

List Making 101: The Power of Pre-Made Decisions with Sarah Steckler (she/her)

Who am I?

I'm Sarah Steckler.

I teach online entrepreneurs how to organize their business, create sustainable and mindful productivity, and turn their ideas into published planners and journals that they can sell around the world.

I'm also the host of the *Mindful Productivity Podcast* and author of the *Daily Productivity and Brain Dump* book.

Here's what we're talking about today

First, I'm going to give you a brief intro to me and about my journey into discovering more about my brain.

I'm going to show you a typical day in my brain and where I struggle, and I'm really curious to know if there are areas where you might relate as well.

Then I'll be diving into types of lists and how they can help with executive functioning.

I'll be showing you examples of lists and pre-made decisions that I've been making for years in my life and business. Then we'll be going into lists that you can use for your neurodivergent brain along with two super fun and nerdy productivity hacks that you can use starting right away.

I've created [a Google Doc](#) that has all this in there, including links to the templates I'm going to provide during this presentation and all of the lists. You can download that at any time if you'd like to follow along and have that reference sheet for yourself.

Understanding my brain

Let's talk a little bit about my journey to understanding my brain.

Warning, I'm about to get *super vulnerable* here.

I've had depression and major depressive disorder for as long as I can remember going way back into my childhood. Then in 2017, I experienced a traumatic event

overseas that led to debilitating flashbacks and panic attacks and an official PTSD diagnosis.

I was diagnosed with CPTSD in 2020, during the pandemic.

The pandemic really opened up this door of being stuck at home and really diving into a lot of self-reflection.

I ended up spending two years researching autism and ADHD during the pandemic. I took every single self-assessment that I could find. I started a journal recalling childhood experiences. I was really stuck between: is this something new I'm experiencing because of CPTSD, which can overlap with ASD symptoms and experiences, or is this something that goes all the way back to my childhood?

The more I asked questions about my childhood, the more I did journaling around it. I was, like, "Oh my gosh, I've been stimming. I've been doing all these things. I've struggled in all these ways my entire life."

In 2022, I bravely made the decision to put all of this information together into a Canva presentation that I showed to my mom and my husband. It was one of the scariest things I've ever done. Obviously, these are two people in my life that I love more than words. I was so scared that, for some reason, they wouldn't believe me or wouldn't accept me.

It went wonderfully. They were so receptive and both of them were, like, "Oh yes, this totally makes sense. Everything you're saying makes sense." They didn't know much about autism at all so it was really eye-opening. It really felt super validating.

I still often doubt myself and I have times where I think: "'Oh, maybe I'm just making all this up. Maybe I'm actually neurotypical. Maybe there's something that I'm trying to do to make myself stand out,' or 'why am I trying to make myself feel special?'"

That's something that I often do, gaslight my own experience. I know a lot of people experience this, and I'd love to hear from you if you do as well.

The other thing that was a real setback for me was I'd had this counselor for years throughout the pandemic. She helped me with my PTSD diagnosis. She knew everything about me and I felt so comfortable telling her things. We'd really built up a very strong relationship within that counseling space.

When I finally got the courage to tell her how I was feeling and what I thought, she said to me, "Everyone is a little bit autistic, and even if you were, why would you want to know?"

She said, "I wouldn't want to know if I was."

This was devastating to me and it was a huge blow. It really set me back months in the process of accepting who I was, and made me re-question everything all over again.

Where I am today is, currently, I really do think I do have autism, but due to a lack of available resources and some of these hesitations, I've yet to be able to go in for a formal diagnosis for ASD or ADHD or both, whatever it may be, at this time. It's something I'd like to pursue in the future, and I'm hopeful to get more information about that soon.

What I do know is that being adjacent to these communities has really improved my life, and created a space where I finally feel seen.

Truly, at the end of the day, regardless of any potential outcomes, I found that giving myself the accommodations that I see online and that I see people talking about has drastically improved my quality of life. It's helped me better understand myself, allowed me to be more productive and creative, and really given me confidence to live my life how I want to.

