The Storyline Productivity Schedule

The One-Page Key to Increased Productivity

By Donald Miller and the Storyline Team

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INTRODUCTION

What if problems like writers block and procrastination were less about your shortcomings and more about how you structure your work day?

The Storyline Productivity Schedule is a system I created that more than doubled my productivity. It has worked wonders for me and I believe it will work for you, too.

WHAT LIFE LOOKED LIKE BEFORE

Not many years ago I was stuck. I’d put two books on the New York Times Bestsellers list, but the days of sitting down at a coffee shop and easily firing off words seemed gone. Instead, I’d become a horrible procrastinator. I went from writing a book in six months, to writing a book in a year and then it began to take two years then three years and so on. Writing became a chore rather than a positive work habit.

I thought for a long time the problem was me, in my inability to write. But in researching writers block and procrastination, I realized the problem was in how I was structuring my day.

For instance, before creating the Storyline Productivity Schedule my day looked like this:

Morning: Instead of writing my book, I’d return emails, write blogs, go for walks and wait for creative inspiration to strike. It never did.

Afternoon: I’d eat lunch and get nappy, then cancel my evening appointments to write. But by then I was too distracted and tired.

Evening: I’d get a little writing done, but it wasn’t focussed, and the process was a chore. I’d tell myself I could try again tomorrow.

This pattern continued for years and I failed to produce anything worthy of publication. I was in a jam. Turns out, publishers don’t like it when you take four years to write a book.
THEN I REALIZED THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

I realized my career was going to fall apart if I didn't do something, so I ordered every book I could find about the creative process, procrastination, positive work habits and willpower. I think I read nearly twenty in all. Some were better than others but from each I made changes to the way I approach my job.

Each book referenced untold scientific experiments and studies helping me understand why people procrastinate, what time of day the brain is most productive, and what it really takes to finish a large project.

Here's what I realized:

“Along with managing my time, I needed to manage my mental energy.”

What I discovered was the brain worked like a muscle, and the whole time I was fighting my mind to sit down and work, I was wearing down the muscle. I didn’t need to manage my time better, I needed to manage my mental energy better. I needed a new way to structure my day so I was getting the most out of my mind when my mind was the strongest.

SO I CREATED A GREAT TOOL

To be more productive, I created a one-page sheet to fill out each morning. Unlike a normal day-planner we might use to manage our time, my schedule managed my mental energy.

Dr. Henry Cloud says the three keys to extreme productivity are:

1. **To attend** - This means to focus on one thing until serious progress has been made.

2. **To inhibit** - This means there must be a strong ability to inhibit distractions from getting through.

3. **A working memory** - This means we need to be reminded throughout the day of what we are supposed to be working on.
When our work is frazzled, when we say yes to everything and when we fail to focus on what’s important, we get less done.

Something had to change in the way I did my work and the Storyline Productivity Schedule did the trick.

Here are some things that make the Storyline schedule different:

- It forces you to work on your most important projects first.
- It forces you to only focus on three important projects per day.
- It kills off the mental bugs that cause procrastination.
- It reminds you each day of your life theme and so creates a decision filter.
- It limits the number of appointments you will take.
- It builds in rest and reward so your mind recharges and is capable of working harder in the long run.
- It allows open-ended work sessions so the clock works for you rather than you working for the clock.

Each module in this small, easy-to-use system is designed to overcome some bit of creative struggle and make the creative process fun and productive.

AND DID THE TOOL HELP?

The result? Within four months I’d finished a new book. No kidding. That’s the fastest I’ve ever written a book. It took me another two months to edit it and the book was off to the printer. My publisher said it might be the best book I’d written, so my new method also meant I wasn’t sacrificing quality.

Without the Storyline Productivity Schedule, I doubt I’d have been able to take new ground. Gone are the days of being frozen and afraid and back are the days of creating whatever I want, whether it’s a book, a new speech or even a new division of my company. I’m focussed and productive.
YOUR WORK MATTERS

The *Storyline Productivity Schedule* is yours for free. At Storyline, we’re devoted to helping people and brands understand and tell their stories. The *Storyline Productivity Schedule* plays a significant part in that mission.

We think it’s a tragedy when brilliant people aren’t able to get their ideas into the world. Whether you’re a painter, a small-business owner, a writer, life coach, marketing executive, a physical trainer or have any kind of job in which you need to consistently create new material, this one-page planner that repeats every day will be of use to you.

