

# STUDY SKILLS

## To-Do Lists

The main secret of getting more done every day took me several months of research to discover. When I first started delving into better time use, I asked successful people what the secret of their success was. I recall an early discussion with a vice-president of Standard Oil Company of California who said, "Oh, I just keep a 'to-do' list." I passed over that quickly, little suspecting at the time the importance of what he said.

I happened to travel the next day to a large city to give a time-management seminar. While I was there I had lunch with a businessman who practically owned the town. He was chairman of the gas and light company, president of five manufacturing companies, and had his hand in a dozen other enterprises. By all standards he was a business success. I asked him the same question of how he managed to get more done and he said, "Oh that's easy- I keep a To-Do List." But this was a list with a difference. He told me he considered it a game.

The first thing in the morning, he would come in and lay out his list of what he wanted to accomplish that day. In the evening he would check to see how many of the items he had written down in the morning still remained undone and then give himself a score. His goal was to have a "no miss" day in which every single item was crossed off.

He played the To-Do list game as much as you cover the squares on a bingo card, getting items on his list done during the day as opportunities presented themselves-talking to someone on the phone, bringing up points at a meeting, exploring a creative project in the evening with his wife. He made sure to get started on the top-priority items right away. Towards the end of the day he initiated whatever calls, actions, or letters were necessary to finish up his "bingo card" for a perfect score.

Again and again when I talked to successful businessmen and government administrators, the

To-Do list came up. So during one of my seminars I asked how many people had heard of keeping a priority list of things to do. Virtually every one had. Then I asked how many people conscientiously made up a list of things to do every day, arranged the items in priority order, and crossed off each task as it was completed. I discovered that very few people keep a list of things to do every day, although most people occasionally make a To-Do list when they are particularly busy, have a lot of things they want to remember to do, or have some particularly tight deadline.

### **Only a Daily List Will Do**

People at the top and people at the bottom both know about To-Do lists, but one difference between them is that the people at the top use a To-Do list every single day to make better use of their time; people at the bottom know about this tool, but don't use it effectively. One of the real secrets of getting more done is to make a To-Do list every day, keep it visible, and use it as a guide to action as you go through the day. Because the To-Do list is such a fundamental time-planning tool, let's take a closer look at it. The basics of the list itself are simple: head a piece of paper "To-Do," then list those items on which you want to work; cross off items as they are completed and add others as they occur to you; rewrite the list at the end of the day or when it becomes hard to read.

One of the secrets to success is to write all your "To-Do" items on a master list or lists to be kept together, rather than jotting them down on miscellaneous scraps of paper. You may want to keep your list in you appointment book. One executive keeps a special pad on his desk reserved for his To-Do list.

Some people try to keep To-Do lists in their heads but in my experience this is rarely as effective. Why clutter your mind with things that can be written

down? It's much better to leave your mind free for creative purposes.

### **What Belongs On the List?**

Are you going to write down everything you have to do, including routine activities? Are you only going to write down exceptional events? Are you going to put down everything you might do today or only whatever you decided you will do today? There are many alternatives, and different people have different solutions. I recommend that you not list routine items such as attending class, eating lunch, etc. but do list everything that has high priority today and might not get done without special attention.

Don't forget to put the A-activities for your long-term goals on your To-Do list. Although it may appear strange to see "begin learning French" or "find new friends" in the same list with "bring home a quart of milk" or "buy a birthday card," you want to do them in the same day. If you use your To-Do list as a guide when deciding what to work on next, then you need the long-term projects represented too so you won't forget them at decision time and consequently not do them.

You might also consider your To-Do list as a study checklist of items that you need to study for each subject. List reading assignments, problems you need to review, skills to master, or concepts that you need to seek clarification on.

Before you even consider doing anything yourself, look over the list and see how many tasks you can delegate. Depending on your responsibilities, you might, if you try hard enough, get all the items on your To-Do list completed by the end of each day. If so, by all means try. But probably you can predict in advance that there is no way to do them all. When there are too many things to do, conscious choices as to what (and what not) to do is better than letting the decision be determined by chance.

In all planning, long-range, middle-range, or short-range you (1) make a list and (2) set priorities. All the items on a list are not of equal value. Once

you have made a list, set priorities based on what is important to you now. In my opinion, no list is complete until it shows priorities. Whenever you make a list, finish the list by setting priorities.

### **It's as Basic as ABC**

Use the ABC Priority system: write a capital letter "A" to the left of those items on the list that have a high value; a "B" for those with medium value; and a "C" for those with low value. As you do this, you know that to some extent you're guessing. You're not sure you'll be right on the value. But comparing the items to one another will help you come up with the ABC priority choices for every entry on the list.

Items marked "A" should be those that yield the most value. You get the most out of your time by doing the "A"s first, and saving the "B"s and "C"s for later. You can break them down further so that "A"-items become "A"-1, "A"-2, "A"-3, "A"-4, "B"-1, etc. As you decide how to prioritize the items take into account the time of day and the urgency of the items.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough: You must set priorities. Some people do as many items as possible on their lists. They get a very high percentage of tasks done, but their effectiveness is low because the tasks they've done are mostly "C"-priority. Others like to start at the top of the list and go right down it, again with little regard to what's important. The best way is to take your list and label each item according to ABC priority, delegate as much as you can, and then polish off the list accordingly.

One person I know color-codes the entries, using black for normal entries and red for top-priority items. For people who have trouble living with priorities, I have found that it's helpful to use one piece of paper for the "A"s and "B"s and another page for the more numerous "C"s. The "A" and "B" paper is kept on top of the "C" list, and every time you raise the "A" and "B" list to do a "C", you're aware that you're not making the best use of your time.

Many office workers, homemakers, and professional people have come to my seminars because they felt the need to “get organized.” Most report a couple of months later that they feel much more organized simply because they regularly list and set priorities. If little things mean a lot, a list of things to do in priority order means a great deal because it provides you with the security of knowing that nothing is missing; an affirmation of all your important activities; a motivation to cross off items you don’t need to do; and a reservoir from which you can select activities to be done next.