For example, I'm no longer masking at home, and this was something I used to do all the time.

Now I'm really letting myself freely stim when I need to, partake in hobbies that I enjoy, and I've loved discovering more about myself.

Instead of making all these rules for things I can and cannot do, now I do them. I collect squishmallows. My room is adorable and magical, and I love being at home and I love finding out all this new stuff about myself.

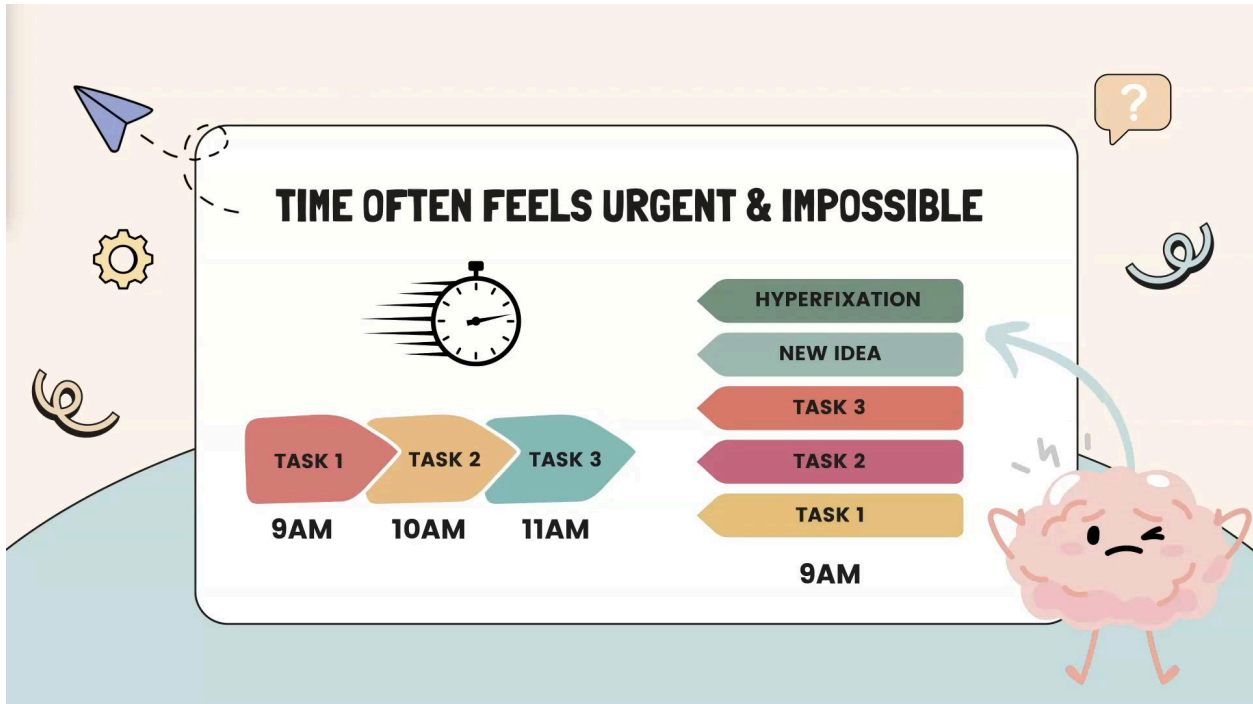
Where I struggle

Let's talk about a typical day and where I struggle the most, and then we'll get into how lists can really help.

Decision-making is often the hardest part of my day, which is why I've found making as many pre-made decisions as I can ahead of time is so incredibly helpful because I often will just get so overwhelmed and overstimulated with all of my ideas. All of the ways that I could structure my day, routines really, really are the backbone of how I'm able to survive and get things done.

I also have a false perception when it comes to time, and I really struggle with **figuring out what my priorities are**. I often think that making a decision about one thing will basically result that I can never do any of the other things.

I was trying to figure out a better way to explain this, so I created this little visual.



On the left here, we have a more linear view of time. I think a lot of neurotypical people tend to think of things like this—you have a project and a task and you can do that one at 9:00 AM and you can do the next thing at 10:00 AM.

