

MY PERSONAL OPERATING GUIDE

A system for knowing your strengths, managing your time,
showing your value, and setting yourself up for what comes next.

Name	
Path / Goal	
Date	

From Ashley: *This document is yours. There are no right answers. Fill in what's actually true — not what sounds good. The most useful version of this is the honest one. This is something I wish someone had handed me at your age.*

Section 1 — Why This Exists

Most people spend their whole career doing good work that nobody ever hears about. They show up, they contribute, they fix problems and then when it comes time for a raise, a promotion, or a reference letter, they can't remember what they've done. This document changes that.

There's also a version of people who never figure out what they're actually good at, so they drift from job to job doing what's available instead of what they're built for. This document helps with that too.

Here's what this guide does:

- Helps you name your strengths before an interviewer asks you to
- Gives you a system for managing your time and tracking your wins
- Teaches you how to show your value at work: in numbers, not just feelings
- Helps you figure out what you want and how to ask for it

The only rule:

You don't have to fill this out perfectly. You just have to fill something in. An imperfect answer is worth more than a blank page.

Section 2 — Your Superpower

Everyone has something they're unusually good at. Most people never name it — which means they never use it on purpose. Answer these three questions honestly:

What do people always come to you for help with?

What feels easy to you but seems hard to other people?

What compliments do you keep getting — even if you brush them off?

Now try to name it in one sentence:

My superpower is

I use it to help people

It doesn't have to be a career skill. It can be the ability to make people feel calm, to organize chaos, to explain complicated things simply, to notice problems before others do, or to make people laugh when things are tense. These are all professional assets when you use them intentionally.

Section 3 — Your Strengths

This section is about evidence, not opinion. The goal is to build a list of real things you've done that demonstrate your strengths — so when a future employer asks “what are you good at?” you have specific examples, not just adjectives.

Fill in at least one example for each strength below. Leave blank the ones that genuinely don't apply.

Strength	Real example from your life (school, work, sport, family, anything)
Problem-solving — figuring things out when there's no obvious answer	

Strength	Real example from your life (school, work, sport, family, anything)
Initiative — doing things without being asked	
Reliability — following through on what you said you'd do	
Communication — explaining things clearly, listening well	
Working with people — building trust, resolving conflict	
Attention to detail — catching things others miss	
Physical / practical skills — hands-on ability	
Creative thinking — coming up with ideas or new approaches	
Other strength you know you have:	

Section 4 — Your Honest Gaps

This is not a criticism section. *Knowing your gaps makes you better at your job, better in a team, and better at asking for what you need. The best employees are the ones who know exactly what they're not great at because they compensate for it, build around it, or ask for help early instead of letting it become a problem.*

What do you tend to avoid or procrastinate on?

What has gotten you in trouble or caused problems for you in the past?

What do you need from a teacher, manager, or teammate to do your best work?

What’s one pattern you’d like to change this year?

Section 5 — Managing Your Time

Time management isn’t about doing more things. It’s about making sure the important things actually get done — and not losing track of them every time something interrupts you.

The after-a-meeting habit (10 minutes)

Every time you finish a meeting, a class, a shift, or any important conversation, do three things:

#	Do this	Why it matters
1	Write down your action items	You think you’ll remember. You won’t. Write: what, by when, who else is involved.
2	Put the tasks in your calendar or planner	A task without a time slot is a wish, not a plan. Block actual time.
3	Ask: did I do anything worth remembering?	If you solved a problem, saved someone time, or caught a mistake — write it down. That’s your evidence file.

When things get interrupted (and they will)

The biggest time management problem isn’t laziness. It’s getting interrupted mid-task, switching to something new, and never coming back to the original thing. Here’s the fix:

- Before you switch: write down where you left off and when you’ll come back to it.
- In your planner or notes: “Interrupted on [task] — pick up at [step] on [day].”
- If the same thing interrupts you more than twice, it’s a pattern — figure out why and fix it at the source.

Section 6 — Showing Your Value at Work

Every employer, teacher, and client wants to know one thing: why should I keep investing in you? The answer isn’t “I work hard” — everyone says that. The answer is specific, real, and quantified where possible.

Value shows up in three ways:

Type	What it means	Example you can use
Risks avoided	You caught the mistake. You prevented the problem. You flagged something before it became expensive.	<i>"I noticed the order was wrong before it shipped, which saved us having to redo it."</i>
Time or money saved	You made something faster, cheaper, or easier. Even small things add up.	<i>"I reorganized the storage room and it cut restocking time by 20 minutes a shift."</i>
Relationships built	You made an introduction, got someone the help they needed, or opened a door.	<i>"I connected my manager with someone in my network who had exactly the expertise she needed."</i>

The key word is QUANTIFIED AND COMMUNICATED.
 Not assumed. Not hoped. Measured and said out loud. "I saved us time" is forgettable. "I saved us 45 minutes a week by changing how we do handoffs" is a raise conversation.

My wins log — things I've done that created real value:

What I did	Type of value (risk / time / relationship)	Number or outcome if possible

Section 7 — How You Work Best

This section is for you — and eventually for any manager, teacher, or mentor you trust enough to share it with. It's not a complaint list. It's a user guide that helps the people working with you get the best out of you.

What I need to do my best work:

(Examples: clear expectations, room to work independently, regular check-ins, honest feedback, time to think before responding, understanding the 'why' behind a task)

What makes my work harder:

(Examples: constant interruptions, unclear instructions, no feedback, too much oversight, not enough guidance)

How I like to receive feedback:

(Examples: direct and private, in writing, with examples, with time to respond, framed around what's working too)

One thing I want people to understand about how I learn or process information:

Section 8 — Your First-Year Plan

Whether you're heading to university, college, a trade, or straight into work — the first year is where most people either build momentum or lose it. This section helps you plan it with intention.

Where I'm headed after graduation:

(Be honest. "I'm not sure yet" is a valid answer.)

My first-year roadmap:

Timeframe	What I want to accomplish	What I'll need to make it happen
First month		
By month 3		
By month 6		
By end of year 1		

The one person I should connect with in my first 30 days:

The skill I most want to build in year one:

Section 9 — Using AI Wisely

AI is the most powerful tool that’s ever been available to someone starting their career. It can also be the most destructive if you use it wrong.

How you use it	What happens	Long-term result
Use it to think faster, not instead of thinking	You get better faster. Your ideas come out cleaner. You learn the skill AND save time.	You become genuinely capable and irreplaceable.
Use it to do everything for you	You skip the learning. You don’t build the skill. You can’t do the work without it and you can’t explain your own output.	You become dependent on a tool you don’t understand. Fragile.

The best use of AI for a student:

- Brainstorm ideas and push back on your thinking
- Organize your thoughts before writing an essay or email
- Get a second opinion on a plan or decision
- Learn something faster by asking it to explain concepts in plain language
- Turn a messy voice memo or notes into a clean summary

Things to be careful about:

- Never submit AI-generated work as your own thinking without disclosing it
- Don’t use it to skip the struggle — the struggle is where the learning happens
- Always read and understand whatever it produces before you use it

A note before you go:

The people who figure things out early aren’t smarter than you. They’re not more talented. They just started paying attention to their own strengths sooner, and they gave themselves somewhere to put what they noticed. That’s what this document is. Use it. Update it. Bring it back out in a year and see how much has changed.

And if you ever want to talk about any of it: ashley@smalltownmarketer.com