Our hope is you use it to take a massive amount of new ground in your work.

I’m grateful for what you do, and grateful you’ve allowed us to help.

Donald Miller

*Founder of Storyline and StoryBrand*
HOW THE *STORYLINE PRODUCTIVITY SCHEDULE* WORKS

Each working day, for the next 30 days, fill out the simple, easy-to-use *Storyline Productivity Schedule*. If you do this thirty times, you’ll develop new habits, become more productive, overcome procrastination and complete projects that have been gathering dust.

Once you’ve completed thirty days, you can continue using the SPS but you may not need to. The idea here is to change the way you structure your time and approach your work. By the time you’ve done this thirty times, approaching your work this way may become habit. Feel free to use it again to reinforce your new work structure.

Here’s what each page looks like:

The *Storyline Productivity Schedule* (SPS) works best for people who need to manage their own time. If your work day involves the need to make progress on several large projects, the SPS will be of benefit. The SPS is designed to help people become more productive, overcome procrastination, stop comparing their productivity to an ideal and enhance creativity. The SPS forces time to work around your brain rather than your brain to act as a servant to time. Here is how each of the components you’ll fill out each day work:
INSTRUCTIONS FOR DAILY USE

• Print out 30 SPS pages, three-hole punch them and insert them into a binder.
• Fill out the entire page every day before you start working.
• Fill out the page in this order:
  1. Today's Date
  2. If I could do today over again I'd
  3. Things I get to enjoy today
  4. Appointments
  5. My Life Theme
  6. Project One and following...
• When you're done with your day, transfer incomplete projects to the following day. This can also be done the next morning.

HERE'S WHY EACH SECTION IS IMPORTANT

IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I'D

After you fill in today’s date, fill in this section before you even think about your work. An integral part of the SPS, involves asking yourself what would happen most if you could “live today over again.” This idea was first proposed by Dr. Viktor Frankl, a Vienese psychologist who worked with depressed and suicidal patients. Asking them to consider “what they’d do differently the first time around” was a mental trick that allowed them to assess what was really important and learn from their past mistakes even before they made them. You’ll find asking yourself this simple but profound question will keep you from getting caught up in trivial problems and will allow you to focus more on what really matters. Most people wake up worried about all the stuff they have to get done, but if you think about what you’d do differently if you pretend you're living today over again, you'll find yourself realizing most of the stuff you worry about isn’t worth it and instead add more relational elements into your life. It should be noted Dr. Frankl cared for more than 30,000 depressed
patients and not one committed suicide under his watch. Asking yourself what you’d do differently if you were living today over again is one of the keys to living a more meaningful life and assessing priorities.

**THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY**

Dr. Neil Fiore is one of the world’s leading experts on procrastination. He’s spent decades studying why we tend to put off our work and has worked with thousands of clients to help them become more productive. Interestingly, one of the reasons Dr. Fiore says we procrastinate is because we believe by doing our work, we’re missing out on something fun or enjoyable. He found when he had his clients make a list of all the enjoyable things they get to do later in the day, they tended to be more willing and able to get their work done because they knew they were still going to get to enjoy life. Use this section to make a list of a few things you get to enjoy later in the day—such as dinner with your spouse, a walk with your dog, a football game or even a great meal. You’ll find yourself much more willing to work when you know you’re actually not missing out on a good life. Not to mention, you’ll get much more enjoyment out of those rewards later, after you’ve earned them.

Writing down Things I Get to Enjoy Today helps you:

- Gain a sense of calm by reminding you life is, in fact, enjoyable.
- Focus on work now because you know you get to enjoy something later.
- Be more present with others later in the day knowing you got your work done earlier.

**APPOINTMENTS**

Of course we all have appointments throughout the day, so we’ve made space for you to write down up to 7. If you have more than 7, you’ll want to reconsider how available you’re making yourself to people. Is it affecting your
TO DO LIST
Creating a short To Do list will keep you from worrying about all the stuff you need to get done that day. Once it’s on paper, there’s no more confusion. Don’t use this space for major projects, as those will go elsewhere, but instead use them for things you know you need to do but can put off until after the important work is done. Only tackle your To Do list after you’ve taken new ground on your most important project.

Keeping a To Do list helps:
• Relieve stress by getting smaller items off your mind and onto paper.
• Increase your dependability by insuring you’ve got the little stuff written down and can follow through after you tackle the big stuff.
• Increase productivity by daily writing down and accomplishing tasks.
• Keeps you from forgetting the little stuff.