What happens to me, more often than not, and it's constantly a struggle, is that I have all these ideas and all these tasks, and I want to do them all right now, and I will often assume that somehow I can.

The problem is that, if I make a decision, like "at 9:00 AM, I want to do task one," in my brain, that means I'm basically killing all the other tasks and none of them can happen.

I struggle with thinking I have to do everything all at once, or I can't do it at all. I know, logically, that's a fallacy that doesn't make sense, but that's how my brain works. I constantly have to work with that and battle with that.

I also have two default modes. I'm either super hyper-focused and I want to work on a specific thing all day and not do anything else and not get interrupted, or I've completely maxed out my capacity and I need to just be in bed quite a bit during the day.

During those days, I don't really feel like I have access to my brain or my creative brain, and it can be very frustrating.

I also tend to get stuck on the big picture. It's like not seeing the forest through the trees. I'll get stuck on the big picture and often not realize all the ways that I need to

break things down. The more I can break things down into micro-actions and tasks, the more productive and helpful that's going to be.

I'm also realizing how important structure is to getting things done. I used to fight this a lot, but I do find, and this is actually a relatively recent discovery for me, is that when I do have access to my creative brain and I'm getting all my genius ideas and I feel really in the zone.

But I notice that my executive functioning—when it comes to other things like making sure I'm eating, drinking water, showering—it's either one or the other.

That's one way that is really difficult and it's so important for me to make sure that I'm actually eating so I'm not starving at the end of the day and my brain stops working.

That's when **structure truly, truly saves me.**

I notice when I use my creative brain, I need to be fueled. That means optimum rest and sleep, a good solid meal, snacks.

Also, sensory things around me that help me feel cozy and safe.

For example, I have squishmallows under my desk, and I find those touching my legs is so comforting. I just get so much more done.

I also have a keyboard that I'm obsessed with that makes folkie keyboard sounds, if you know, you know. I absolutely hate overhead lighting, so everything in my office is always super cozy: lamps and lighting like that.

As I've been looking back at my brand on **Mindful Productivity**, I realized that—having this be my niche—is because of all the ways that I was seeing productivity being talked about online, and it never seemed to apply to me.

I was, like, "Why are we not talking about your energy level, and your energy capacity, and how many 'spoons' you have?" That is where I started talking about mindful productivity before I really realized, like, "Hey, you've got a neurodivergent brain."

How lists help

Let's talk about how lists can help.

- Planning and capturing
- Creating structure
- Noting patterns in your energy and ideas.
- Listing different ideas that you have, different offers you want to have, and task initiation.

- Lists can also help with pre-made decisions
 - Boundaries: things that you do or not do with your clients, your students, within your launches
 - Pre-made decisions about eating: meal prep, or what you're doing, when you're going to grocery shop
 - self-care

Also, things like **theme days**: Maybe you have a podcasting day or you have a day where you do all of your calls in one day or you have reoccurring work sprints. Having a place to make all these lists can really help in so many ways.

Understanding your energy capacity.

I love to identify energy drainers and drivers.

What are the things that you do, not only in your business, but outside of it, that produce energy or drain you? Are there ways that you need to spread out certain tasks and projects? I'll give you more specific examples in a minute.

Noticing cycles within your work

I know, for me, after I do a bunch of Zoom calls, I'm going to have much less energy the following week, and I often won't have as many creative ideas. It's like really noting that, and understanding why.

Reference materials.

You're writing down things that you can do or consider at specific times during specific events or things you're doing. Then, obviously, another form of lists, which we won't be diving into, are **SOPs and workflows**.

Types of lists & what they can look like

- To-do lists
- Reference lists, things that you are referencing.
- Routine checklists
- Project task lists: you might have a list of projects and within those projects, you have specific tasks related to those.
- Pre-made decisions: things that you're making ahead of time. I specifically love doing these for launches and landing plans.
- Scenario lists

These are really more of things that you're doing related to a given scenario. If you're going to go on a camping trip, what are all the things that you would need to do because of that? If you have a specific thing that's happening, what are you going to do?

