are to get at least a little work done can lead to focus and efficiency. Also, on this kind of day, look carefully at your scheduled activities (from step 2), and see if there is something you can shorten, delete or defer to another time. For example, maybe there is a routine meeting that does not really require your attendance this week, or, you could take a shorter lunch one day.

Begin mapping your weeks, and try these techniques one at a time. Use the ones that work for you, and see if you don't find an increased sense of calm and control.

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Reference

Fiore, Neil. *The Now Habit, 3rd edition.*