



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

Episode 15: Using Reminders

[Theme Music]

Adam: Hi! I'm Adam Sanford, I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles, and this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn, how we teach and how they overlap.

Adam: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier! This is Episode 15, the fourth episode of our Time Management series, where we'll talk about how to remind yourself that you have a planner, and how to remind yourself to use it.

Once you write everything down that you need to do (to get it out of your head), put the big due dates on your wall calendar, break down those projects into small tasks, prioritize them, and get all those tasks written down in your planner, you still need to take one more step: remembering to use your planner.

Dinur: Many students buy a planner, and even fill it out, and then forget to look at it. Think about your own life - how many times have you pinned your hopes to getting a planning system and only had it fall short? How many old and new planners are just gathering dust in your room or they're on your desk or they're in your book bag or they're somewhere in the back of the closet?

Adam: Most of us have at least one planner that we bought with the best of intentions, hoping it would be the solution to all our disorganization and procrastination. Many

students (and others, not just students!) get a planner in the first week of school or the first week of the year, fully intending to use it to schedule their lives down to the last minute.

Dinur: A new planner fills most of us with hope, and the belief that this time, this time it's going to work. This time we will use the planner and will be the organized envy of all our friends. We will be aces at managing our time. This time we're going to use the planner and we're never missing a date or a deadline again. Think of this think of having a planner as an academic New Year's resolution. Sure, previous attempts in the past in work but this time will be oh, so different.

Adam: And then reality sets in, because, of course, most of these planners wind up stuffed into a backpack or a bag. They get left on a desk at home, or shoved underneath the bed, but they get forgotten somewhere. They start gathering dust.

Now that's because most of us have never established the habit of looking at our planner. Once it's filled out, we forget that it's there. I had a student, when I was telling them to make the to-do list, he says, "but now that it's written down, how am I going to remember it?" And that's a very important question.

Dinur: To start remembering that you have a planner, and to remember to look at it often and regularly, you'll need to do two things: Make a date to spend time with your planner once a week to update it and schedule anything new, and set reminders, so you'll open it and look at it during the week.

Adam: So, the first thing is to make a date with your planner. It sounds silly, but if you set a regular time every week that you're going to spend some quality time with your planner, you'll be more likely to do it. So, set a regular time of maybe an hour each week to schedule out the upcoming week, and make sure you stick to that time. One of the first things on your schedule should be "planner time."

Dinur: During your planner time, do these things. Write a to-do list and get everything out of your head. Anything you can think of: assignments, quizzes, tests, readings, labs,

buying groceries, buying clothes. Anything that you can think of that's coming up, get it on the list. Then backwards-plan any big projects on the list.

Adam: And then, use the Eisenhower box once you've written down all the tasks and all the things to prioritize - to prioritize the things on your to-do list, to prioritize the individual tasks for the projects. You may discover a bunch of things going into the "delete" box. That's totally fine.

But then comes the last thing: you've got to set up some reminders, so that you actually look at your planner, and look at it often, every day.

Dinur: Reminders help you to build the habit of looking at your planner frequently. They're going to make time noticeable in a different way than calendars, planners and to-do lists. Eventually, you won't need the reminder. You'll be used to looking at your planner and finding out what's coming up. But until that becomes a habit, you might need some help. There are two basic kinds of reminders, active reminders and passive reminders.

Adam: Now, active reminders make time audible. Calendars and planners and to-do lists, they make it visible, they make you see it - but you've got to look at it. You also want to make time audible, where it can jar you out of what you're doing and make you pay attention. And there are several tools that serve this purpose beautifully.

For example, if you depend on your smart phone or cell phone - and who doesn't, these days? - there are several online services that allow you to schedule text messages to be sent later. Among these are ohdon'tforget.com and textitlater.com. So you can go there, put in your cell phone number, and text yourself on Monday at one o'clock in the afternoon: "remember you need to study for the geology test tomorrow!" And then you'll get that text from yourself at one o'clock on Monday.

That's really helpful, because a lot of us respond to our phones in ways that we don't respond to even emails anymore.

Dinur: You can also use your phone's calendar or download a reminder app, such as Alarmed, that'll send you alerts using your phone. And again, this is based on the idea that most of us are tied to our phones, more than we may want to admit. If we're going to be spending so much time looking at this screen, why not make the screen work for us?