There's a great book called *The Checklist Manifesto*. In the beginning of that book, they talk about how checklists save lives and how they were able to save this person that had fallen under the ice. They were able to save her life because they had this whole checklist that they would go through. Without having to think about it, they were able to just go through and do all these things to resuscitate her and save her life.

Example lists

I wanted to show you some example lists that I have made.

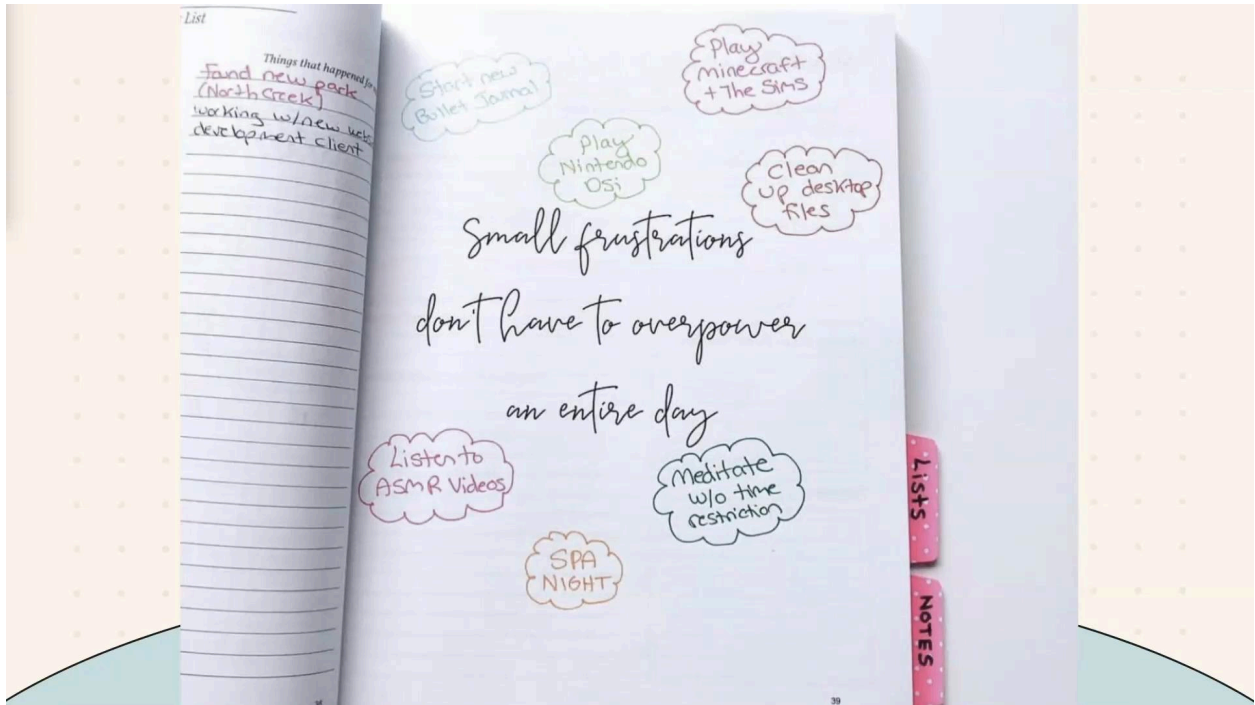


Things that Make Me Happy

I made a list of things that make me happy. One thing too, I find, is that a lot of times, looking at lists and making lists can be a really great way to regulate my nervous system, and reading them can be really helpful too. I'm someone that tends to ruminate a lot. Even just opening up my journals and looking at all these things can really help bring me back to the present moment.

Wishlist

On the other side here, you can see I have a wishlist. This is actually the first planner that I ever created for *Mindful Productivity*. It had these monthly sections with little quotes. Every month, I would come in here and write down little fun goals that I had or things that I wanted to do to brighten my life.



