

Amherst College

Strategic Learning Center

How to Keep a To-Do List that Actually Gets Done

1. Make a task list, not a project list

- A task is something you can do in one sitting, ideally in 30 minutes or less. A project is a longer-term goal that usually takes several steps (or tasks) to complete.
- Break a project into tasks by imagining doing it. For example, “doing research” may include brainstorming ideas, searching the library database, or looking through readings.
- You can keep a physical or digital list. For digital lists, something as simple as a Mac Notes app page or a Google Doc works well, or you can try apps like Todoist, Any.do, Asana or Trello.

2. Use a calendar

- A calendar can help you identify how you’re spending your time, enabling you to add or subtract time from certain activities. You can use a paper or digital calendar, like Google Calendar.
- Block out your class times, office hours, and other meeting times, and include non-academic needs such as sleeping, eating, exercising, and socializing.
- Look at the blank spaces and decide when you’re going to get the tasks on your to-do list done. Then, schedule them in just like anything else! Try to overestimate how much time something will take, as that will be easier than underestimating.
- Your calendar should free you, not trap you. Stay flexible, but honest with accomplishing what you scheduled for the day.

3. Keep weekly and daily lists

- Using weekly and daily to-do lists together can help you keep the “bigger picture” in mind while staying focused on the day-to-day things that need to get done.
- Create a list of what you need to do in the week.
- Every day, review your weekly list and decide what you’re to do that day. Transfer those tasks to a separate daily to-do list.
- Repeat and pick a regular time each week to make your weekly to-do list to make it a habit!

4. Focus your energy appropriately

- Some tasks require higher levels of energy and focus than others. Consider the difficulty of each task and plan accordingly (like saving the hardest tasks for when you’re most alert).
- Try making separate lists for high and low difficulty tasks, and work from the appropriate list, based on your circumstances.
- When scheduling a lot of easy tasks into your calendar, don’t create short events for each of them, but make one larger bloc of time for all of them to keep your calendar decluttered.

5. Make the most of your time by focusing

- It’s easier to fit events and tasks into the day when you can accomplish more in less time!
- Find a study environment that works for you. If noise distracts you, try headphones. Listen to music if you like.
- Be realistic regarding where you can best focus, and who is a good study/accountability partner.