To create these reminders, set a weekly time to sit down with your already filled-out planner, and schedule a week's worth of reminders. Just build this habit - time after time after time, you're looking at repetition.

Adam: Now the second kind are passive reminders, and these serve as passive cues to associate things that happen around you with "oh, time to check my planner again." So the trick is finding things that will happen reliably, every single day, so you really get used to being cued to look at your planner - and actually looking at your planner - multiple times during the day.

Now, I've had students say, "well, I don't know what to use for cues." So, we're going to help you build that right now.

Dinur: So, write down three things that happen every single day, even if they don't happen at the same exact time every day. So, for example if your roommate's alarm clock always goes off at least once a day, write that down on the inside cover of your planner. If you always have toast for breakfast, write that down. If you know you're going to get a text message from your mother every single day, write that down.

Other reliable cues include having one leaving the classroom, walking through a particular door, riding a bus, if you walk - taking a certain route to school. Something that happens daily, even if it's not at the same exact time.

Adam: And so, for example - and I'm going to just riff on this a little bit - for me, three of my cues are having my morning coffee, meditating, which I also do in the morning, and getting a text message from my husband. When those three things happen, my planner comes out and I look at it. And my planner is Google Calendar.

So, I'll just click over to Google Calendar and say, "okay what's coming up? Oh, that's right, I've got a meeting today at 2:00." If I hadn't got that cue I wouldn't look at it.

Now I've developed a habit of where I obsessively check my planner, because I don't want to miss anything, but if you're not one of those folks who's used to obsessively checking your planner, this helps you to develop the habit of doing it.

Now once you have this list of three things that you know are going to happen every single day, you have three reliable cues that will remind you to check your planner. So, every time your text message sound goes off, open the planner and check it. Open it while you're having your morning toast; open it while you're having your mid-morning coffee; but make sure that you're checking it, and checking it often, because otherwise it's not going to help you.

The whole idea behind the passive reminders is to create and maintain a routine that gets you as prepared to succeed, as you want to turn these reminders into something habitual, where you just automatically begin to check your planner because you know that's what contains all the information you need for what's coming up.

Dinur: What helps me is, I'll take a short walk around campus between my second class and my office hours, and once I get back into my office, that's my reminder to take my planner out, see what's coming up and just refocus. I've spent some energy teaching my first two classes. I've got office hours and I've got a few more classes to teach coming up. Let me get refocused, let me get reset, let me see what's coming up - and that way I'm not feeling too rushed. I'm not feeling pressured, because I've thought this through. It's in my planner, I know what's coming up.

Adam: And I've had students come to me with their planners and ask me, "am I doing this right?" The answer is, however you do it is the right way to do it. All we're giving you here is tools, all right?

If there is a show you watch every evening - for example I usually have MSNBC on every evening - make that a cue to look at your planner. You can look at it during the

commercials. It's okay, because once you've written down your planner stuff, that's your planner time. I've had students say to me, "Wait, I have to sit down and write things in my planner every time I hear my text message go off?" No, no, no. You're going to set the time at the beginning of the week. I usually say Sunday because that just seems to make sense, you know the week starts on Sunday.

So, sit down on Sunday for an hour, fill out your planner. That's the time that you're spending a lot of time with your planner. After that it's mainly going to be open it and look at the day; open it and look at the next couple of days; open it and put in that new thing that your teacher just announced in class - "by the way there's something due on Thursday, okay?" Write it down.

These planner checks are not going to take a ton of time. They're going to take a couple minutes every time, and that will allow you to save a lot of time, because you're not going to be wondering "what am I supposed to do next?" or trying to keep it all in your head, which wastes time and energy.

Dinur: Keep in mind you're developing a habit. You're developing a routine. One thing about routines is that until they become that easy, that automatic, it takes a lot of repetition. It takes doing this over and over and over, and at first, it's going to seem weird, because now you're thinking about one more thing, right? Not only are you making time visible; now you're reminding yourself that you have to look at this planner.

But over time it's going to become automatic. It'll become a force of habit. You're not going to think about it, because you'll be used to looking at the planner.

Adam: And not to steal your sports analogy position, but think of it as starting a new exercise routine. When you first start an exercise routine, you have to keep track of it. Okay, I did arms yesterday, I've got to do legs today, I've got to do torso tomorrow, I've got to do arms the day after that - and you're going to probably write it down, because you won't remember every single day. "What am I supposed to do today?"