"Start a new bullet journal. Play my Nintendo DSi." Then all these other things, *Minecraft*, *The Sims*. I actually haven't played *The Sims* in a very, very long time. I want to get back into that.

List for Strength

Here's another list I have. These were just things I think would help me grow strong and take care of myself. Just little words and things.



I like the one where I wrote breaks in between big projects. Give yourself space in between things. I actually ended up publishing a pocket list planner because I love lists so much. Inside there are lists for daily tasks, weekly tasks, things to do to unplug and unwind, and then a mental health checklist.

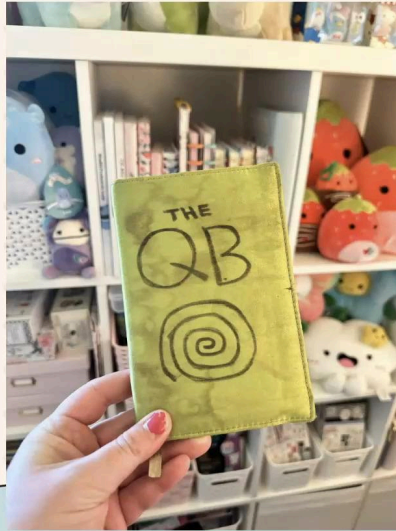
Some of these things are already in the planner. For example, for the mental health one, there's the 4-7-8 breathing exercise, a brain dump for your busy mind, identify something from all senses. That's a great mindfulness technique. If you're ever feeling super anxious, it's just to be, like, "What do I smell? What do I see?" All those things.

It also says reduce sensory overload, turn down the lights, find a quiet space. Obviously, you can add your other things to that. *Having lists for specific things that you're doing every single day, every single week, reflection, stuff that you're doing, can be incredibly helpful.*

The Quote Book

This isn't so much a list, it's so gnarly. There's coffee stains and all kinds of things on it. This is actually a moleskin planner. One of my friends in middle school, gave this to me, and I called it the QB for the quote book.

Lists of quotes,
memories,
good times



Inside of it are just pages and pages of funny things that me and my friends said, all the way from middle school up until I started college in 2005. It was before Twitter, before social media was really a thing, before Facebook. This was like my own personal Twitter feed. It was really, really fun to have. All these quotes in there I had to write the date and the time people said things.

It's just such a little wonderful memory book.

Health Reminders

Sometimes I use stickers to inspire my list. These are reasons to put your health first every day. Just reminding myself all of these reasons. One thing it says here is strength training supports your bones, helps you sleep deeper, and makes you feel like a regular badass.

I have, on the left here, signs of depression. Oftentimes, I don't really realize that I'm going into a depressive episode. This has a list of all those things. Then I have a depression toolkit. These are things that you can do. Obviously, this doesn't cure my depression, but these are things that you can do that help you feel better. I reference this all the time.

I will also make lists for things to check when I'm at the end of my rope:

- Reasons why my bulldog could be whining, and things I can do
- Easy meals I can make
- What to do after grocery shopping or another over stimulating activity

Lists for the neurodivergent brain

I recommend list-making for the neurodivergent brain.

Stim List

For example, it can be really helpful, if you're someone that benefits from stimming, it can be helpful to write down all the stims that you enjoy. *One thing I encourage you to do on this journey is just get curious about what things really help you regulate your nervous system.*

Make a list, what are sensory things for your stims like weighted blankets? Are there auditory things that you love? Are there visual things? Watching slime videos on TikTok or wherever really calms me down. Sometimes when I'm anxious, that's something that I will do!

Energy Capacity and Location List

I feel like this is so much more applicable for business owners, or if you're working from home. Oftentimes there are days when I just feel like I can't get the ball rolling. *It can be so incredibly helpful to have a list of projects or tasks that you can do from your desk and things that you can do from bed.* There are days when I just have to work from bed.

That's the only option. I don't have any energy and I need to know what I can do, because I'll feel guilty if I can't record a podcast or do this, but I can actually do all these other things.

What are those things that you can do by location? What are low-lift tasks that don't drain you? What are tasks that you do find draining that are best done in smaller spurts? Don't load up or plan your day with all of the most energy-draining tasks.

