



How to do 'To Do' lists

TN23 Training Notes series: Leadership

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Most of us use 'To Do' lists in some form. Simple examples include a 'shopping list', an 'appointments diary', and a meeting's 'agenda'. These notes cover the well-known aid of making a list of 'tasks to be done'.

The truth is that many people find this simple self-management tool does not seem to work. I have recently met several Christian leaders struggling under the burden of a 'To Do' list they never complete. The list acts as a constant reminder that they are behind schedule. Instead of being a helpful aid to planning time, it mocks them for their inability to cope.

So here is a better way forward. First, three principles to get away from the idea of one long list on several sheets. Then an example of how to apply these principles in practice.

NOTE that there is now a more detailed explanation of what follows at Article A51 on this website, *The 'To Do Diary' guide*.

1: Differentiate tasks by how long you expect them to take

It is not much help having a list that muddles up tasks that will take five minutes with those needing several days. Things that need to be knocked off quickly get lost among the major items. I recently saw a Vicar's list which included the signing of a form needing urgent attention. It was lost in a mass of major business and had been forgotten.

So have one list for quick things, the items that can be dealt with in five to fifteen minutes in between appointments, or in a designated 'admin' time. Keep the longer items separate. You may prefer to divide further: 'Under 15 minutes', '15-60 minutes', 'Over an hour'.

2: Differentiate tasks by when you need to do them

The biggest danger of a single 'To Do' list is that it fails to note deadlines or time when it makes sense to fit things in. The tool was never designed to be a list of 'Everything I Can Think Of That Needs Doing', but as a 'To Do Today' list. Yet I find Christian leaders who write down 'Character reference for Mike' (which needs to be off today), then 'Order candles' which can be done any time this month (but no later), followed by 'Avoid this year's fiasco over holiday cover' which may apply months ahead. No wonder it all goes wrong.

Someone explained to me the other day that things had got much better when he stopped planning for a day and started planning for a week. It is helpful to plan too for a month or year.

3: Differentiate tasks by how important they are

Some things on the list must be done. It might be awkward but not disastrous if others never happened. Still others could be done by other people, provided they were given enough notice and support. But by filling in long lists where some items remain unticked for weeks adds to the feeling of guilt and thereby saps morale. This in turn means you work less effectively on everything you do, and the noose tightens further.

So how can we benefit from the value of 'To Do' lists while taking these three principles into account? One answer is

The 'To Do Diary'

Here is one way ahead that I have used for many years. You may need to adapt it for the person that is 'you'. I use paper because I find this much better than a digital approach, but you may be quite different. No problem if so.

Standard engagement diary – for big-picture monthly planning

Choose one with pictures you like (nature or Winnie-the-Pooh for me). Ignore the days down the left column and use it only for a list of things to do in each month. I fill mine in at the start of the month under four category headings by type of work and keep my eye on it each week so I don't forget anything. On each page for the months still to come, pencil in tasks you need to do that month. Then forget all about them until the beginning of the month in question.

For example, I write a column for a quarterly publication. So, when I agree the next series I pencil in a reminder on the four copy-date months. At the start of the month that task goes on my (inked in) list. At that point other work is suggested by my appointments. No detail though.

Standard page-to-a-day diary – for detailed daily and weekly planning

Divide each day into sections, or have a double page with engagements on the left-hand side and the other categories I list below on the right. Four ideas:

1 **Timed Engagements (TE)** *(top part of page, possibly written in red to stand out)*

Anything with a time attached to it. Meetings of course. Visits perhaps. Include also any task you need to do at a fixed time, eg. phoning someone back before they go out. This is what you expect in a diary, but it is now one part of a scheduled 'To Do' list.

2 **Main Tasks (MT)** *(next section, possibly written in capitals to make them stand out)*

Use the second part of the page for anything likely to take more than an hour, say. If it actually takes 30 minutes, it's your gain.

Fill these in at various times: a week or two ahead for some things, at the beginning of the week if planning then, the previous night when thinking about the next day. But never put too much down: if there are four or five tasks already there the previous day and you now need to add another, something will have to be moved. The list of everything on the page must seem achievable, allowing for inevitable interruptions.

At the end of each task tick it (if that action encourages you!). At the end of the day cross those not done (there will usually be some) and reschedule them in the diary. So expect quite a bit of crossing out (this is where a digital system scores).

Put in brackets everything that could go if something has to go. If time, do it. If not, short-cut it in some way or just leave it. But as you cannot overload the system, many of these things just cannot be added anyway, so you have to find ways round them.

3 **Quick Actions (QA)** *(third section down the page)*

This is a key feature of this system. In the next part of the page (keep it separate) jot down a list of shorter things to do. Again, some will go in a week in advance, some a few days, some on the day itself.

So you phone me now and ask if I will put some things together and email them to you. It's a 15 minute job. I look at my diary and know I am pretty busy today, I am away tomorrow, but I could fit it in the next day. I ask if two days' time would be fine. You say yes. I jot it down in the third quarter of that day's page. Then I forget about it. I go through tomorrow's engagement with no feeling of guilt of something on a 'To Do' list not done. Next day I fit it in around my longer tasks at the start of the day, or at a break, or at a prearranged 'bits and pieces' time. Then I tick it.

You may have several items like this each day. Again, never overload any one day, and so expect to move some items around. This idea helps me not to forget little things.

Article A51, *The 'To Do Diary' guide*, offers a range of practical examples, especially for Quick Actions.

4 **Personal tasks** *(OPTIONAL: bottom section of the page)*

You might like to keep a separate part of the page for all personal and family tasks. Or it may be better to combine these with the other three sections. Up to you.

Note that if using headings 1 to 3 above, TE + MT + QA cannot total in expected time for more than you have available in a day. But seeing engagements and desk work all in one system will help you to avoid overbooking a day.

If you are suffering from a single 'To Do' list, think again about my three principles, think up a system that would be better for you than the one I describe here, and give it a try for a month. The key is to schedule your 'Timed Engagements' and to keep the 'Quick Actions' separate from the 'Main Tasks'. Without the muddle of one list, without the guilt of things not getting done, and with the firmer grasp of planning your time, I hope you will find it helps.

With a diary system you can then apply Matthew 6:34. "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Recommendation: if you like the sound of this idea, now read it up in more detail at Article A51 on this website, *The 'To Do Diary' guide*.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN23. They cover one aspect of self-management, an area John writes and trains in for Christian leaders in churches and mission agencies. See also Article A51, *The 'To Do Diary' guide* for more detail plus Training Notes TN43, *Did Jesus use an iPhone?*, TN62, *Know what distracts you*, and especially TN84, *How to say 'No' when you should*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his running a training event for you.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN23 under Leadership (with a link to Administration).

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