



*a podcast about
how we learn,
how we teach,
and how they overlap*

Episode 13: Using a Planner and a Calendar

[Theme Music]

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an Academic Life Coach and professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

Adam: And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn, and how we teach, and how they overlap.

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 13, and the second in our time management series, using a planner and a calendar. Today, we're going to talk about how to use a planner and a wall calendar to get on top of your time management.

Adam: So, this is the second in a series of six episodes that discuss different time management strategies. In this episode, we're going to talk about how to move the items on your to-do list, which we talked about in the last episode, into a plan and a calendar where you'll see them every day.

So, using the to-do list, you've noticed what you got to do. Now, it's time to make it visible, where you'll see it every day. So, get a planner that has day sheets divided by hours with enough space to write out what you need to do, and get a wall calendar to put important due dates into.

Dinur: Now, the wall calendar is where you put your due dates. So, this means you want something fairly large that you can see from across the room. A desk blotter sized calendar is a really, really good idea.

Now, due dates are not the dates you start something. They're the dates you need to be finished with something. In each calendar box, write down what has to be finished by that day. Don't worry, you'll schedule ways to break them down into smaller pieces when you get really friendly with your planner.

True due dates are ones that other people, like your professor, set for you. If it's not a true due date, save it for your planner. Your planner's where you'll set intermediate and short-term deadlines; your wall calendar is for the big picture.

In the completed to-do list example, which you can find in the show notes as To-Do List 2, there are three things that are true due dates that you didn't choose: the English paper, due on October 5th, the geography research project due on the 7th, and the biology lab that's due on Thursday.

So, on your wall calendar, find those three dates, use a marker color that you'll notice - red is almost always a good one - and write "English paper due" on October 5, "geography project due" on October 7th and "bio lab due" on Thursday. Then, in the left-hand column you labeled "done" on your to-do list, check them off. They're on the wall calendar now, so they're off your to-do list.

Adam: And I really recommend using a marker that is a color that you'll notice. I had a student use a black Sharpie, and they stopped noticing it because it just didn't catch their eye. And I said, "you need red or hot pink or bright orange or something that's going to scream at you, that will get your attention." They changed to hot pink and all of a sudden, they started noticing their due dates.

Now, your planner should be something that you can and will carry with you. And you need to do two things with it. The first is, all those things that aren't long-term projects with true due dates, move them off your to-do list and into your planner. Do that now, and mark them "done" on the to-do list. Then the other thing you need to do with your planner is, to take those big goals, the stuff that you put on the wall calendar, and break them down into small tasks. And the method we're going to teach you right now is called the backwards-forwards method.

So, on your wall calendar, you've got long-term projects that have to be broken down into smaller pieces that you can work with. So, think of these as a big goal and smaller goals. Goals actually come in three sizes: there are the long-term goals, that's what's on your wall calendar. Then there are intermediate themes and short-term tasks, and you're going to work backwards to create these.

So, a long-term goal takes at least two weeks to complete. Each of your classes may have several projects that are due over the course of the term.

The October 5 English paper, that's an example of a long-term goal. It's going to take several steps to do it right, and you can't really get it done in less than two weeks, not well. You can, like, write it the night before it's due, but it's going to be crummy, it's not going to be worthwhile to turn it.

Then there are intermediate themes, and intermediate themes take one week to complete. So, think of them as “the theme of the week.” The theme, or focus, is one piece of the long-term goal that you want to complete.

And then short-term tasks, finally, take no more than two hours each. So, your job is to take those intermediate one-week themes, and break them up into two-hour blocks of time and energy.

Dinur: To break down a long-term goal into short-term tasks, start at the end and work backwards for the intermediate themes. Then work forward to break the intermediate themes into small tasks.

So, let's take your English paper for an example. You have to write an argumentative essay about whether oil companies should be allowed to lay pipelines across indigenous lands in order to drill. You'll need to do some research, write at least one rough draft and give yourself enough time to rewrite and polish up the draft to make it presentable. We made the to-do list on September 15th, and that means October 5th, the due date for this project, is three weeks away.

Now, let's break the long-term goal into intermediate themes. What do you do the week before you turn in a paper? Hopefully, you'll be rewriting the rough draft so it's not a rough draft anymore. That means logically, you'll be writing the original draft the week before that, right? And finally, in order to do that, you need to get research sources, read through them and make notes so that you can write the draft in the first place.

