

time hacking for teachers

the ultimate handbook for increased
productivity and endless summer

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An Introduction To Time Hacking

In an effort to continuously serve the teachers who make use of our resources, we occasionally send out emails asking folks about the greatest challenges that they're facing in their classrooms so that we can focus our efforts accordingly. The responses we've received have inspired many of our most popular materials – ranging from the “CounterPunch” counterargument lesson to Taylor Swift infused analytical models.

But one particular challenge appears *every* time we send this survey out – a challenge that is *always* the most popular, and that is most often neglected. Here are a few sample responses to give you an idea:

*“My biggest challenge this year is finding the **time** to teach literature instead of informational text.”*

*“Finding enough **time** to create lessons, assessments, and give quality feedback.”*

*“Probably the biggest challenge faced by classroom teachers today is **time**... time is taken away from the classroom for administrative activities, including training for teachers during their instructional time.”*

*“The biggest challenges I'm facing have to do with **time**... there is never enough!”*

*“Of course, **time** is the de facto answer. But what can TeachArgument really do about that? Hab.”*

It's no surprise that “time” is the most widely expressed challenge associated with good teaching. After all, almost *every* facet of teaching is tied to time in some manner; time for planning, time for writing or reviewing the curriculum, time for unpacking standards, time to grade and grade and grade, time for professional development, time for parent phone calls and emails, time for committees and liaisons... and, of course, time to teach.

This handbook represents a careful effort to “hack” the various tasks that most often crowd our time. We will explore best practices for becoming *less* busy and *more* productive – with student learning at the forefront of every consideration. Wherever possible, we will include templates and concrete samples of the practices we suggest – all in the spirit of ensuring that this handbook is *practical*, and that your time is well spent from here on out.

But before we begin, a word of caution for the über ambitious. It is quite unlikely that *every* strategy in this handbook will work for you. In fact, you may find one or two strategies in here that you simply *despise* – and that's okay. We encourage you to embrace the techniques that you find practical, and that effortlessly integrate to your life. If you find yourself likening a strategy to fitting a square peg in a round hole... put down the hammer and find another peg.

As Mark Twain finely put it, “the secret of getting ahead is getting started.” Without any further ado, let's get to it.

The Pareto Principle

One of the fundamental premises that guide the thinking behind many of the strategies in this book is known as the “Pareto Principle.” This idea, first suggested by Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, is popularly referred to as the “80 – 20” rule, and “the law of the vital few.”

In short, it states that **80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes.**

This, of course, is not always the case, and rings much truer in some industries than others.

In business, this often translates to “80% of your sales come from 20% of your clients,” or “80% of your new customers come from 20% of your marketing efforts.” For folks in business, the tricky part becomes (#1) determining where that 20% is so that it can become a larger focus, and (#2) decide the 80%’s juice is worth the squeeze.

So what about education? Consider the following questions:

- Can 80% of your class discussions be attributed to 20% of the individuals in your class?
- Are 80% of parent communications associated with 20% of your student population?
- Is 80% of student growth (as measured by test scores) the result of 20% of the instruction that they’re exposed to?
- Does 80% of student mastery come from 20% of the learning tasks that they’re asked to engage with?
- Do 80% of student errors result from 20% of the possible misunderstandings?

By and large, we find ourselves able to nod “yes” to most of these hypothetical statistics. It’s easy to imagine the five students, in a class of twenty-five, that “run the show.” It’s just as easy to imagine the five students who will cause 80% of behavioral issues. Can you think of the one lesson this week that will certainly outshine the other four? The majority of students’ errors, whether in writing or in mathematical computation, that stem from the same few missteps?

But identifying the Pareto Principle in action is only the first in a series of steps that will ultimately buy you more time *and* make you a more effective teacher. Once you’re able to point out the areas of your life – professional and otherwise – that comprise of that valuable “20%,” you must determine (#1) how to make better use of these areas, and (#2) what can be trimmed for the less-potent “80%” to make your practices leaner and stronger.

The page that follows contains a template for identifying these areas, for reflecting on the value of each respective task, and for increasing your students’ *learning* while decreasing your *workload*. Use this template to complete a “time audit” for the focus areas most pertinent to your practice.

Suggested focus areas: *student learning, grading, lesson planning, collaboration with colleagues, professional development, parent communications.*

The Pareto Principle: Time Audit

SAMPLE

Focus Area: Student Learning	
A practice that typically takes 20% of your time and yields 80% of your results	A practice that typically takes 80% of your time but only yields 20% of your results
<p>Socratic Circle Discussions!</p> <p>We do these in class once a week, and they seem to really get the students thinking. Their comments are most insightful during these discussions, and their understanding of content is heightened after participating.</p>	<p>Homework Packets.</p> <p>At the end of each week, students are required to turn in a packet of worksheets that they completed throughout the week. The worksheets correspond with the readings, are easy to answer for students who read, and are very time consuming (for students to complete, and for me to grade!)</p>
What are the implications of doing this <u>more</u> often?	What are the implications of doing this <u>less</u> often?
<p>Students would have more opportunities to engage in critical thinking through discourse with their peers. I could replace our weekly (and time consuming) homework packet review with one of these discussions... or maybe even ask students to extend their discussions online for homework <i>instead</i> of assigning a homework packet. (That would heighten learning <i>and</i> save me from having to grade those awful packets!)</p>	<p>The packets make up a large percentage of the grades in my gradebook. Perhaps I can replace those by integrating grades from our discussions. I also feel like these packets serve to reward students who are willing to do the work, and who spend more time getting to know the reading... but I don't think students will learn any less not having to do these packets. I'll also save myself a ton of grading.</p>
How is this going to impact my practice?	
<p>By integrating more discussions, and by integrating <i>graded</i> discussions, I'll be able to give students a greater opportunity to learn with their peers and to engage in critical discourse...</p> <p>By assigning less of the homework packets I'm accustomed to, I'll save the kids from doing rote busywork (and, where possible, replacing it with valuable tasks like online discussions instead)... <i>and</i> I'll save myself from the mindless process of grading these worksheets.</p>	

The Pareto Principle: Time Audit

Focus Area: Student Learning	
A practice that typically takes 20% of your time and yields <u>80%</u> of your results	A practice that typically takes 80% of your time but only yields <u>20%</u> of your results
What are the implications of doing this <u>more</u> often?	What are the implications of doing this <u>less</u> often?
How is this going to impact my practice?	

About “Flow” (and “Endless Summer”)

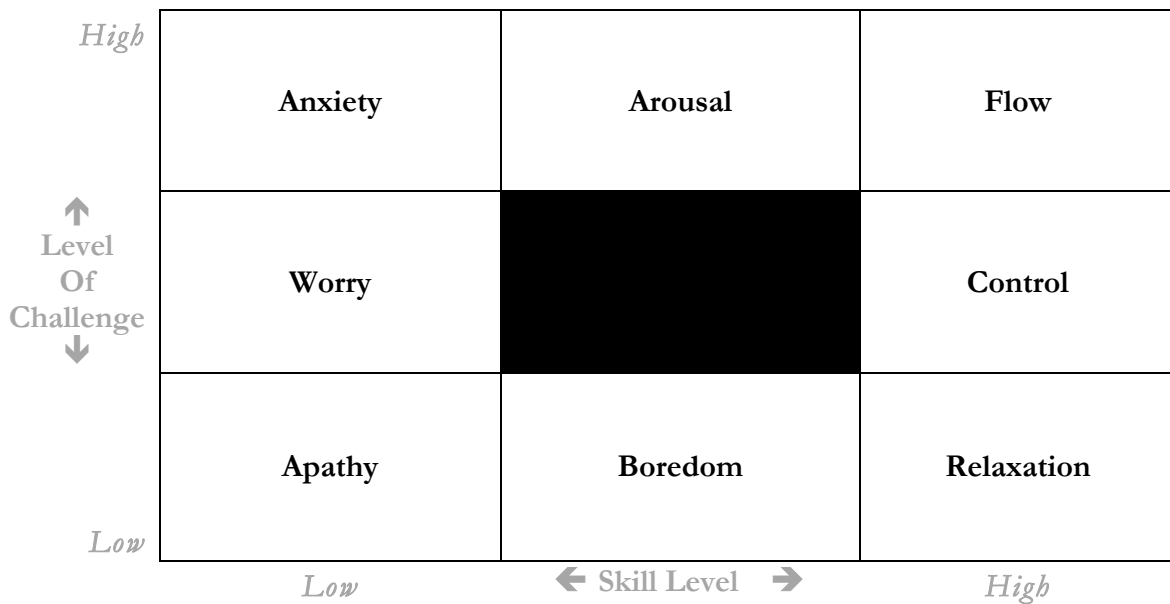
The sections that follow will provide a battery of strategies that promise to help streamline the facets of your professional life that you’ve identified in your “time audit,” but before we get there, here is one final philosophical lens through which to consider the manner in which you manage your time and optimize your productivity.

A psychologist named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is credited for naming it “flow” in research literature on human motivation, although it is better known colloquially as “being in the zone.” In short, “flow” is the state of achieving a single-minded focus on something in such a manner that time seems to fly by. This often happens when reading a good book, or when playing a video game, or when engaging in a great conversation, or when a lesson you’ve implemented with your students absolutely hits the nail on the head. (Every teacher knows that when students appear shocked that a period is already ending, the lesson is a major hit... and, conversely, when students complain about time seeming to have come to a halt, the lesson is a painful miss.)

For our purposes, “flow” is interesting because it’s enjoyable, and because it has the power to transform many of the tasks that presently causing anxiety in your life into pleasurable experiences that have you wondering where the time has flown.

The graph below demonstrates how the level of challenge associated with a task (i.e. how hard it is to do), as well as the skill level you possess (i.e. how able you are to meet the challenge) impact motivation and, ultimately, create “flow.”

The page that follows includes a template on which you should reflect on the areas of your practice that achieve “flow,” as well as those that do not.



