

Identify the next action

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Years ago I read half of [Getting Things Done](#) while on jury duty. I never did finish the book (yes, I see the irony!) but there are two big lessons I learned from what I did read. One is that your mind is for having ideas, not holding them - so you need to capture those ideas. ([Here's my post on that.](#))

The other key takeaway for me from the book was the idea of always identifying the next action. Author David Allen quotes Elbert Hubbard as saying, "It does not take much strength to do things, but it requires a great deal of strength to decide what to do." He's right. Deciding is a challenge, and one that when accomplished, makes the rest of the task much easier to complete.

Allen says, "the 'next action' is the next physical, visible activity that needs to be engaged in, in order to move the current reality toward completion." He suggests "Next Actions" lists, saying: "Any longer-than-two-minute, nondelegatable action you have identified needs to be tracked somewhere. 'Call Jim Smith re budget meeting,' 'Phone Rachel and Laura's moms about sleepaway camp,' and 'Draft ideas re the annual sales conference' are all the kinds of action reminders that need to be kept in appropriate lists, or buckets, to be assessed as options for what we will do at any point in time."

In [this previous post](#) I discussed how it's easier to accomplish projects when they are broken into smaller tasks. But it's even more useful to identify exactly what the next step should be. I often write something like "Schedule car service" on my list - and then it gets delayed from one day to the next or one week to the next. Why? Because not only do I have to make a phone call or go online to schedule the appointment, but I have to see when it works for my schedule and also my parents' schedule, since I typically borrow a vehicle from them. Instead of "Schedule car service" what I should first write is, "Look at calendar to identify a few times that would work to get car serviced." Then when that's done, "Talk to Dad about when I can borrow a car to get my car serviced." When that's done, it should be "Go online to schedule car service." And then voila! The car service would be scheduled. It may take 5 minutes or 5 days to accomplish these 3 items, but thinking about the task in terms of actions makes it much more likely I will actually get the task done.

Take a look at an item that's been on your to-do list for at least a few days (if not weeks or years) and get clear on what the next action is. Then do - or schedule time to do - that next action. And then bask in the glow of your action-identifying and action-accomplishing awesomeness!