Adam: So, that gives us your three intermediate themes for this project. So, in week three, which would be September 29th, to October 4th, the main theme of the week, or the main focus of the week, is “rewrite the rough draft of the English paper and polish it in the last couple of days.” Week two, which is the week before that September 22th to September 28th, you're going to “write the rough draft.” And in week one, which is September 15th, today, to September 21st, you're going to “do your research; you're going to get sources and you're going to make notes.”

Dinur: So now, you want to break up each of these intermediate themes into short-term tasks; two-hour blocks. Use regular paper to plan, and then transfer it to your planner once you have it organized, just like the to-do list. Rewrite your list to put the intermediate themes in calendar order, week one through three instead of three through one. Then break up each week's theme into two-hour tasks.

Adam: So, in this episode's show notes, you can find an example of how this person broke up the intermediate themes into short-term tasks. It's called “Backwards Plan Example.”

So, week one theme is, “do the research for the English paper.” And when you write it down, it might look like this:

- Sunday of week one, create argument for paper and identify three main themes
- Monday of week one, go to the library, talk to the librarian, find at least three sources for each main theme.
- Tuesday of week one, go through the sources for the first main theme and make notes of important quotes you can use.
- Wednesday of week one, do the same thing for the second main theme's sources.
- Thursday of week one, do the same thing for the final theme's sources.
- And then on Friday of week one, make notes on possible introductions and possible conclusions.
- Then on Saturday, give yourself a break. Take it off.

Dinur: Yeah. Now week two, which is themed "write rough draft for English paper," might look a little like this:

- Sunday week two, read through notes on first theme's sources, free write for two hours on these ideas. Make sure to mark quotes somehow so you can cite them. Meaning, if you find juicy quotes that you like, put down page numbers, put down the author so that you don't have to hunt through all of your sources when you're writing your final draft later on.
- Monday of week two, read through the notes on the second theme's sources, free write but do it in a separate file. Think of each of these days almost as separate chapters.
- On Tuesday, read through your notes on the third theme's sources. Free write like you've done on Sunday and Monday, and again, save it in a separate file.
- Wednesday, write your conclusion, keep it in a fourth file.
- Thursday, write your introduction. Notice you're writing your introduction last after you've done the research. And after you've hammered your point on what you want the reader to know.
- Friday, combine all of your writing into one messy first draft. It could be copy and paste because this is not the draft that you're going to turn in.
- And on Saturday, again, give your brain a break. Take a day.

Adam: Then finally on last week, third week, which is "rewrite and polish English paper," it might look like this: On the Sunday of week three, outline your messy first draft and mark each paragraphs main idea. Now, this is going to sound really counterintuitive, a lot of students think, "I've gotta outline first."

If you outline first, you're going to lose a lot of those hot moments where you come up with a great insight because you're writing, and you're not focusing on an outline so much as the ideas. So, we really recommend that you hold off on the outline until you have a draft. Because the outline is for organizing, not for planning.

So, outline your messy first draft on the Sunday of week three, mark each paragraphs main idea. So, here's where you're going to notice that paragraphs have more than one main idea. Now, the thing about main ideas and paragraphs, they're kind of like beta

fish. They work really well as long as they each have their own space, but they fight like hell if they have to share one.

Or you might find that paragraph four and paragraph seven are pretty much exactly the same paragraph, so you might want to remove one.

Then on Monday of week three, you're going to organize the first draft by the themes so that the paper flows from the first theme to the second theme to the third theme, and you're going to delete, prune and rearrange to tidy this up and create a rough second draft.

On the Tuesday of week three, you're going to do proofreading, proofread for spelling, for grammar, for other issues that you know you have like if you know that you love run-on sentences, that you love the comma; check for that. Okay, fix those things. Remove flowery language, get rid of 12 words that don't need to be there, make sure your citations are there. And write and double check your work cited page.

On the Wednesday of week three, give this paper to a friend and ask them to proofread your cleaned up second draft and find the things you missed because you always will miss something, that's just a given.

Don't look at the paper at all until Thursday. Give your eyes a rest so that they will be fresh for a final proof and polish on Thursday morning.

Then on Thursday of week three, polish it fix the problems that your friend found, fix the last little bits that might need polishing: oops, that's a comma that should be a period; oops, I need to get rid of that run-on sentence; oops. I've said "obviously" three times on one page, let's remove those.... Okay, just those little bits of polishing.