Flow Audit
*****SAMPLE*****

The template below has been filled out in an effort to model the kind of reflective thinking you should engage in using the Flow Audit template:

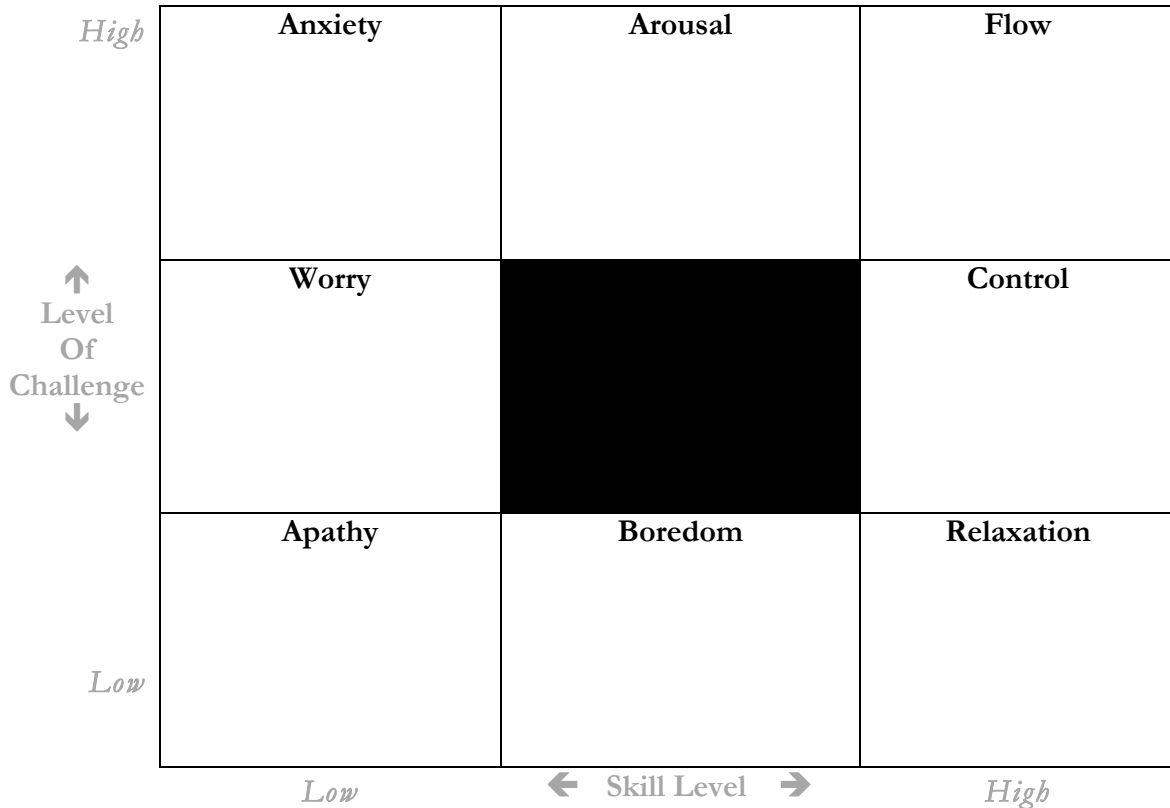
↑ Level Of Challenge ↓	<i>High</i>	Anxiety <i>When I have to grade 150 of the same, long, redundant tests – and the marking period ends <u>tomorrow</u>.</i>	Arousal <i>When the students’ essays are so interesting I can’t wait to read more – and share their work with my colleagues.</i>	Flow <i>When the work I’m grading is creatively completed, and my grading practice is streamlined.</i>
		Worry <i>When I have to run 150 of the same test through the Scantron machine by <u>tomorrow</u>.</i>		Control <i>When I grade ten creatively written essays during study hall as part of my morning routine.</i>
	<i>Low</i>	Apathy <i>When I have to grade 150 of the same test, but <u>no one</u> cares about the feedback or the grades.</i>	Boredom <i>When I have to grade 150 of the same test – with a deadline of one week that I set for myself.</i>	Relaxation <i>When I have to grade 150 interesting and well-written essays – with a deadline I set for myself.</i>
	<i>Low</i>	← Skill Level →		<i>High</i>

Reflecting On The “Flow Audit”
Any common characteristics you notice for anxiety, worry, apathy, and boredom?
Common characteristics I noticed: these are typically boring (because the grading is redundant), painful (because of the redundancy or lack of creativity), and time consuming (especially if under a time constraint!)
Any common characteristics you notice for relaxation, control, arousal, and FLOW?
These seem much more pleasant – creative or well written essays are more fun to grade, and easy to “get lost in.” There is also much less time pressure here – better planning and organization on my part.
How can these findings impact your practice in a positive way?
I can make it a point to give students a greater degree of choice in their writing topics – not only will they enjoy the assignment more, but I will be happier to grade them (and will grade them faster!). I can also make it a point to schedule deadlines at appropriate times throughout the marking period – so I don’t create a stressful time crunch for myself...!

Flow Audit

Choose an assignment or task that you've experienced in both positive and negative ways... (for instance, sometimes essays are fun to grade – and other times, they're the source of burdensome anxiety!!).

Then, complete the “flow audit” below.



Reflecting On The “Flow Audit”	
Any common characteristics you notice for anxiety, worry, apathy, and boredom?	
Any common characteristics you notice for relaxation, control, arousal, and FLOW?	
How can these findings impact your practice in a positive way?	

Batching

“Batching” is a term that has been popularly circulated amongst productivity gurus in the business world for years. It is precisely what it sounds like – the batching of tasks into sets or groups. This is the same basic premise that boosted productivity all over the world when Ford Motor Company introduced the first ever assembly line... a tried and true tactic that we often neglect in our day-to-day lives.

So, how can *you* use the power of batching to boost your productivity and free up *hours* of your time?

First, identify the “batchable” tasks in your life. *Then*, decide *how* you will batch those tasks.

The model below demonstrates how this looks in practice, and the blank template on the page that follows provides a space for you to create your own plans for batching.

Batching Plan ***Sample***		
The time consuming / redundant tasks	My plan for batching the identified tasks	What I will <u>avoid</u> to make this successful
Making copies. I run out to the copier before most classes. I usually have to wait in line, and I’m hard pressed for time, so it’s stressful <i>every time</i> .	I am going to make ALL of my copies for the following week on Friday afternoon. There are no lines at the copier, I’ll be fully prepared for the week, and I’ll save myself tons of idle time.	In order for this to actually save me time, I’m going to have to avoid making last minute copies. I’ll do something <i>else</i> with that time!
Grading quizzes. I keep these vocabulary quizzes with me at all times and grade them when I can, but the process usually lingers for 2+ weeks.	I’m going to set aside twenty minutes to grade them all at once, which will happen quickly when I’m “in the groove” and have the answer key on hand. I’ll also grade each <u>section</u> of the quizzes simultaneously instead of “resetting” my process with every student’s individual quiz.	I will have to avoid procrastinating grading, and I will have to avoid distractions when I set out to score <i>all</i> of these quizzes.
Emails. I check email when I wake up, when I get to work, in between (and sometimes during) classes, after school, when I get home, and before bed. Sometimes <i>more</i> .	I’m going to check my email at the end of the school day, and I’m going to respond to <i>everything</i> before leaving the building. I will let students know about this policy so that they don’t expect answers to redundant questions about homework from me.	I will have to avoid the impulse to check my email fifty times a day. I will have to come to terms with the fact that urgent matters will find me regardless of my email habits.
Lesson Plans. I write them all week long, during my prep. I focus on days rather than preps.	I will write two weeks of plans for a single class (i.e. for English 2) during my prep on Friday, before I make all of my weekly copies.	I will avoid the urge to rewrite plans during the week. I will avoid distractions on Friday!

Batching Template

Use the template below to identify the “batchable” tasks in your life before deciding what your approach to “batching” these tasks will be.

Remember, thoughtful batching is one of the easiest ways to boost productivity and to “make time,” but it requires deliberate planning and a willingness to take action!

Batching Plan		
The time consuming / redundant tasks	My plan for batching the identified tasks	What I will <u>avoid</u> to make this successful

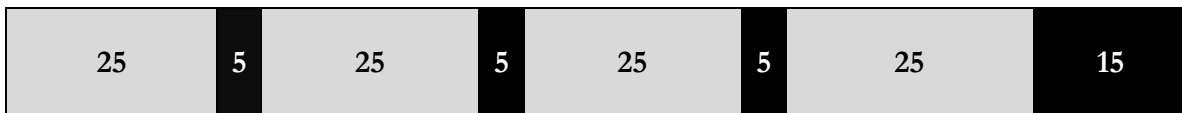
The Pomodoro Technique

This productivity technique is named after the famous tomato-shaped “Pomodoro” kitchen timer. (“Pomodoro” literally means “*tomato*” in Italian.) The popularization of this method is largely credited to Francesco Cirillo in the 1980’s, but is incredibly popular today among entrepreneurs, programmers, and other individuals whose job it is to sustain a sharp focus for long periods of time.

The premise is simple: people are more productive (i.e. able to maintain a sharper focus, greater “mental agility,” etc.) when their work is supplemented with frequent breaks. As such, the classic pomodoro technique suggests is as follows:

- Step one:** Determine the task that will demand your attention.
- Step two:** Set a timer to 25 minutes. (A traditional timer is encouraged, because the ticking sound is said to induce a state of flow, and the physical practice of setting a timer encourages your brain to commit!)
- Step three:** Get to work! No distractions are allowed! (If a distraction presents itself, postpone it until the soonest break – or write it down!)
- Step four:** When the twenty-five minutes are up (i.e. when the timer rings), make a checkmark on a piece of paper indicating the completion of one cycle.
- Step five:** Take a five-minute break before repeating the process. Do this until have completed four complete cycles... then take a *longer* break.

The breakdown of your time and effort will look something like this, with the **grey** indicating *work* and the **black** indicating a *break*:



A few things to keep in mind as you consider how the Pomodoro Technique might serve you well:

- This strength of this strategy is in the impact it has on your focus and stamina. As such, the work you do in each “pomodoro cycle” is likely to be more productive than the work you do piecemeal throughout the week. (In other words, you’ll grade more essays in two pomodoro hours than you would in many more hours that are fragmented throughout the day, the week, or even the month.)
- That being said, it’s important to keep in mind that this strategy is most effective for tasks that require a significant amount of your cognitive energy for long periods of time. That typically translates to two tasks for teachers: (#1) intensive grading, and (#2) lesson planning. (Is it possible to grade essays just as quickly on-the-go? Yes, but you’ll almost certainly sacrifice something in the quality of your scoring and your feedback.)