You may also find that it's important to do tasks at the beginning of your day. If you're someone that has trouble regulating dopamine or getting dopamine going, do the tasks that you love first. You don't have to "eat the frog" at the beginning of the day. *You can absolutely do stuff you love first.*

Energy-producing Activities

What creative activities make your brain come alive? What types of hobbies, movement, or nourishment fuels your energy? Like going for a walk or using a coloring book. Get clear on what those energy-producing things are. Again, coming back to noting patterns and cycles. Keep a log of times in your day where you reach your done threshold.

Noticing Patterns

Sometimes I'll just throw this in my Google calendar. It's 2:30, it's 3:30, and I stopped working for the day. My brain just was like, "Meh." Make a list of that and you can start noticing patterns. "Oh, I just got out of a launch," or, "I had a lot of student calls," whatever. Also, make a list of symptoms during your cycle. If you're someone that menstruates, notice how that might impact your thinking, your working, et cetera.

Pre-made Decisions

I find it so incredibly helpful to make a lot of decisions ahead of time, specifically for launches. *What steps do you need to take after certain projects or events to regulate your body and refuel your mind?* I call this **a landing plan**. What are the things you need to do to come out of something big that you just did?

It's almost like when you go on vacation and then you come home, and you're, like, it sucks when you have to work the next day, it's almost like you need a vacation from your vacation. That's a landing plan. These are pre-made decisions that you can come up with. What are things you'd like to have in place after you do specific things? How can you "come home to yourself?"

List hacks

List Signs

Let's talk about making list signs. You can actually buy these cute little acrylic signs. I think I got these at the Dollar Tree and maybe one at Target. You can purchase these. They stand up on their own and they're just little plastic clear signs. You can use a dry erase marker, and mark stuff off as you do it.

I'll actually carry this around with me throughout the day. Especially if you're creating a new routine, it's going to take you a while to just remember things.

For example, if I go into the kitchen and I feed the babies and get their food ready, and then notice there's laundry, I'll just go in there and do that and then completely forget about everything else. This keeps me on task.

Other List Hacks

I've created a little Canva template for you and you can find that in the opt-in document if you want to make your own for this. Another thing you can do is you can throw a QR code on these. Then you can scan your QR code in the morning or in the evening and you can bring up a playlist. You can bring up something in Notion, a podcast that you're listening to, whatever.

Productivity hacks

Repetitive Songs and Sounds

For ADHD, autistic, or AuDHD brains, repetitive sounds can help:

- regulate emotion
- reduce anxiety
- improve focus
- drown out external noise distractions
- provide a pattern of predictability

This is also referred to as rhythmic or auditory stimming. This is something I really, really relate to. When I first heard this, I was like, "Oh my gosh, I do this all the time."

If you're someone that remembers the "Badger, badger, badger" song, this is something that you can listen to on repeat. Also the *Maxwell the Cat* theme song.

Something about listening to this repetitive stuff over and over again—sometimes it's even a song that I'm currently obsessed with on Spotify or something—is so incredibly helpful for my brain. It actually gets me to start working.

If you ever find something on YouTube and you're, like, "I need to hear that for five minutes," you can actually right-click on the screen and hit the loop button, and it will just continue to play that over and over and over again.

Gmail Life Hack

This can be incredibly helpful if you have trouble remembering things. Basically, I created this little hack for myself because sometimes there can be barriers to checking in on different project management systems. I always tell people, it doesn't matter what you use—Asana, Notion, Trello. If you're not able to check it consistently,

then that project management system, no matter how amazing it is, it's not going to work for you.

I alter back and forth between using all kinds of different productivity methods. It really depends on my brain that day, and the project I'm working on.

One thing I found that's really helpful is to actually pre-schedule an email to myself for the top of the week to remind myself of things to not forget about. This is really helpful because, for me, I need reminders right in front of my face. I love post-it notes. I love having a planner with the weekly plan in front of me on my desk, open at all times.