MY LIFE THEME
If you’ve gone through the Storyline Life Planning Process, you already know your life theme. If you haven’t, simply state what it is your life is about or what you’d like to have been known for before you die. Use your life theme as a filter from here on out. Does each of your projects fit within your life theme? If not, stop working on them or change your life theme. Too many of our clients spend too much time working on projects that have nothing to do with their decided purpose. Your life theme is your decision filter.
Writing down your Life Theme helps you:

- Gain clarity by giving you a decision filter through which you can weed out projects and tasks that aren’t “you.”
- Build self esteem by reminding you each morning you are on the planet for a reason and a purpose.
- Live free from regret by insuring your work is moving in the direction of your life theme.

**PROJECT ONE**

What is that major project you need to focus on? In their book *Willpower*, Roy F. Baumeister and John Tierney make a compelling argument that the brain works like a muscle, meaning it gets fatigued as the day goes on. For this reason, a productive person will tackle their most important project first. In fact, if it’s possible to get an hour or two’s worth of work done before any significant conversations, answering email and, for some, even breakfast, you’ll find your productivity will dramatically increase. We know people who will not turn on their phones until after their first work session is complete. Often our clients claim they get more done during their first two hours than they will over the next 12. If a writer, for instance, writes 1,000 words each day before 9AM, they will complete more than 6 full-length books each year. You do the math. Protect this first work session like it’s your retirement, because it is.

After a good night’s sleep, the brain is sharp, fresh and ready to work in the morning. Don’t let that time go to returning emails and helping other people get their work done. Or worse, don’t let it go to reading dumb internet sites. You can do that later. Under Project One, write the name of the project you’ll spend the first two hours or so working on then get to it straight away.
Tips for Tackling Project One:

• Develop a morning routine and repeat it 5 or 6 days each week. Example: Get up, take a walk, take a shower, make coffee, then work on project one.

• Ignore all morning criticism. The more self criticism you fight, the more weary your brain becomes. Delay all negative thoughts until after your morning session. You’ll find it much easier to fight these thoughts first thing in the morning because it’s during these hours your mind is the strongest.

• Unless answering email is part of your project, save it for later. And don’t engage in significant conversations that might sidetrack your mind. The idea is to get into the chair and start working as fast as possible before anything can interrupt you. If you have to take the kids to school, tackle project one immediately when you get to the office.

Writing down the title and goal of Project One every morning helps you by:

• Helping you focus on the one major project that must get done.

• Making the whole day feel great because you got the important work done early.

• Increasing productivity by focussing on one thing, every day, until it’s done.

REST/REWARD

Because the mind works like a muscle, it fatigues easily and needs regular breaks. You’ll find if you take a break to rest your mind, you’ll come back to your work rested and ready to start another session. These breaks should happen every 90 to 120 minutes and should last approximately 15 to 30 minutes. Consider each break a reward and write them down in advance. Your break may be as simple as going for a walk, taking a nap or even having coffee with a friend. You’ll also find when you do something that takes your mind off your work, you’ll come back with fresh and new ideas. Many productive people find themselves stuck, then walk the dog and come back with a terrific new idea. Mark down your rest/reward breaks in advance so you’ll know you’re not a slave to the work but rather it’s part of a productive, enjoyable day.
Writing down Rest/Reward breaks between project sessions helps you:

- Take intentional breaks to rest your mind.
- Increase productivity because you recharged.
- Stimulates creativity by getting your mind focussed on something else, allowing inspiration to come on its own terms.

TIME MANAGEMENT

Many people experience guilt when working within a normal time-management system. If they say they'll work from 8am to 10am on a project and are interrupted, they feel guilty for not fulfilling their morally neutral expectations. Dr. Neil Fiore believes this creates a negative attitude about our work that contributes to procrastination. Because of this, the SPS has no set time for when you will start or stop a project. You simply start working when you like and stop working when you feel like you've accomplished enough. Not only this, but with the SPS, you actually mark down how long you worked on a project once you've completed that session. If you worked for 90 minutes, simply mark H:1 M:30 and you'll have plenty to feel good about. Marking how long you worked on a project AFTER you've completed each session allows positive emotions to be associated with your work, contributing to your sense of accomplishment and increasing the chances you'll want to come back to do more work.