Pomodoro Time Sheet

Use this template to track your productivity using the Pomodoro Technique. (Helpful for tracking your efficiency over longer periods of time – *and* equally motivating!)

Task	25 Min	5 Min	25 Min	5 Min	25 Min	5 min	25 Min	15 Min
Task:	25	5	25	5	25	5	25	15
Progress Log								
Task:	25	5	25	5	25	5	25	15
Progress Log								
Task:	25	5	25	5	25	5	25	15
Progress Log								
Task:	25	5	25	5	25	5	25	15
Progress Log								
Task:	25	5	25	5	25	5	25	15
Progress Log								
Task:	25	5	25	5	25	5	25	15
Progress Log								

Eat The Frogs First

“To do lists” are nifty little tools that help us to remember what we have on our plate, but they are typically only used for that and nothing else – a running (and often dreaded) list of tasks that seems to only get *longer*.

This strategy, known as “eating the frog,” makes an effort to optimize the manner in which your to do list is written, and the manner in which you take action on that list. As you may have already imagined, “eating the frog” is a metaphor for getting that one, awful thing done *first*. This has proven to be a powerful strategy because (#1) you’ll feel like a million bucks once the most dreaded task on your list is complete, (#2) that feeling will inspire you to tackle the remaining, more pleasant items on your list.

The thing about frogs is – they grow, they’re often evasive, and the longer you procrastinate eating them, the better they become at slinking away. *Eat the frogs first!*

To get started, use the optimized to-do list template below.

Things I don't want to do, but <u>need</u> to do. (The frogs!)
Things you want to do, and <u>need</u> to do.
Things you want to do, but don't actually need to do.
Things you don't want to do that don't actually need to get done.

Streaking

No. Not that kind of streaking.

Streaks – as in, a consecutive accumulation of accomplishments – are incredibly powerful motivators *and* habit builders. This idea was popularized by Jerry Seinfeld’s “don’t break the chain” approach; each day that Seinfeld wrote new material, he drew a big red ‘X’ on his calendar – something that turned out to be quite gratifying, but also stirred the compulsion to avoid ‘breaking the chain’ of X’s on the page.

Couple this with the knowledge that it takes 21 days to form, alter, or break a habit (as supported by loads of psychology research, with several relatively obvious caveats), and you have a potentially life-altering productivity technique in your repertoire!

To get started, consider the three steps to effective habit formation and “streaking” as detailed below.

Step One: Select A Habit
<p>The importance of choosing your habit wisely cannot be overstated. Human motivation is a finite resource, and adopting a handful of habits might sound tempting – but it’s very unlikely to work. Instead, focus on identifying what Charles Duhigg describes as “keystone habits” in his book, <i>The Power Of Habit: Why We Do What We Do In Life and Business</i>. In short, a keystone habit is one that lays the groundwork for other, similar habits to follow suit. An example of this would be working out – a keystone habit that often leads to a healthy diet, although healthy eating is not explicitly indicated in the keystone habit itself.</p>
<p>A sample keystone habit that enhances productivity for teachers is that of consistently setting a certain amount of time aside each day, typically indicating the time, place, and purpose (ending each school day with 15 minutes of “reading,” or “grading,” or <i>something</i>). Other popular keystone habits include writing, meditation, making the bed, listening to audiobooks while jogging/driving, reading/grading while on the stationary bike, and so on.</p>
<p>The <i>reasonable</i> details of your habit:</p>

Streaking (continued)

Step Two: Choose A Habit Tracker

The most rudimentary form of habit tracking is a simple calendar on which you can draw a big, fat, red “X” each time your habit is accomplished. The physical act of drawing the “X” becomes gratifying in and of itself, and the visual representation of your success only adds to its motivational power.

Digital calendars (i.e. “iCal” and “Google Calendar”) also do the trick, but if you’re looking to move into the digital realm, a wide variety of habit-tracking apps may prove to be even better suited for your needs and your personality.

A simple search in any App Store will yield great results. Simply search for “habit tracking,” “streaks,” and “don’t break the chain.”

At the time of this writing, the iOS app “Productive: Habit Tracker” is, hands down, the *best* habit tracking app on the market. “Productive” allows users to schedule reminders, to view visual representations of habit streaks, and even calculates the statistics.

Step Three: When The Going Gets Tough

Let’s get this clear – habit formation and alteration is no easy task. Chances are that you’ll have a difficult time getting to 21 days. The truth is, most folks have a hard time getting past day 2. (Our brains are good at reminding us that we can always just start *tomorrow*...)

To successfully forge your habit, consider the three techniques that follow:

1. Recognition

As you consider deviating from your streak (or postponing getting started), take a moment to remind yourself that *this is it*. The going has already gotten tough. Caving in now will only make it easier to cave in later. Realize this, and move forward like a winner.

2. Reflection

Ask yourself: “How will I feel about this? How have I felt about this in the past? How will I feel if I don’t follow through on this? What am I losing in doing so?”

3. Projection

Imagine your life one, two, or even three years from now. How has this habit helped to better shape your world? Has it been worth it? If so – get a move on! If not – perhaps it’s time to reevaluate the habit in question.

Total Collapse

As is the case with all things of value, your time should be carefully considered – the manner in which you save it, spend it, and possibly squander it. The following strategy encourages you to account for each moment in your day before seeking avenues for “optimizing your spending.”

Begin by conducting a “time audit.” You can do this in real-time (i.e. carry the “time audit” schedule found on the proceeding page along with you throughout the day and fill it in accordingly) *or* you can complete this at each day’s end (somewhat less accurate, but far more convenient). Do this with as much detail as you can muster for three consecutive days.

Once your time audit is complete, take some time to analyze your findings. Grab a set of highlights or colored pencils and identify the following trends in your days:

- Are there any tasks or time slots that are purely immovable? (An example of this would be that class you teach, first period, every day – no ifs, ands, or buts.) Highlight these blocks in **red** – they aren’t going anywhere.
- Are there any tasks that are essential to your success, but that lend themselves to some flexibility with regard to when or where they take place? (Examples of this would be grading papers, reading for a graduate class, or writing lesson plans.) Highlight these blocks in **orange**.
- Are there any tasks in your day that are entirely untethered to your schedule? These are most likely tasks or activities that you engage in for leisure purposes, “time permitting.” (Examples of these tasks might be reading for pleasure or watching TV.) Highlight these blocks in **yellow**.
- Categorize any remaining tasks using different color highlighters or pencils using (1) their necessity, and (2) their time-based flexibility, as qualifiers. (Examples of remaining tasks might include playing board games with your family, mowing the lawn, and so on.)
- Make a list of what’s missing. Wishing you had a morning jog in that 5:00 am time slot? Jot that down. Wishing you had some time to catch up on that stack of books that has taken residence on your nightstand? Jot that down too.

What you have before is a *heat-map* of your day – where you’re locked down, where you’ve got some wiggle room, and where you’re ready for “collapse.” Now here’s the hack: identify any and all possible combinations of the blocks you’ve identified and colored where multiple tasks or activities can be *collapsed* into each other.

Note that you’re looking for *all* possibilities – not just optimal or fun possibilities. The purpose here is to find innovative ways to smash your time together – and that requires a little risk-taking! Also note that just because you’ve highlighted certain blocks as “red” (i.e.

fixed, immovable) doesn't mean that you can't potentially layer "orange" or "yellow" blocks on top.

You may find it easier to cut out the various blocks of your day, to lay the tasks out on a flat surface, and to layer them in this fashion. Again – keep in mind that the purpose of this activity is to build innovative recipes that boost productivity by collapsing tasks into one another. If you can achieve this even *once*, you'll experience a tremendous boost in your productivity *and* you'll open up *hours* of time that were previously accounted for.

As an example, consider the following "recipes" that have hacked hundreds of hours back into my life:

Driving (commuting to work, etc.)	Listening to audiobooks, "reading" for pleasure Listening to student work (required students to read and record the speeches they wrote), and providing voice-based feedback Making necessary phone calls (i.e. to parents who knew I was on my way to another meeting)
Watching Sunday Night Football	Grading vocabulary quizzes (during commercial breaks, boring plays, and halftime)
Cardio on the elliptical or stationary bike	Grading essays; reading books and magazines (for work and pleasure)
Cafeteria duty	My new favorite place to hold "writing conferences" (instead of during my prep, or before and after school!)

Some of these recipes may require a little retrofitting – for instance, I wasn't in the habit of listening to audiobooks until I realized how much time doing so could save me... and I wasn't in the habit of asking students to submit audio materials (i.e. recordings of their speeches) until I realized how beneficial this strategy would be for all parties involved. Now, Three quick points before we move forward:

1. Not all of these recipes will work for you. In fact, if *one* recipe works for you, you've unlocked a treasure trove of time that's yours for the taking. (Audiobooks aren't for everyone... neither is grading essays on a stationary bike... neither is holding writing conferences in a loud cafeteria that smells like fries and sweat.) Find the recipes that appeal to you and give them a whirl.
2. As you begin to unlock hours in your day by overclocking existing activities, be very wary of how you spend your newly acquired time. It's imperative to guard against other forces that will seek to creep into your day – which will leave you busier than you were *before* you completed your time audit. It's also imperative that you reserve swathes of time in your day for yourself – that means "sacred" blocks of time that are free from hyper-productivity (and the *brain drain* that comes with "collapsing" tasks into one another).

3. It's likely that your time audit will help you to uncover areas in your life that *don't* lend themselves to "collapse." Some of these things, like playing with your kids, are sacred – and should be guarded at all costs... while others, like going grocery shopping for two hours on Sunday morning, you might *love* to collapse, discard, or replace, but simply don't know how.

The sections that follows will explore avenues for outsourcing and automating these pesky tasks – the *mosquitoes* of productivity.