Side note, when I met my husband on OKCupid so long ago, I kept opening up messages and then forgetting to respond. He actually kept sending me messages on there all the time, saying, "Just trying to get to the top of your inbox." It obviously worked. *Just know that you are not alone if you need those constant reminders.*

Gmail Tutorial

Here's a quick little tutorial using the opt-in Gmail template that I've created for you.

<https://mindfulproductivity.lpages.co/list-making-101-summit-opt-in/>

1. **Click on the Copy/Paste Gmail Template and scroll down.** This is something that you're going to tweak to whatever makes sense for you. I've got different sections, such as a place where you can write upcoming deadlines.
 - a. Again, this isn't the only place that I have these deadlines. But having an email at the front of the week, or even every day, can be so helpful. It's like, "Hey, this is what's going on."
 - b. There's a place for a quote
 - c. There's a section to start your day. Whatever main things that you needed to do at the start of the day, you can add in here. (I've added some links to some of my favorite background music on YouTube. I saw a TikTok years ago where this woman said that listening to medieval tavern music helped her clean the kitchen because she felt like she could pretend to be a barmaid. I totally resonate with that. There's something about role-playing a character, when you have to do a specific task, that really helps me get stuff done.)
 - d. There's also sections to write down things not to forget. For me, this isn't necessarily business tasks, but things like meal prep. If I put something in the fridge and then someone moves something in front of it, I'll forget it exists. Then I'll find it weeks later and it's like nasty and goeey and all that stuff. So reminding myself, "Hey, you have pasta salad that

you made for the week in the fridge. Don't forget about that. Go check on that."

- e. Then stuff you might need to follow up with. Just reminders. This also becomes a place where you can capture random ideas that you have inside of a Google doc. Again, you can take this stuff and move it somewhere later, but I just find that it's helpful because I'm in my inbox a lot during the day and I'm in Google, G Suite, Google Workspace a lot.
 - f. Then there's a place for hot links where you can create hyperlinks to specific things. Again, if you're working on a specific project and you want to link directly to it in Notion, or a specific email thread in Gmail, all those things you can do that.
2. Once you've tweaked this to your liking, **copy it**.
 3. **Then jump into Gmail and click "Compose."** If you do have a footer here, I recommend deleting it. Otherwise, you'll get a duplicate one when you create your template.
 4. **Then paste in the template** you just created and copied.
 5. **Next head over to the three dots for "more options"**
 6. **Hover over "templates,"** and **save as new template** called "Plan of The Day."
 7. **Open up a new email** and click on those same three dots, hover over "templates," and click on "Plan of The Day." And boom, it's going to create everything in there for you.

This is really helpful, especially if you've provided links to yourself, you can reference them again and again.

The magic happens when you go ahead and schedule things to yourself.

I always like to title these emails "Plan of The Day," and then give the actual day and date that I want to receive it. Monday, May 27th, 2024. Instead of clicking on Send, go to "more send options -> schedule send," and pick a specific time and date and then click "schedule send."

I'm going to share one last little magic trick to this process.

1. Click on the Gear icon -> See All Settings -> Filters and Blocked Addresses.
2. Click on "Create A New Filter," and type in your email address for both the From and To.
3. Pick the subject line "Plan of The Day," and hit "Create Filter."
4. Click "Start It."
5. Then you'll create a new label, and call this "Plan of The Day."

6. hit "Create Filter." You will see "Plan of the Day" under your labels.
7. Click on the three dots and you can change the label color to whatever you want.

This means whenever you click on the label, it's going to show all of your plan-of-the-day emails in one spot.

Recap

Let's recap what we went through:

- We talked about how lists can help
- We went over all the different ways and different ideas for lists and planning, pre-made decisions, understanding your energy capacity, reference materials, and so forth
- I gave you a list of lists to make
- I showed you some fun productivity hacks
- I've provided templates for you to use if you want to download the opt-in.

Stay in touch!

You can opt-in for my mailing list (and download my Google Template) here:

<https://mindfulproductivity.lpages.co/list-making-101-summit-opt-in/>

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