PROJECT TWO

Project Two may be a continuation of Project One or another project all together. Simply repeat the process as you move throughout your day. It’s unlikely you’ll be able to devote optimum mental performance to more than three projects per day, so we’ve only included three.
We’ve included this small icon of a brain to reveal how much mental energy you lose throughout your day. It’s a subtle reminder to work on your important projects first and, as the day goes by, to gain ground on other projects that are less important.

NOW LET’S GET STARTED

Tomorrow morning, fill out your first SPS from beginning to end and continue to do so each working day until you’ve completed all 30 pages. We firmly believe this simple, elegant, thoughtful tool will dramatically increase your creative productivity.

Here’s to allowing your brilliance to take new ground in the world!
The Storyline Productivity Schedule works best for people who need to manage their own time. If your work day is a blank canvas in which you have to make progress on several large projects, the SPS will be of benefit. The SPS is designed to help people become more productive, overcome procrastination, stop comparing their productivity to an ideal and enhance creativity. The SPS forces time to work around your brain rather than your brain to act as a servant of time. Here is how each of the components on the daily schedule work:

**SCHEDULE KEY**

**PROJECT ONE:** Throughout your day, your mental capacity diminishes with use just like any other muscle.

Procrastination often takes place when we put off an important project until the end of the day, making it much more difficult to accomplish because we are tackling it with less mental capacity.

Therefore, our first project of the day should be our most important. Because you tackle it (or a portion of it) first, you’ll experience greater success and you will soon begin to associate it with progress rather than frustration.

**H:__ M:__ S:** Many people experience guilt when working within a normal time-management system. If they say they’ll work from 8am to 10am on a project and are then interrupted, they feel guilty for not fulfilling their morally neutral expectations. Reverse scheduling allows for the freedom and flow of a given day. Simply use this space to mark how much time you spent on the project once you’ve completed that work session. This insures you’ll feel good about your work and begin to associate the project with positive feedback rather than comparisons to unrealistic expectations. You’ll be more likely to give hours to it and this number will likely grow.

**Rest/Reward:** Because the mind works like a muscle, it fatigues easily and needs regular breaks. These breaks may be as simple as going for a walk or even taking a nap. If having coffee with a friend recharges you, feel free. The idea is to take your mind completely off your project for a period of time before either coming back to it or moving on to another project.

**PROJECT TWO:** Project two may be a continuation of project one or another project all together. Simply repeat the process as you move throughout your day. It is unlikely you’ll be able to devote optimum mental performance to more than three projects per day.

**IF I COULD DO LIFE OVER AGAIN I’D:** The process of considering the day as though you were reliving it comes from psychologist Viktor E. Frankl. He developed this simple mental trick in order to help his clients live more meaningful lives. Clients who were caught up in trivial problems suddenly realized they’d rather spend time with family or loved ones, work on projects they enjoyed and so on. Reverse scheduling is about not letting time manage your life, but rather living the most meaning-filled and productive life possible. We recommend writing down a couple of these per day to keep you from becoming a slave to unforeseen and often trivial pressures.

**THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY:** According to Dr. Neil Fiore, procrastination often occurs when a person believes they won’t be able to enjoy their lives because they have to work. Those who suffer this perspective often neglect their work then feel guilty and so don’t enjoy life either. To his clients, he simply recommends listing the things they get to enjoy each day before tackling their work. He found the success of this simple exercise profound. His clients were more motivated to work because they felt they were not going to miss out on life. Make sure to follow through on much of your list so you are sure to enjoy life, too.

**APPOINTMENTS:** Most Storyline clients keep their calendars digitally or in a separate planner. However, those manage their own schedules often have less than five appointments per day. Use the appointments section to manage time-specific meetings or obligations.

**TO-DO:** Use this section as a daily task list.

**MY LIFE THEME:** We’ve included this box to allow you to write your personal life theme daily. A personal life theme can evolve over time, but it’s to be a statement about what you want your life to be about. A personal life theme is a primary component of a decision filter. If a project or task is not in keeping with your life theme, it may be best to let it pass. If you’ve gone through Storyline 2.0, write your personal life theme here.
# The Storyline Productivity Schedule

## PROJECT ONE

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## PROJECT THREE

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## MY LIFE THEME:

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### The Storyline Productivity Schedule

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Rest/Reward:

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#### MY LIFE THEME:

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PROJECT TWO

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Rest/Reward: [Blank section for rest/reward details]