Friday, turn the paper in on time.

Because once you have your project broken down like this, now all you have to do is transfer each small task to a two-hour block of time on the appropriate days in your planner.

Dinur: By using this method of large goals, intermediate themes and small tasks, and by breaking it down backwards, you can become a pro at turning your huge projects into bite-sized pieces.

And we want to give some advice to both teachers and students on this.

Adam: So teachers, one of the first things you can do is work through how to break down a long-term assignment into smaller segments. Do it as a class - this is worth spending class time on. Remember, just like we've said in previous episodes, we have done this over and over and over, and for us, it's just old hat. We know how to break

down a project. We've done it dozens of times, maybe hundreds of times since graduate school.

But our students are coming in and often, they're coming in from backgrounds where they may never have been taught how to do this. And we can either say "well, it's not my job" and not do it, in which case, we're going to get a bunch of crummy projects and papers to grade; or we can say "here, let me teach you how to do this because I know that most of you have never been taught how to do this before," and just reserve a day. Today we are going to talk about how to take big project and break it down into small pieces, so that you can actually do what you need to do.

Dinur: And as teachers, we can give our students earlier milestone assignments, things are just pass/no pass, to have students work on the assignments sooner. So for example, I have my law students write an essay examining a documentary. But I forc my students to bring in an outline to class one day, and to bring it in, an in progress draft on a different class day, so that we can spend time together working on this. Because I know if I don't, I'm going to get a bunch of papers that were written a day or two before, it's going to be painful for me to read them, it's going to be painful for the students when they get their grade; that does neither of us any good. And so having that outline, taking that time in class to work through these ideas, has resulted in students writing stronger papers, and it's resulted in students getting higher grades on it.

Adam: And I do the same thing with my students. In almost every class that I teach, I set up a three-paper project, where the first paper is an annotated bibliography, and the second one is a literature review, and the third one is the research paper.

And yes, I do let them fold their lit review into the research. I basically say, "take the lit review, expand it and fit things in between here, so that you've got a research paper."

Now, I also teach them how to write an argument. And that happens in a workshop before they ever get to the annotated bib. And when they turn in their workshop, I critique it and I say,"okay, you do not have an argument, yet. Here's what you need to do fix this, fix that," and it is pass/fail, it's either you did it or you didn't, it's complete or it's not. And I will have students who have to come back three or four times, but eventually, they get it. Then, when they do their annotated bibliography, it makes a lot more sense.

In the same way, I give them a workshop on how to do an annotated bibliography, which is essentially going over the guidelines in class. And then I have them turn in a sample of what they're going to do, like one annotation out of the six or seven they're going to do. And then I critique the annotation and then say, "okay, you're supposed to have a quote here, I don't see any quotes." Or, "you need to tell me why this is important to your audience." So, it is more feedback, but it means you're going to get stronger papers. And in the meantime, these workshoppy attempts, you don't grade them beyond "you did it or you didn't." Because that way they're not connected to, and they're not

focusing on, the grade. They're focusing on the work, which is where we want them to be focused.

So when it comes to students, okay, a lot of students are listening to this and going “Oh, God, but I've never used a planner.” Well, now it's time to start, okay? This method is giving you a formula, it's giving you a structure for how to use a planner, and in later episodes of the time management series here, we're going to be talking about how to make sure you actually use your planner and don't just let it sit on the end of your desk, gathering dust for a semester. So, if you've never used a planner before, get ready to start.

Dinur: Remember, students: breaking down big tasks is not done in the planner. You do that on scratch paper. And once you have your plan, then you transfer everything into your planner.

Adam: Remember, when you got big due dates from your syllabus, those go on the wall calendar. The tasks that build up those big due dates, those go into the planner. Just like we've done here, we've taken the big project of the paper due on October 5th and broken it down into probably 20 or 25 small tasks that can be put into the weeks that lead up to that project.

Now, this isn't the last step for learning how to manage your time, not at all. But with a planner and a wall calendar you now have space to prioritize. And we'll talk about how to do that in Episode 14 --

Dinur: Next week.

[Theme Music]

Adam: You've been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Dinur: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

Adam: If you want to support us, please go to www.patreon.com/LearningMadeEasier.

Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week.