But after a few weeks you begin to realize, “okay, I did arms yesterday, so today I obviously I’m going to do legs, because legs come after arms, the torso comes after legs, and then arms come after torso,” and it just begins to be a routine. And after a while, it’s just “hit the gym, do my arms, go on with my day.” Hit the gym the next day, “do my legs, go on with my day.”

And you’re no longer trying to remember what it is that you’re supposed to do. So, in this case it’s “check my planner, just open my planner and look at it. Okay, text message went off,” that’s going to be just an automatic, almost a Pavlovian, “Okay, time to open the planner and look at it.” And the goal is to make it so that you don’t have to actively think about it anymore.

Now using the planner - until you get used to doing that, as Dinur said, until it becomes a habit - that is going to take a little bit of time to remember to do it. But think of these cues like a string around your finger or a rubber band around your wrist; that also can serve as a reminder.

Dinur: Now we’ve been gearing this episode a lot towards students, but teachers can also use this. And one thing that Adam and I suggest is that you set a time during class when students can take a minute or two to look at their planner. If you’re the kind of teacher who announces what’s coming up, whether you do that at the beginning of your class or at the end, make that announcement period at the time when you remind your students to get their planners out and to write down what you’re announcing.

That way, you’ve got instant feedback. You can see who’s responding and writing things down and you can help students at least prioritize information for your class.

Adam: I also say at the start of every class, “when’s the last time you checked your planner?” and like half the students will then get the planner out, because it’s a cue, right? If you have a text messaging system - I know that a lot of teachers, for example, use remind.com - well, then just put a reminder in there a few times a week, “hey, check your planner;” “hey, check your planner.”

And there will be teachers who say “that's not my job.” Okay, but do you want your students to succeed? And you could just sit down and plan a week's worth of reminders for your class. I do that with reminders myself and just put in “check your planner” four or five times. “Hey, remember check your planner!” “Hey, have you looked at your planner lately?” “Hey, what's going on in your planner today?”

And just help your students establish this habit, because, too often, we think, “Well, I can do it on my own, so they should be able to do it,” and that's really not the right way to go about this. If you have students who are struggling, the goal is to help them stop struggling, not to let them drown.

And so, I really recommend that you give them some time in class to look at their planner. Not necessarily fill it all out, but at least to look at it, so that they know what's coming up. And to send them some messages through a text messaging system, if you can, to say, “hey, time to check your planner!”

Now here's the way that students can use this: we have been building up a set of steps for you; we've been giving you a bunch of tools. Follow those steps, use those tools! Time management is absolutely critical to success in our modern world - critical.

You can't get by not knowing what's coming up next, and being able to plan out your time, that's part of your time management. But looking at the plan regularly is also part of time management, and if you're not looking at it, why did you spend all that time filling out your planner, you know? Do you want to waste twenty-five dollars on a planner just because it was a pretty planner, or because it was a gorgeous leather-bound planner that was maybe fifty dollars? Do you want to waste that money? Do you want to waste that time? Or do you want to actually use that planner and that time?

And it really does require a shift for some folks, because the idea of using a planner never occurred to them.

But it's occurred to you, hasn't it?

Dinur: Right, the idea behind managing your time is so that you feel like there are fewer fires to put out. You're not feeling as rushed; you're not feeling as hectic; you're not feeling as stressed. Hopefully, because you've managed your time, you're managing your energy and you're able to accomplish everything that you want and need to get done, at a level that you are happy with.

But again, I mentioned the idea of routines. Adam also mentioned it with exercising. Routines need two basic things: they need repetition and they need consistency. And developing routines takes a lot of thinking initially. It's going to seem like another thing that you've got to worry about. But once it becomes automatic and you're not thinking about it, you're going to be amazed at just how much more time you have in your day, how much more energy you have - and hopefully you'll be accomplishing your goals at a rate that you're happy with.

Adam: Now that brings us to the end of Episode 15! If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends. We're always hoping to get new subscribers so we can reach and help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android, and we're hosted on blubrry.com. Also, we'd really appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Dinur: Be sure to join us for next week's Episode 16, when Adam and I talk about how to move past motivation to action, and how to train yourself to do the work you need to do, no motivation needed.

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

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