Time Audit Form

Time	Day One	Day Two	Day Three
<i>Pre-5:00 am</i>			
<i>5:00 am to 5:30am</i>			
<i>5:30 am to 6:00 am</i>			
<i>6:00 am to 6:30 am</i>			
<i>6:30 am to 7:00 am</i>			
<i>7:00 am to 7:30 am</i>			
<i>7:30 am to 8:00 am</i>			
<i>8:00 am to 8:30 am</i>			
<i>8:30 am to 9:00 am</i>			
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<i>7:30 pm to 8:00 pm</i>			
<i>8:00 pm to 8:30 pm</i>			
<i>8:30 pm to 9:00 pm</i>			
<i>9:00 pm to 9:30 pm</i>			
<i>9:30 pm to 10:00 pm</i>			
<i>10:00 pm to 10:30 pm</i>			
<i>10:30 pm to 11:00 pm</i>			
<i>11:00 pm to 11:30 pm</i>			
<i>11:30 pm to 12:00 am</i>			
<i>12:00 am to 12:30 am</i>			
<i>12:30 am to 1:00 am</i>			
<i>1:00 am to 1:30 am</i>			
<i>Post-1:30 am</i>			

Outsourcing Work, In Theory and Practice

A tactic that has been tried and true in the world of business is that of *outsourcing*. In the world of entrepreneurship, the thinking is fairly straightforward – why waste three hours engaged in a task that *anyone* can do for you at a low cost, such as responding to email or social networking, when you can spend those hours doing something exclusive to your skillset, and something far more lucrative.

Fortunately for us, this brand of thinking can be applied to education in novel ways – several of which we will explore as thought experiments, others of which will change the way you “do business” in your classroom.

1. Outsourcing: A Thought Experiment

Let’s begin with a thought experiment, shall we?

At the time of this writing, several websites exist for the sole purpose of streamlining the “outsourcing” process for anyone. One of the most popular, Upwork.com, allows for the hiring of Virtual Assistants to help with almost any task imaginable – from developing a mobile app to writing blog articles, from website development to graphics experts. What’s more, many of these virtual assistants are based in countries that promise to get you more bang for your buck, considering conversion rates and the strength of the dollar.

It’s important that you are aware of the existence of services such as Upwork.com, whether or not you are able to take advantage of its services. Simply perusing the site and considering how it might make you more productive will have lasting, positive effects.

Should you hire a Virtual Assistant in the Philippines to grade all of your research papers for five bucks an hour? ...No, probably not, but the sheer existence of such an option opens other doors that you may not have even considered before.

Is there any kind of scoring that *can* be outsourced? An assessment that doesn’t require the personal touch of an essay, but that requires more consideration than a Scantron machine can afford? Are there any kinds of data analysis that you would prefer done for you? Any emails you’d like to have drafted – for students, parents, or colleagues?

Another low-cost and compelling iteration of these services is Fiverr.com. Its premise? A wide array of services, ranging from voiceovers to web development to singing jingles – for only five bucks. If you’ve ever spent hours writing and recording a catchy jingle for your class, or developing a logo for your class website, and so on, the thought of trading a mere five dollars for all of those hours likely feels like a godsend.

Before moving forward, take some time to explore each of these websites (Fiverr.com, Upwork.com) and consider the role that they might play in boosting your productivity. And remember, we’re still in “thought experiment” mode. Always respect student confidentiality, and always be sure you’re working within the parameters of state and district policy.

2. From Theory To Practice

Let's consider what "outsourcing" looks like for teachers when it's done well. The kneejerk response to outsourcing is typically: "I could never do that! It's my professional responsibility to do *everything!*" As such, (#1) the kneejerk response to teaching is often correlated with enormous busyness, stress, and burnout; (#2) practices that are adopted in colleges across the world, such as having Teaching Assistants who grade the bulk of student papers, are forgotten; and (#3) things are outsourced anyway, but with far less efficiency... i.e. outsourcing lesson planning to TeachersPayTeachers.com.

So let's start there. There are a number of websites that provide lesson plans, classroom materials, and other such services. (TeachArgument.com does this with engaging ELA lessons... TeachersPayTeachers.com does this with a wider array of content areas and grade levels... the list goes on.)

Typically, when we see a great looking lesson for sale online, our first thought is more likely to be: "That's a great idea! I should build something like that next week!" when in fact, our reaction *should* be: "Wow. Five dollars is a bargain. That would take me at least an hour to make on my own, maybe two – and it wouldn't look nearly as polished."

This line of thinking is normal. In fact, some very interesting studies of human psychology have shown that humans are more motivated by the fear of losing money than the desire to earn more. (That explains our compulsion to spend a few hours building an activity that we could buy for a few bucks, doesn't it?)

But, if you repurposed just one hour on Sunday for tutoring at a rate of \$60+ / hour, you would have generated enough buying power to purchase an entire month's worth of stellar lesson plans. *This* is the model entrepreneurs seek to follow, optimizing the manner in which they spend their time so as to earn more money and increase productivity. In short, it's brilliant if carefully executed, and you should certainly give it a whirl.

3. Your Interns

Every now and again, businesses are graced with an intern or two – and those interns are used to boost productivity by shifting certain menial responsibilities (i.e. posting to social media, making some copies, taking notes during meetings, etc.) to them.

While we are typically view our students strictly as cherubs who cherish learning (...or something like that...), they also happen to be a great resource for boosting productivity. Just imagine how productive you would be if you had 25, 50, or even 100+ interns. Now, take a moment to realize that you *do* ... and consider what kinds of changes you can make to your classroom procedures that will bolster productivity, reduce stress, and free time.

To clarify – this is *not* a suggestion that you require students to engage in non-educational menial tasks (i.e. organizing your desk), nor is it a suggestion that high caliber responsibilities (i.e. grading essays) be shifted elsewhere.

Rather, review the following responsibility shifts (each of which is aligned with the upper-echelon of next-generation, student-centered teacher evaluation frameworks) and consider how they might be adopted for *your* classroom.

Previous Teacher Responsibility	Revised, As Outsourced To Students
Creating bulletin boards before school, after school, or in the summertime.	An interactive bulletin board project that is assigned to alternating groups at the start of each month. The focus of the board can shift based on learning goals, units, themes, or developments in student work.
Updating the class website, especially for freshly assigned homework.	A weekly “online moderator” is given the credentials, or editing-permissions, to access a class-based Twitter account <i>or</i> an ongoing Google Doc. The moderator is responsible for updating the document with homework at the end of each class – and at the end of the week, it is the moderator’s responsibility to pass the credentials / editing-access on to the next moderator on the class roster.
Keeping track of make-up work – who missed what, and where the work “lives.”	Dedicate one wall or bulletin board to “make up work.” Attach folders to the wall and label them for each day of the week. Ask a rotating “student facilitator” to keep these stocked with each day’s work, or simply stock the folders yourself when handing out student materials. Remind students that it is their responsibility to track and complete make-up work – and include a reminder on the bulletin board.
Holding one-on-one conferences with all students to reflect on their progress.	Select several students to form a panel of “experts,” and arrange for 1-on-1 conferences to be held with their peers... <i>Or</i> , engage the entire class in 1-on-1 peer conferencing (random partners) as you conference with students as well.
Sending parents emails to communicate how their children are progressing in your class.	On a monthly, bi-monthly, or quarterly basis, ask students to review all of the work they

	<p>have completed thus far, the growth they have shown, the areas they need to work on, and how this is reflected in their grades. Then, ask students to compose a reflective analysis – and to <u>email</u> that analysis to both you AND <u>their parents</u>.</p>
<p>Creating highly engaging and content rich lessons – i.e. stations based lessons that take hours upon hours to craft!</p>	<p>Assign research topics to small groups with the end-goal of teaching their peers about the topic through a ten-minute, self-running “station.” In this manner, the students (<i>instead</i> of the teacher) will create each of the stations that the “stations carousel” will be comprised of.</p>

Automate Everything

At this point, we have explored the art of collapsing (e.g. reading while working out), outsourcing (e.g. asking students to email reflective progress reports to their parents), and even safeguarding (e.g. the importance of maintaining “sacred” time for you to relax, to spend time with your family, etc.) the various tasks and activities that continuously draw from your time, energy, and willpower. What’s left to consider?

This section will focus on strategies for automation – for tasks you can’t quite collapse, and that don’t quite lend themselves to outsourcing.

To begin, let’s consider what we mean by “automation.” This is, in short, the art and science of making something automatic. A rudimentary example of this is the timer you’ve set (or have seen set) on a lamp (or Christmas lights, or coffee machine) to trigger at the same time each day. The result? By automating your lights, or your coffee, or whatever it is that you choose to automate, your cognitive load is lightened.

A note about “cognitive load,” because it’s interesting and pertinent to teaching:

The term “cognitive load” comes from cognitive psychology and refers to the total amount of mental effort being activated in working memory. John Sweller popularized this theory in the 1980s with his work on problem solving, but the implications for education, learning, and life are fairly straightforward: *if you can lighten the cognitive load for learners, you can heighten their learning*. This can be done in any number of ways – i.e. very careful lesson design – but the inverse is also true: *excessive cognitive load can negatively impact learning, task completion, and so on*.

With this in mind, I encourage you to fill in the following blanks:

- (1) Students who use cell phones or laptops in class are able to multitask. As a result, their cognitive load is _____ and the impact on their learning is _____.
- (2) Children have less general knowledge than adults, and amateurs have less content-area knowledge than their professional counterparts. As such, both children and amateurs have cognitive loads that are _____ than their counterparts.

In short – multitasking, such as worrying about text messages, social media, and so on – increases the cognitive load, gives individuals *more* to worry and think about, and thus, has a negative impact on learning. Likewise, individuals who have less general knowledge also have a heavier cognitive load, and they must work harder (cognitively) to accomplish the same tasks as their more experienced counterparts.

This is an awesome theory to consider when approaching the use of technology (i.e. how can the internet be used to lessen, rather than increase, students’ cognitive loads?). It’s *also* an awesome theory to consider as you seek to make yourself a more efficient human being!

A variety of new devices and tools are available that make the automation process a piece of cake. The most productive, efficient, and successful folks in the world automate as much as possible so as to free up as much cognitive energy as possible for the stuff that truly matters.