PROJECT THREE

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Rest/Reward: [Blank section for rest/reward details]

IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I'D

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THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

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APPOINTMENTS

[Blank section for appointments]

TO DO

[Blank section for to-do list]

MY LIFE THEME:

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TODAY'S DATE: / /
The Storyline Productivity Schedule

PROJECT ONE

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Rest/Reward:

PROJECT TWO

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PROJECT THREE

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Rest/Reward:

IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I’D

THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

APPOINTMENTS

TO DO

MY LIFE THEME:
PROJECT ONE


Rest/Reward:


PROJECT TWO


Rest/Reward:


PROJECT THREE


Rest/Reward:


IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I'D


THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY


APPOINTMENTS


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The Productivity Schedule

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The Storyline Productivity Schedule

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PROJECT TWO

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PROJECT THREE

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IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I’D

THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

APPOINTMENTS

TO DO

MY LIFE THEME:
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Rest/Reward:

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### Things I Get to Enjoy Today

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### Appointments

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### To Do

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### My Life Theme:

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The Storyline Productivity Schedule

PROJECT ONE

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Rest/Reward:________________________________________________________________

PROJECT TWO

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PROJECT THREE

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MY LIFE THEME: ____________________________________________________________
The Productivity Schedule

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APPOINTMENTS

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PROJECT THREE

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Rest/Reward: ________________________________

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IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I'D

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THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

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APPOINTMENTS

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TO DO

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MY LIFE THEME: ________________________________

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MY LIFE THEME: ________________________________

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MY LIFE THEME: ________________________________
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Rest/Reward:

PROJECT TWO

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PROJECT THREE

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IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I'D

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THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

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APPOINTMENTS

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TO DO

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MY LIFE THEME:

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| Rest/Reward:|   |   |   

| PROJECT TWO |  |  |  
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|             | H: | M: |  
| Rest/Reward:|   |   |   

| PROJECT THREE |  |  |  
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THE PRODUCTIVITY SCHEDULE

PROJECT ONE

H: __________ M: __________

Rest/Reward: __________________________________________

PROJECT TWO

H: __________ M: __________

Rest/Reward: __________________________________________

PROJECT THREE

H: __________ M: __________

Rest/Reward: __________________________________________

IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I’D

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THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

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APPOINTMENTS

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TO DO

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MY LIFE THEME: __________________________________________

95% 75% 50%
# The Storyline Productivity Schedule

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Rest/Reward:

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## PROJECT TWO

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## IF I Could Live Today Over Again I’d

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## THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

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## APPOINTMENTS

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## TO DO

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## MY LIFE THEME:

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TODAY’S DATE: / / 95%

75%

50%
PROJECT ONE

H: __________________________ M: __________________________

Rest/Reward: ________________________________________________

PROJECT TWO

H: __________________________ M: __________________________

Rest/Reward: ________________________________________________

PROJECT THREE

H: __________________________ M: __________________________

Rest/Reward: ________________________________________________

IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I'D

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THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

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APPOINTMENTS

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TO DO

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MY LIFE THEME: ________________________________________________
### The Storyline Productivity Schedule

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Rest/Reward: 

#### PROJECT TWO

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Rest/Reward: 

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Rest/Reward: 

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#### IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I'D

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#### THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

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#### TO DO

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#### MY LIFE THEME:

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TODAY'S DATE: / /
The Productivity Schedule

PROJECT ONE

H: ___ M: ___

Rest/Reward: __________________________

PROJECT TWO

H: ___ M: ___

Rest/Reward: __________________________

PROJECT THREE

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Rest/Reward: __________________________

IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I’D

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MY LIFE THEME: _____________________________
The Storyline Productivity Schedule

PROJECT ONE

H: M: 95%

Rest/Reward:

PROJECT TWO

H: M: 75%

Rest/Reward:

PROJECT THREE

H: M: 50%

Rest/Reward:

IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I'D

THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

APPOINTMENTS

TODAY'S DATE: / /

TO DO

 MY LIFE THEME:
The Storyline Productivity Schedule

PROJECT ONE

_________________________ H: M: ______________________

Rest/Reward:______________________________

PROJECT TWO

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Rest/Reward:______________________________

PROJECT THREE

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IF I COULD LIVE TODAY OVER AGAIN I’D

THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

APPOINTMENTS

TO DO

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### THINGS I GET TO ENJOY TODAY

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### MY LIFE THEME:

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