

The art of starting a project on time

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Most of us miss deadlines because nervous anticipation drives us to begin too late. Here's how to break the cycle.

Everyone knows that getting started is often the toughest part of a project. It's amazing how this conundrum cuts across types of endeavors: writing, research, filing taxes, drafting a presentation, preparing a budget, making repairs, cleaning a room, even grooming a dog. The anticipation is the main obstacle. You see the task ahead of you, and it looks monstrous. Even if you enjoy the kind of work you'll be doing, dread can set in, which can lead to serious delay. The single biggest factor in missing a deadline is getting started later than you could have.

I find that the art of starting on time boils down to one basic technique: creating an environment in which the project feels like it's already underway before you sit down (or stand up) to begin it formally. There are many ways to achieve this, but the best ones involve making small preparations for the new project while you're doing something else.

If the task is writing, try jotting down ideas as soon as they occur to you while you're going about daily life—and then placing the notes somewhere prominent, where their very presence will later engage your attention and interest. The prominent place can simply be your computer desktop or email inbox, although physical prominence (e.g., a paper notebook that rests on your keyboard) tends to work much better.

For presentations, budgets, and taxes, setting up and naming new files— and sticking them right where you'll see them every time you fire up your computer— works pretty well. The key is to seize on opportunities, while you're doing other work, to toss real content into those files so that they're not merely empty shells. A file with data already populating it is much more likely to focus you than a blank one is. Still, I'd add something physical to the mix (e.g., a relevant paper sitting under your mouse) in order to seal the deal.

For manual projects, physical placement of tools works beautifully. Step away from preparing dinner to put the dog-grooming brush on the coffee table or in the middle of the living room floor, so that you have no choice but to deal with it after the meal. The same kinds of tricks work with repair tools and other implements. The key is to make setting them out a distraction from another endeavor, so that the setup task doesn't feel like the moment of project initiation.

Weaving the very first steps of a new project into other things you're doing makes the transition seamless. No mountains to climb, no first hurdles to clear. You're still surmounting the barriers, but you're reducing them to the size they actually are instead of making them bigger than they need to be.

Of course, just like setting your watch ahead is no guarantee against lateness, stealth initiation is no guarantee against procrastination. But unlike the watch trick, it's not merely a psychological ploy. It actually sets you on the path to completion, and knowing that you're already on your way is the invaluable ingredient.

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