Ever wondered why so many brilliant individuals always wear the same friggin outfit? Ever wondered why Steve Jobs owned an entire wardrobe of black turtlenecks? This trend is largely attributed to an inherent desire to decrease cognitive load – to override the decision-making process associated with selecting a wardrobe at the start of each day. Instead, these brilliant thinkers save their energy (and their reserves of stress-battling brain neurons) for the more meaningful challenges up ahead!

Things you might automate around the house:

- Automate your coffee machine
- Automate lights to turn on and off at specific times, or at sunset / sunrise
- Automate your sprinkler system with an irrigation timer (...this saves me upwards of an hour a day!)
- Automate your dinner with a slow-cooker
- Automate your trips to the grocery store with a grocery delivery service, or with Amazon services such as recurring product subscriptions (i.e. the dog food arrives on the first of every month) or “Amazon Pantry”
- Automate your thermostat with a “smart” thermostat such as the *Nest*

While most of the above household automations do require a minor investment in automation equipment, a number of mobile apps exist that promise to automate your life with minimal cost and effort. At the time of this writing, the best automation app on the market is “IF.”

IF was previously known as “IFTTT,” which stands for If This, Then That. While the name is shortened, “If This, Then That” is still the basic premise for just about *every* automation recipe you’ll be cooking up in the app itself. An easy way to wrap your head around the recipe style is to consider how something as simple as a coffee timer works:

IF it’s 6:30 am, THEN brew my coffee...!

The beauty of the IF app is that it isn’t limited to a piece of hardware you’ve plugged into your wall (although it *can* do that too), but rather, it connects with other apps already on your phone. A few samples of the automations that have saved me hours upon hours through IF:

- IF it’s Sunday afternoon, 3 pm, THEN email me this week’s most popular ‘Education’ and ‘Op/Ed’ articles from The New York Times.
- IF I receive an email from the principal, THEN send me a text message notifying me to check my email as soon as possible...!
- IF I leave my home, THEN offer to calculate the fastest route to school using Google Maps, accounting for any traffic along the way.

IF allows for some *very* creative recipes, especially if you have the technology to support them (i.e. when my FitBit senses that I've woken up, turn on lights and music in the kitchen; when I arrive to or leave school, update a Google Sheet with a timestamp; when I arrive to school, send me a text message reminding me to turn my phone to vibrate; if it's going to snow tomorrow, Tweet "Snow day?").

It's easy to have fun, and even to get carried away with the automations suddenly available at your fingertips – but keep our goal in mind: automate as many tasks as possible so you can reduce your cognitive load and spend your brainpower, effort, energy, and time *elsewhere*.

When Duty Calls

It's easy to suggest that people should "make time" to get more done during the day by simply shuffling their schedule around, especially when coupled with argument that this is something we already do regularly. You found time to watch all those episodes of *Game of Thrones*, didn't you? So why can't you make even a fraction of that time for going to the gym, or grading those essays, or painting that room?

The truth is, "making time" is impossibly difficult. While finding the time to watch a compelling new TV series may feel easy, it should be no surprise – passively absorbing engaging content is a breeze (as opposed to the comparatively substantial efforts necessary for going to the gym, or grading a stack of essays, or painting a room). Further, the time spent watching TV did not materialize from thin air – you didn't "make it," but rather, you sacrificed *something* for it. Perhaps a few hours of sleep, perhaps a home cooked meal, perhaps something else. With this in mind, we must consider how these sacrifices (i.e. the cost of making time) might be minimized to an extent that there is a worthwhile payoff *without* suffering a substantial consequence.

We're not going to talk about techniques for waking up earlier (...put your alarm in another room...), or for minimizing the amount of sleep you need every night (...Google "polyphasic sleep" for a real kick in the pants...). Instead, we're going to discuss an incredibly simple practice that all veteran teachers employ in order to make more time in every single one of their days.

It's an email or a conversation with the principal. And it goes something like this.

"Hi Mr. Prince. I'm hoping to get the kids writing a lot more than in previous years but am finding that it's generating an overwhelming amount of reading for me. Is there any way I can request study hall / in-school suspension / hall duty / etc. as a duty next year? I figure I might be able to hit two birds with one stone that way. Thanks!"

Reasons why this works:

- (1) You have the students' interests at the forefront of your intentions. Any good principal will recognize, respect, and reward this kind of thinking.
- (2) You're requesting a specific kind of work... so you can do *more work*. From a managerial perspective, this is ideal.
- (3) The last thing your principal wants is to reward a lazy person with a "passive" duty (i.e. hall duty) that allows them to "relax."

Remember that the squeaky wheel gets the grease, and in this case, the grease is worth every squeak you can muster. In 45-minute periods, a good prep that allows you to get work done translates to 135 hours per school year that you wouldn't have had otherwise! That's huge!

Staggered Deadlines

The desire to be more productive is typically motivated by several factors, including:

- The wish to reallocate time (i.e. to spend time with family and friends, engaging in a hobby of some kind, or just relaxing *instead* of “busy with work”);
- The deeply gratifying feeling of getting more done – something linked to our human aspiration toward “self actualization;”
- An aversion to the kind of bone-crushing stress that is associated with having too much to do, and not enough time to do it.

As it turns out, the latter point (stress aversion) is one of the most powerful motivators for productivity, rightfully so. Stress sucks, and what’s worse, a “successful living” in modern society seems to cultivate more of it at every turn.

An adage that was popularized by Cyril Northcote Parkinson in the mid-fifties, but that seems to have held true in the research literature, serves as the foundation for the “staggered deadlines” strategy we’ll be discussing momentarily. The adage, now known as “Parkinson’s Law,” states that “work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.”

In other words, if you give yourself a day to grade that stack of quizzes, those quizzes will take a day to grade. If you give yourself a week, the task will *expand* to an entire week instead. If you take a moment to think back to papers or projects that you were assigned in your own academic career, you’ll likely remember a similar experience – assignments due “in a week” were far less stressful than those with similar requirements but given the opportunity to grow troublesome across the span of several months.

In your teaching, that means that assigning a five-page research paper that will be due in two weeks will far less taxing on your students than the same paper due in two *months*. Why? Because we are human!

So, with Parkinson’s Law in mind, consider how you might reduce stress and optimize productivity when it comes to grading student work. There are many variations of this technique that you might brainstorm and employ, but the best practice discussed here is that of establishing *staggered deadlines* for your students.

When we say “staggered deadlines,” we mean giving different sets of students different required due dates for their assignments with one primary intention in mind: to avoid collected a dreaded skyscraper-high stack of papers that will cause you angst and agita for no meaningful reason.

Consider the following scenarios in which staggered deadlines can be used to reduce stress *and* to optimize your productivity:

Opportunity-Based Deadlines

You teach three sections of “English III.” Each class starts a significant “research project” on the same day. Rough drafts are due between the hours of 3 pm and midnight on Thursday. The chart below indicates final drafts’ due dates:

The <u>first</u> twenty students to submit their completed rough drafts earn this deadline.	Final drafts are due by Friday, May 31 st
The <u>next</u> twenty students to submit their completed rough drafts earn this deadline.	Final drafts are due by Wednesday, May 29 th
The <u>last</u> twenty students to submit their completed rough drafts earn this deadline.	Final drafts due by Monday, May 27 th

Staggered Teaching, Staggered Deadlines

You teach three sections of “English III.” Each class will be assigned a significant research project this marking period, but two weeks apart. While one class conducts research, the others will engage in short-story mini-units. The curricular schedule looks something like this:

	Class #1	Class #2	Class #3
April 15 to April 30	Research Unit! Projects Due 4/30!	Short Stories (<i>Mini Unit A</i>)	Short Stories (<i>Mini Unit B</i>)
May 1 to May 15	Short Stories (<i>Mini Unit A</i>)	Research Unit! Projects Due 5/15!	Short Stories (<i>Mini Unit B</i>)
May 16 to May 31	Short Stories (<i>Mini Unit A</i>)	Short Stories (<i>Mini Unit B</i>)	Research Unit! Projects Due 5/30!

Alternating Staggered Deadlines

You teach three sections of “English III.” Each class will be assigned an essay on the same day, but will have different amounts of time in which to complete their final drafts. These times alternate with each assignment.

	Class #1	Class #2	Class #3
October Essay (Assigned 10/1)	Two weeks to complete (Due 10/14)	Three weeks to complete (Due 10/21)	Four weeks to complete (Due 10/28)
November Essay (Assigned 11/1)	Four weeks to complete (Due 11/28)	Two weeks to complete (Due 11/14)	Three weeks to complete (Due 11/21)
December Essay (Assigned 12/1)	Three weeks to complete (Due 12/21)	Four weeks to complete (Due 12/28)	Two weeks to complete (Due 12/14)

Winning – Or, Not Losing

This strategy is a natural extension of “staggered deadlines” in that it will give your staggered deadlines more power, and in that it continues to take advantage of the quirkiness of human psychology.

The premise is as follows: humans are highly motivated to do things when they know there is some kind of reward in the works. (This is especially true if the rewards are randomly received for engaging in a particular behavior – which is why people so often gambling to be incredibly appealing, regardless of the fact that the odds are never in their favor.)

But winning some kind of reward isn’t the only thing that motivates humans. In fact, the desire not to lose can be just as motivating, if not more so. Consider the following scenarios that exemplify this point:

Earning Something	Not Losing Something
If you tutor a student on Saturday morning, you’ll earn sixty bucks.	If you don’t tutor a student on Saturday morning, you’ll have sixty bucks deducted from your bank account.
If you go for a jog first thing in the morning, your friend will pay you fifteen dollars.	If you don’t go for a jog first thing in the morning, you’ll owe your friend fifteen dollars.
If you advise the newspaper club, you’ll earn an extra \$1,000 this year.	If you don’t advise the newspaper club, you’ll earn \$1,000 <u>less</u> this year than you did last year.

While the types of scenarios in the right-hand column are undoubtedly highly motivating, they aren’t always pleasant, and they don’t occur often. (Ever form a betting pool with your friends to inspire morning jogs? Me either.) The newspaper club example most likely rings most true for us, as this kind of scenario often arises once we become accustomed to the pay associated with extracurricular advising and/or coaching responsibilities – at which point the responsibility becomes something folks feel like they simply can’t give up without losing money.

So, how can this inform your teaching, grading, and general productivity? If you’re willing to take on a dash of increased stress to bolster your productivity, replicate these recipes in your classroom. “If you don’t (thing that must get done), then you must (thing you really don’t want to happen or do).” A few tried-and-true examples:

- **If I don’t grade ALL of your quizzes by the day of your next quiz, then you will ALL be excused from the new quiz.**
- **If I don’t grade all of “Class #1’s” essays by “Class #2’s” deadline, then class #2 will receive a two-day extension. (*Extension of the “staggered deadlines” strategy.)**
- **If I don’t finish grading and returning your research papers by spring break, then I will shave my beard / chaperone prom / write my own research paper.**

Luck Of The Draw

Teachers generally feel that they must read and grade every piece of work assigned to students – that it is their absolute responsibility to do this, that it is critical for learning to occur, and that a failure to do so will result in a major injustice to students.

As a result, teachers find themselves inundated with papers and projects to grade – papers that weigh down their bags, eat up their weekends, and burn out their ambitions. And all of this, of course, afflicts only the best, brightest, and most well intentioned teachers – those that are assigning *more*, grading *more*, and, in turn, sacrificing *more*.

If this sounds at all familiar, repeat after me: **It is impossible to read and grade every piece of student work if students are generating enough work to make a substantial impact on their learning.** This is particularly true in content areas where students are writing and *writing and writing*.

In other words – in order for a student to truly grow as a writer, to truly sharpen his or her skills, he or she must write constantly. Every. Single. Day. But you? You can barely keep up with the papers students turned in last week! What’s a teacher to do?

Option A: Brew more coffee. Grade faster.

Option B: Stop assigning more work until you can catch up. No more writing!

Option C: Assign more. Grade less.

While “option c” is obviously our preferred choice, it may sound like it belongs in the land of leprechauns and unicorns unless you’ve already dabbled in this kind of methodology. Consider how the following assignment was adjusted to ramp up student work while reigning in grading time.

The Traditional Assignment	The Enhanced Assignment
<p>You must write five journal entries in your reader’s notebook by October 15th. I will collect all 100 of your journals and grade your work. (500 journal entries written, 500 journal entries graded)</p>	<p>You must write fifteen journal entries in your reader’s notebook by October 15th. I will collect all 100 of your journals, and will grade <u>three randomly selected entries</u>. (1500 journal entries written, 300 journal entries graded)</p>

This adjustment can be made in any content area, on any kind of assignment that lends itself to *continuous* and *meaningful* practice. That being said, it is imperative that you avoid cranking out “busywork.” Every assignment should serve a deliberate purpose – *especially* those that you supercharge with a strategy such as this!

Rubric Roulette

This strategy is a second cousin of the previously discussed “luck of the draw” technique. Where “luck of the draw” enables students to do more meaningful work while reducing grading load, “rubric roulette” achieves a similar end by refocusing the grading criteria.

In other words, grading a piece of work can be a very time consuming process because of the nature in which it is typically approached. The entire piece of work is read and analyzed, and elements that were not necessarily on the docket for consideration are *also* graded.

For instance, if students are assigned an argumentative essay, everything from spelling and grammar to thesis and claim development, is graded. In turn, the act of grading that one essay is not a singular process – it’s *dozens* of processes rolled up into one dense, time-consuming ball of yuck.

Consider the following questions associated with the costs and benefits associated with time-consuming, holistic grading:

- Is there a time and a place for holistic grading and feedback? (Yes, certainly.)
- Is there value in considering every nook and cranny of a student’s work? (Surely.)
- Is it worthwhile engaging in this time-consuming grading process on *every* assignment? (No – probably not.)
- Is there a point of diminishing returns, where comprehensive feedback on *every* facet of a rubric stops being meaningful? (Hmm...)
- What if alternating papers were graded “holistically”...? (Students would more frequently receive more immediate feedback...)
- If you’re not grading the whole assignment, what *are* you grading?

Instead of applying an entire rubric to every assignment, choose focus areas that are most pertinent either to (1) the instructional focus of the assignment, or (2) an area that will be helpful for the individual student.

In other words, if your students are writing an argumentative essay, turning in a well-written essay is a prerequisite, and as such, spelling and grammar aren’t graded unless they’re abhorrent. Instead, on the day that students turn in their essays, ask them to highlight their thesis *and* all claims with supporting evidence. Then, grade only these focus areas —

OR

If your students are turning in a more generic kind of assignment, use previously graded student work (i.e. the last essay you graded using a holistic, whole-paper approach) to determine which focus areas would be of most benefit for individual students.

The results? You’ll grade the essays in a fraction of the time, students will receive timely feedback, and the grading focus (*and* your comments) will be more closely aligned with the assignment’s intended instructional outcomes. Win, win, and win.

Digital Streamlines

A host of digital tools exist with the sole purpose of streamlining the assessment process, while a battery of existing tools can be repurposed to achieve similar ends. The five annotations below will serve as a curated introduction to the very best these tools and techniques.

(#1) TurnItIn.com

We will consider TurnItIn first because it is the oldest and most well known of the five digital tools on our list. TurnItIn became popular because of, and is best known for, its plagiarism-checking software. (Students submit their work and a report is generated that includes a “similarity index” checked against a massive database of essays.)

While the “originality report” is still a helpful tool, widely used in districts and universities across the country, it is only one of several tools in the TurnItIn suite... which also includes features for grading and peer editing.

TurnItIn’s “PeerMark” allows for student-to-student review, scoring, and editing with incredible ease. Instructors are able to choose from a series of options (i.e. should peer-editing be anonymous? Would you like students to use a digitally uploaded rubric for this? What is the minimum word count that will be required of all peer reviewers?) that make this an incredible avenue for bolstering student writing through deliberate and immediate feedback.

Likewise, TurnItIn’s “GradeMark” was designed with teacher scoring in mind, and streamlines the grading process by enabling the following options:

- “QuickMarks” – i.e. a pre-loaded comment that you can simply drag onto a document. If you’ve ever written the same comment on five dozen essays (“Revisit your thesis,” or, “Incorrect semi-colon usage,” etc...), then you are likely already salivating at the thought of such a tool. A best-practice associated with building your “QuickMark” library is including a more detailed explanation of the issue, and embedding a hyperlink to a resource that provides instruction as to how it might be addressed (for instance, a link to examples of semi-colon usage). While this would be incredibly time-consuming, even impossible on paper, it’s a simple click-and-drag on TurnItIn.
- “Voice Comments” – which are precisely what they sound like. With the click of a button, you can leave your students voice comments instead of typing them all up. Not only does this practice save time, but students seem to revisit voice-based feedback with much greater frequency than written or typed feedback. (The fact that students often gloss over feedback is old news, but frustrating nonetheless. Voice comments, on the other hand, are far more appealing – they often provide a clearer, less threatening explanation of avenues for improvement – and students often share voice comments with their parents, too!)
- Embedded rubric – which serves more or less the same purpose as a paper rubric, with one simple upgrade: it’s digital. As such, you are able to simply click on the

corresponding rubric boxes, which are instantly highlighted, and the corresponding essay grade simultaneously calculated.

(#2) Google Docs – “Comments”

Google Docs is becoming more ubiquitous with every passing day. Not only does it provide a free alternative to Microsoft Word, but it also continues to expand its superpowers with “add on’s” (described below).

In short, here are just a few of the magical ways you can harness Google Docs in your classroom to enhance learning and to streamline the assessment process:

- “Share” – By “sharing” a document with one or more students, collaboration is instantaneous. This is great for group-work, for achieving a real-time and free version of TurnItIn’s “PeerMark” (i.e. peer editing). Further, asking students to share their assignments with you digitally works to lessen the literal paper load. Instead of a heavy messenger bag that houses all of your ungraded work, you’ll have access to student assignments *any time* you’re connected to WiFi.
- “Comments” – Much like Microsoft Word’s “track changes” and “annotations,” Google Docs allows you to make “comments” on any document. Each time, a small “thought bubble” will pop up over the corresponding text with whatever comments you include. A best practice associated with commenting via Google Docs is the development of a “comment bank” so that the most frequently made comments can simply be copy and pasted, rather than typed anew every time. Again, this is a real-time and free version of TurnItIn’s “GradeMark” and “Quick Comments.”
- “Revision History” – A nifty little feature (found in the “File” menu) that shows you exactly who wrote what, and when they wrote it. In other words, if a group of four students collaborated on an assignment, “Revision History” would highlight every piece of text in a different color corresponding to the individual who wrote it – *and* also includes a time stamp. Great for assessment group work, for determining who did what, and for identifying any hiccups in your students’ practices (i.e. late night procrastination!).

(#3) Kaizena (Google “Add On”)

When using Google Docs, you will notice what appears to be a typical menu bar running across the top of the page – “File,” “Edit,” and so on ... except you’ll also notice the “Add On’s” option. In short, this is an “app store” for your word processor... and, fortunately for us, most of these apps are *free*.

A simple search for “Kaizena” will grant you access to this tool – one that promises to help teachers “quickly give every student the feedback they need to improve, for free.” Kaizena is fully integrated with Google Docs, allows you to leave voice feedback (again, doing what TurnItIn already does, but for *free*), and includes a bank of curated lessons to help explain concepts to students rather than simply repeating yourself. Grading made smarter.

(#4) Flubaroo (Google “Add On”)

At this point, if you are unfamiliar with these tools, it may begin to feel like we are speaking a different language. First *Kaizena*, now *Flubaroo*.

Flubaroo, like Kaizena, is an “add on” that must be added (from your “Add On” menu) – but you must be in a Google Sheet (i.e. the spreadsheet), rather than a Google Doc, in order to access it.

In short, Flubaroo replaces the need for Scantrons. It will grade all of your multiple choice assessments for you, *including* single-word answer questions (i.e. fill-in-the-blank questions), for free. Beyond simply indicating which student answers are right and wrong, Flubaroo populates a spreadsheet with student names, correct and incorrect answers, averages, and more.

Instead of saving your heap of Scantrons for the end of the day, at which point you wait in line, run them through a clunky machine, and enter the grades into your gradebook, Flubaroo allows this to happen *instantly*. Not only do you have all of that time back – but your students reap the benefits: the assessment results can be instantly relayed to your students, and can be immediately used to inform your instruction. (This seems to make far more sense than waiting until the end of the day to learn that students did not understand the concept in question!)

While using Flubaroo is a piece of cake once you’ve learned how to use it, it does require a bit of familiarity with Google Drive – particularly the creation of Google Forms (which are resemble surveys become are the vehicles for your assessments).

(#5) Doctapus (Google “Add On”)

By now, it’s likely that you’ve realized how much time and energy you can save by transitioning to *digital*. The benefits are tremendous – for student learning (i.e. the immediacy of feedback and the ease of collaboration), and for teacher efficiency (i.e. a productive and efficient use of your time!).

Doctapus is yet another add-on that is available within Google Sheets. Its function is straightforward, and incredibly timesaving. Once installed, it will prompt you to input your class roster. Then, with the click of a button, Doctapus creates a highly organized series of folders that are shared between each individual student *and* yourself. (In other words, if you input a roster of 20 students, 20 personalized folders are generated – editable/viewable only by the corresponding student to whom the folder is assigned, and yourself.) This is incredibly valuable in that it instantly creates a system through which your students can submit their work and track their growth – like real-time, digital portfolios.

What’s more, Doctapus allows you to send out individual “copies” of assignments with a single click – meaning that instead of wasting time and paper in the copy room, you’ll never have to make a copy again...! Ah, the efficiency of a practically paperless classroom!

Checklist Power

The power of checklists has been recently spotlighted by Atul Gawande’s best selling book, *The Checklist Manifesto*. In short, Gawande argues that the incredible complexity of our lives can be effectively managed through the use of a simple checklist. No, this is not true of every facet of life... but it *does* make sense considering the lessons we’ve learned and discussed regarding “cognitive load.” Checklists can be great tools for lessening that load, and for streamlining thought processes that might otherwise overload our brains, stress us out, and detract our attention from things that matter most.

In the classroom, a checklist might be used over the course of a single lesson in order to ensure that certain instructional keystones were addressed. A daily pedagogical checklist might look something like this:

- Warm Up (five-minute writing prompt or independent reading)
- Informal writing opportunity
- Small-group discussion
- A formative assessment that informs the course of the lesson
- Closure

As simply as it seems, this five-point instructional checklist ensures that a number of sound teaching practices are embedded on a daily basis. It serves as a simple reminder to encourage small group discussion, even for a few moments of class time, without taxing your cognition.

Likewise, a checklist might be developed using the highest criteria of whichever teacher evaluation model has been adopted by your district. Most modern teacher evaluation models emphasize learner-centered teaching, and a checklist that embodies those “distinguished” qualities of teaching might look something like this:

- Prompt students to generate discussion questions
- Prompt students to teach some facet of the lesson to their peers
- Allow students to develop an assessment (rubric, quiz, questions, type)
- Provide choice when assigning tonight’s homework
- Provide an opportunity for students to reflect on their learning

A checklist like this relieves the anxiety associated with trying to juggle an entire criterion-based evaluation system in your brain *while* teaching a stellar lesson. (What could be more stressful than that?) Instead of trying to reel through dozens of strands in twenty components of four different domains... a simple checklist ensures a similar outcome. Were students given an opportunity to generate their own questions? Is so – great! If not, make it happen without stressing yourself out or making yourself crazy.

On a curricular level, checklists can also be developed and implemented to ensure that certain pieces of content, and that certain skills, are folded into instruction over longer periods of time. For instance, a checklist that is derived from *standards*, and that is implemented over the course of a unit, might look like this:

- Students engaged in argumentative writing in which they developed and supported claims in an analysis of substantive topics (W.9-10.1)
- Students engaged in analytical writing in which they examined and conveyed complex ideas (W.9-10.2)
- Students engaged in a narrative writing process, developing real or imagined experiences using effective technique (W.9-10.3)
- Students participated in a range of collaborative discussions (SL.9-10.1)

A checklist like this is effective because it places a select few standards in a teacher’s instructional crosshairs. In this case, three genres of writing *and* discussion are part of the checklist. As such, over the course of a week, this list can be revisited and applied as appropriate – i.e. “We haven’t engaged with argumentative writing yet this week, so let’s start with an argumentative writing warm-up today.” This is far less stressful than attempting to pin each and every facet of writing down on Sunday night, knowing full well that the lessons you write are certain to change by the following afternoon. Further, the checklist creates a sense of personal accountability that bolsters professionalism. (I mean, who wants to leave a checkbox unchecked?)

In lesson planning, one of the most time consuming, brain numbing, and downright agitating tasks is that of linking up standards, most often by copying and pasting them from a separate document *or* from the website where they are posted. Instead, consider streamlining the process by embedded “checkbox standards” at the top of your lesson plan template. This would look something like this:

- W.9-10.1 W.9-10.2 W.9-10.3 W.9-10.4 W.9-10.5 W.9-10.6
 W.9-10.7 W.9-10.8 W.9-10.9 W.9-10.10

...and so on, permitting for the simple checking off of standards as appropriate for the lessons you’ve written, rather than hunting, copying, and pasting for hours. (This is a huge time saver!)

Similarly, you might choose to embed rubrics directly onto student assessments. (If “assessment” and “checklist” had a baby, its name would be most certainly “rubric.”) While students would be given a copy of a comprehensive rubric with the assignment task, and while you would have a comprehensive rubric handy while grading, a checklist-style format can be integrated onto the top of bottom portions of assignments to streamline the grading process. (Think of this as your equivalent of office paperwork with boxed off sections that read “*for office use only*” – except in the case of this checklist, *you* are the office.) An example might look something like this:

Reading Comp				Clarify of Language				Textual Evidence				Mechanics / Spelling			
1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>

An embedded, checklist-style rubric may seem like a minor adjustment, but it can have a substantial impact on your productivity. That being said, remember that this checklist is intended to serve as shorthand for a more comprehensive rubric – it is not a replacement!

Best Practices For Efficient Parent Communication

Rather than to divide the following practices into unique sections, it seems most appropriate to discuss them under the umbrella of “parent communication.” Why? Because good parent communication practices are essential for good teaching – and yet these practices are often the most anxiety provoking and time consuming.

Let’s consider the kneejerk negative responses teachers typically have to parent communication:

- “These progress reports take *forever*... and after writing three or four of them, my brain is too numb to make them as meaningful as they should be.”
- “Oh great – I have to call Jonathan’s mom. She kept me on the phone for two hours last month. Here we go again.”
- “Here we go again – a hundred emails about summer reading. How many times am I going to have to explain this?”

One or more of these likely sound all too familiar. Fortunately, the corresponding strategies that follow work wonders in disarming all of that negativity while boosting your efficiency and freeing up your time.

#1. Student-crafted progress reports.

We touched on this strategy earlier, but it certainly bears repeating here. Asking students to engage in a reflective “audit” of their progress in your class (i.e. reviewing a portfolio of their work, their marking period grades thus far, their own feelings about their learning) shifts the entire burden of writing progress reports from you to your students. Not only is this manner of “outsourcing” a great time saver for you, but it also opens an incredible line of dialogue with your students. You’ll know precisely how they feel about their own learning, you’ll engage them in deep, reflective thinking about their progress (i.e. *meta-learning*), and in asking students to email these reports to their parents, you’ll have reduced the time required to communicate with every parent on your course roster *tremendously*. (Just think – writing 100 emails to 100 parents, at ten minutes per email, would take over 16 hours... something you might never even consider doing because of the workload. But with this strategy, the same ends are accomplished in just one class period – less than 3% of the time!)

A deviation of this strategy has recently been sweeping elementary schools across the nation in the form of student-led parent conferences. The benefits are similar in that the activity promotes reflective thinking and meta-learning, while creating an authentic and thoughtful dialogue that *begins* with student.

#2. Schedule all of your meetings.

Meetings happen. And when they do, they’re often long, they’re painful, and they’re difficult to avoid. Can you think of any excuses that actually work? While “I’m bored,” and “I’m not interested,” and “I would rather be drinking a glass of white wine on my patio” may be the most honest responses, they certainly aren’t the most effective.

But consider any meetings that you, or folks you know, have missed. Doctor's appointment? Coaching soccer practice? A conference with the principal? That's right, folks – one the foolproof way to cut a meeting short is... another meeting.

This may sound a bit counterproductive, like ending one war by starting another, but if used thoughtfully, this strategy can save you tons of time. Just think – you'll never be stuck on the phone with "Jonathan's mom" for two hours ever again.

The solution is simple: schedule all of your meetings. In this case, phone calls qualify as meetings between yourself and a parent. If you have four parents to call for whatever reason, jot a quick schedule down (a post-it note is fine) that permits for five to ten minutes per phone call – and *stick to your schedule*. Most of the time, this will be a piece of cake, but in instances where you find yourself glued to the sound of "Jonathan's mom's" voice, you'll be able to kindly and *honestly* inform her that you have another parent conference scheduled. Should you wish to make these time slots more formal, you can just as easily email them to the parents you'll be calling, but this optional step is often more work than it's worth.

If you are looking for an appropriate amount of time to allocate per parent conversation rather than choosing an arbitrary number, consider dividing the number of parents by the maximum number of minutes you'd like to allocate on the task. In other words, if you want to complete all of these phone calls during the second half of your prep, divide the number of calls (let's say, four parents) by the number of minutes (twenty minutes) to get your answer: five minutes each, and you're *done!*

#3. Canned responses.

In the same manner that TurnItIn's "QuickMarks" streamline the grading process by making commonly used feedback accessible with the click of a button, "canned responses" allow you to respond to the most common parent emails with ease.

To clarify, a "canned response" is not an awful, robotic-sounding message that leaves the parents who emailed you feeling unheard. (That would be a very *bad* thing... and would ultimately destroy far more of your time than it would save.) Rather, a "canned response" is a thoughtfully crafted email template that is easily personalized (i.e. just add the parent's name and it's ready to go!) that thoroughly addresses the concern in question in a uniform manner (i.e. all parents with this question are now getting a consistent answer in a timely fashion).

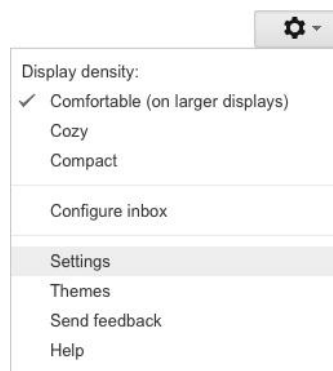
Let's reiterate the latter point: canned emails are *great* for questions that come in en masse, such as questions about a summer reading assignment, questions about a particular classroom practice, questions about that new participation policy you just implemented, and so on. Canned emails are *okay* at addressing more specific concerns about student progress, such as questions about course placements and certain earned grades, although crafting a template for this kind of an email requires a bit more finesse, and a bit more personalization when it's being sent along. Canned emails are *not* a solution for highly individualized concerns – and can be detrimental if used for that purpose.

Consider the following strategies for adding "canned emails" to your repertoire:

- Peruse your “outbox” (i.e. the emails you’ve *sent* from your school account). You’ll likely find that a few kinds of emails are more present than others. Select a good one to use as a template, or “Frankenstein” them together to develop the best-possible draft.
- Make a list of questions that often arise via email, or review your inbox to identify the most recent trends. (These are often seasonal – i.e. March brings emails about next year’s honors placement, while June and July are for summer reading). If you’re *positive* that these issues will come up, take the time to develop a reusable template. If not, save yourself the headache and wait until the emails start coming in before drafting.
- Create a “library” of canned emails. You might save these in a single Word Document or Google Doc... you might save these in a specially labeled folder in your inbox... or, you might even use Gmail’s “canned response” utility for full integration!

Here’s a quick how-to for the Gmail users out there:

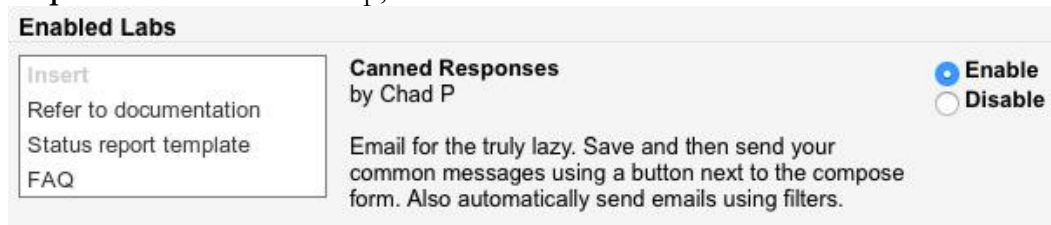
Step one: Once you’re logged into Gmail, click on the “gear” and select “settings.”



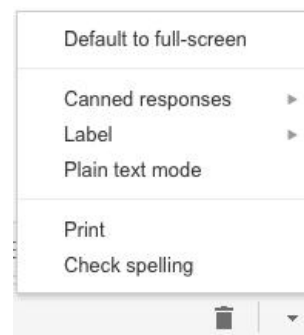
Step two: Across the top, you’ll notice a menu of links, i.e. “General,” “Labels,” “Inbox,” and so on. Toward the right, you’ll see a link called “Labs.” Click on it!

Step three: So, Google has a library of what they call “crazy experimental stuff” – built to enhance your online experience, but not mainstreamed to the public yet. You’ll find all sorts of cool tools here, but before you experiment any further, type “canned responses” into the searchbar.

Step four: When it comes up, click “enable.”



Step five: You’re all set! The next time you compose an email, click on the downward-arrow icon in the bottom right-hand corner of the new message window (next to the trash icon, pictured to the right). This will pop up a fancy little menu for you containing – you guessed it – any and all of the “canned responses” in your library! To add more responses, simply click “*New canned response.*”



Just think of all the time you’ve just saved!

The Sacred Space

Human beings are creatures of habit, and while many of our routines are explicit, habits we work hard to form, modify, to break, others are very subtle, taking place without our even realizing it. The most popular instance of this as it pertains to the “sacred space” strategy is that of sleeping in your bed.

If you’ve done things right, when you lay down on your bed, regardless of how you were feeling just moments prior, you will suddenly begin feel a bit sleepier. Why? Because your brain and body smart! They have come to understand that each night, when you get under those covers, the time has come for sleep. This is simple conditioning – but it doesn’t always work out quite so well. If you consider how technology has crept into most of our lives, it isn’t difficult to imagine what the process of “getting to bed” looks like for most folks nowadays; it often involves a television, an iPad or a laptop, and a cell phone. While this may feel like life-as-usual in the 21st century, these practices send mixed messages to the brain. The act of getting into bed no longer signifies the beginning of sleep, but rather, the beginning of information-intake. And because your brain and body are so smart, they prepare for this accordingly – by making sure you stay awake!

The solution, one that has been recommended by doctors, scientists, and researchers alike, is simply to limit screen time before bedtime, and to avoid any screen time at all while in bed. If you feel compelled to check your email or browse your social networks of choice one last time, do it on the couch. You will, without question, begin to sleep *better*.

As far as your professional productivity is concerned, the same principles hold true. This is why so many people have a difficult time working from home, and when given the option, head into (or even rent) an office to do work. Their brains strongly associate home with leisure, family, and all things non-work related. Likewise, the “home office” can be a space designated strictly for work – and once the brain understands this, those kneejerk feelings of distraction and procrastination begin to melt away.

Consider the practices with which you must engage that require the most focus. For the sake of this example, let’s consider grading essays. While it may be tempting to get a few more essays graded before morning, do not grade those essays in bed! Not one! Instead, make a deliberate effort to create one or more “sacred spaces” that your brain and body can begin to associate with focused work. Your sacred space might be your kitchen table, a desk in your home office, a coffee shop or bookstore around the corner, or a recliner in your living room. Your sacred space might even entail some kind of a ritual that signals to your brain that you’re entering the space and preparing to focus – perhaps brewing or ordering a certain kind of coffee or tea. Make it a point to be consistent regard the location, the corresponding rituals, and the kind of work that gets done there. It won’t take long for you’re your brain to figure things out, and you’ll find that the option to simply relocate and slip into a zone of *flow* and *focus* is remarkably powerful – and, by the same token, be sure to keep your work-free spaces stress-free by keeping them “sacred” in their own right!

Be SMART

The concept of “SMART goals” has become increasingly popular in the world of education, but more often than not, the principles are not clearly explained and are forced down teachers’ throats simply because they’re trendy. In short, here’s why SMART goals are awesome for increasing productivity in any facet of your life.

SMART stands for specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound.

So, if I wanted to lose weight, and my goal was simply that – “to lose weight” – chances are that I wouldn’t find very much success. The goal itself is very vague. How much weight will I lose? How will I lose it? Does this mean I have to go to the gym every morning before school, or just once a week? Will my diet change? The questions are endless, the directions are foggy, and success is fleeting.

Now if I were to develop a SMART goal, it would look something like this. “I am going to do cardio three times a week for the next six weeks.” This goal is far more specific than that of simply losing weight. It is measurable (I can count to see if I’ve met the goal of doing cardio three times a week), attainable (this is a reasonable goal), relevant (it will help me to lose weight), and time-bound (I have six weeks to track my success). As such, I’m far more likely to lose weight with this SMART goal than with its broader counterpart.

In teaching, SMART goals can be applied to any facet of the profession. Teachers are often encouraged to develop these kinds of goals for student learning – i.e. “85% of my students will boost their reading levels by 10 points by May.” But SMART goals can be used to bolster productivity, too. Consider how the common goals and their SMART counterparts listed below apply to your practice:

Traditional Goal	SMART Goal
I’m going to grade all of these essays.	I’m going to grade ten essays a day during my prep over the course of the next ten days.
I’m going to turn in all of my lesson plans on time this year.	I’m going to spend at least one full prep each week writing and submitting lesson plans for the following week’s instruction.
I’m going to save more money for summertime.	I’m going to set aside \$50 from each paycheck from September to June.

When viewed side-by-side, it’s easy to see the huge advantage that specific, measurable, and time-bound goals can have on productivity when compared to their traditional counterparts.

On the page that follows, you will find a template that will guide your process for making “smarter” goals. Take a moment to brainstorm your goals, and to make them SMART!

Set SMARTer Goal

Your Goal (What You Want To Achieve)
How can you make this goal more <u>specific</u> ? Can it be broken down into any processes that are essential for its success – such as “doing cardio” instead of “losing weight”?
What facets of this goal are <u>measurable</u> ? Can you count how many times you engage in the specific behavior you’ve indicated above? Perhaps a percentage?
Now take a moment to reflect. Is this goal <u>attainable</u> ? Is it reasonable, or are you biting off more than you can chew? (If there isn’t room to dial it up, you should dial it down!)
Reflect again, but this time on <u>relevance</u> . Will engaging in this specific behavior help you to accomplish your goal? Are you interested in pursuing this? Will it be a good use of time?
How long will this take to achieve? After how many weeks or months will you look back to consider your efforts a success or a failure? (Don’t skip this step – it’s crucial!)
In the space below, rewrite your goal as a SMART goal.

The End Is Never The End

The strategies and “hacks” detailed throughout this handbook are only the beginning. While each technique is effective in its own right, each is also a rabbit hole that promises to reshape the way you perceive and manage your time. While this handbook may be drawing to its close, your journey is only beginning.

It’s likely that you have already incorporated many of the time hacks found in this book into your life. Others, you’ve forgotten as quickly as you’ve read about them – and that’s okay too. As your journey continues, I only encourage you to consider how these strategies can be better leveraged to help you get more out of your day, and to lead a richer life.

Although it is beyond the scope of this book, the principles behind many of these time hacks can be applied to managing the quantity and quality of time you spend in all areas of your life – spending more work-free time your family, setting up time-hacked systems for generating passive income, the list goes on. At the very least, this handbook aspires to provide a lens by which you can consider the tremendous control you have over how you spend each waking moment of your day.

Remember that you are the master of your fate and the captain of your destiny, bells and duties be damned.

And, as always, thank you for all that you do in our most noble profession – for the kids, for their futures, and for the world at large.

- Jay