Summary of *To-do List Formula* by Damon Zahariades

I have a love-hate relationship with to-do lists.

I love them because they allow me to get things off my mind and focus on one task at a time.

➢ I hate them because they consistently make me feel like a failure. I'm not alone - according to iDoneThis (a popular productivity app), the average person fails to complete 41% of the items on their to-do lists.

➢ And I hate them because they get excessively long and cluttered with insignificant tasks.

This last "hate" is a common complaint of people who try the popular GTD (Getting Things Done) system. GTD is an awesome to-do list system for getting things out of your head and onto "Next action" lists, but it's not great at differentiating between high and low value tasks.

In "To-do List Formula," Damon Zahariades presents a method for getting stuff out of your head and into a well-organized master to-do list system where you can quickly identify your HITs (highest-impact tasks).

I've condensed Zahariades' master to-do list system into three acronyms (M.M.M., A.C.E., L.L.L.), which fit inside a three-by-three master to-do list system matrix.

The M.M.M. acronym explains how to sort your to-dos, the A.C.E. acronym explains how to write your to-dos, and the L.L.L. acronym explains how to label and filter your to-dos.
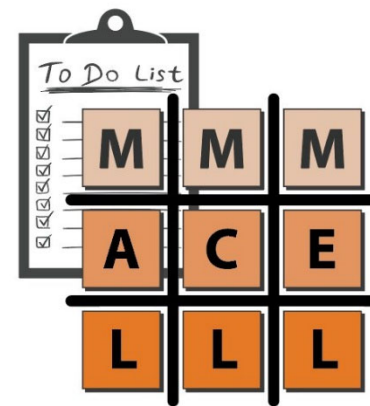
M.M.M. sorting method

Major Project Lists

Create a separate to-do list for every major project you're working on. A major project should take more than a few hours to complete and include several steps – like organizing the house, planning a trip to Hawaii, or building a website. When you create project-specific to-do lists, resistance to working on the project decreases because you have a list of next steps in one convenient location. Opening a dedicated project to-do list to work is like starting a recipe with all the necessary ingredients laid out on the counter, rather than having to search through the fridge.

Miscellaneous List

All non-project tasks go in the miscellaneous master list. Don't overthink it - if you can't easily connect a task to a project, put it on the miscellaneous master list. Having a miscellaneous list lets you capture tasks quickly and get them off your mind.

Maybe List

When you add a task to your major project lists and miscellaneous list, you must assign a deadline to it. If you're not ready to assign a deadline to a task, or the task is unclear, put it on the "maybe list."

Schedule time to revisit your "maybe" list once a week or month and see if you're ready to apply a deadline to a few items and move them to a major project list or the miscellaneous list.

A.C.E. formatting method

Every task in your master to-do list system must have the same three-part structure: ***A**ctive verb (**C**ommitment) - **E**xpected result.*

Active verb

Starting every task with an active verb makes your to-do lists less ambiguous and more actionable.

Compare:

➢ Chloe's birthday cake
➢ Expense report
➢ Car tires

With:

➢ Buy Chloe's birthday cake
➢ Finish expense report
➢ Rotate car tires

The second to-do list is simply easier to imagine. Damon Zahariades says, **"The verb triggers something in the brain, prompting it to focus on completing the item."**

Commitment

Adding a time commitment to each task forces you to consider the total time required to complete a task and plan your day more effectively. For example, *"Meet Steve to discuss the company rebrand"* may initially seem like a 30-minute task, but when you factor in the time to prepare for the meeting, the time it takes to get to the meeting, and the time to write a post-meeting summary email, "*Meet with Steve to discuss company rebrand"* is a 90-minute commitment.

Estimated time commitments also turn every to-do into a fun challenge because you can't help but wonder: *"How can I do this task quicker than the estimated time?"*

Expected result

The last thing you need to ask yourself when adding a task to your master to-do list system is, "*What is the expected result?"*

For example:

- Buy Chloe's birthday cake (30 minutes) – Chloe has a great birthday
- Finish expense report (15 minutes) – Reimbursed
- Rotate car tires (45 minutes) – Tires last longer

When you add expected results to tasks, the items on your to-do list go from things you "should" do to things you "want to" do. Ending each task with an expected result also allows you to easily select important tasks because you can quickly see which tasks move you closer to your goals.
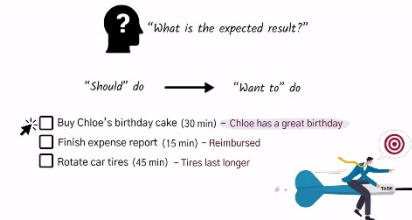
L.L.L. labeling method

Enhance your master to-do list system by adding three labels to your tasks when possible (depending on the to-do list application you use, you may use colored flags or tags to label your tasks. If you don't like using labels, then create three additional lists):

Location label: Assign a location label to tasks you must do in a specific location. For instance, "job site" for a construction manager, "weekly team meeting" for an office manager, or "client office" for a sales manager. I label all my errands with a general location label so I can quickly find them while doing errands around town.

Low Energy label: Assign a "Low Energy" label to simple tasks that require minimal mental effort, such as simple administrative tasks. When you don't feel like working but need to get stuff done, filter tasks by "low energy" and get a list of tasks you can attack in a zombie-like state.

Less than 15 Minutes label: Label every task you can complete in under 15 minutes. Labeling and hiding short tasks will ensure you add longer, more significant tasks to your daily to-do list. Think of it as hiding snack food so you don't fill up before a nice meal at a restaurant. Labeling tasks that take less than 15 minutes will also give you a list of tasks you can batch execute to save time – tasks like phone calls, errands, and emails.
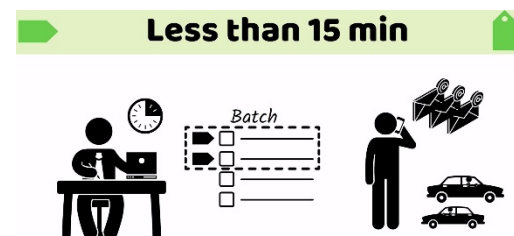
The daily to-do list

If you use the three-by-three master to-do list system matrix, your tasks will be sorted, formatted, and filtered in a way that makes it easy to create a daily to-do list.

Some people like to make their daily to-do list inside a to-do list app on their phones. Others like to use their calendars. I like to use a simple index card and pen - I put no more than seven high-impact tasks on the front of the index card and then write a few "less than 15 minutes" tasks on the back of the card and

circle items I can batch execute. Then, I add approximate starting times next to each task on my card and leave buffer time in between.

Each morning, I go back into the digital master to-do list system on my phone to clear the completed items before populating the current day's to-do list. This to-do list formula keeps me calm and focused because I know I'm not just getting stuff done, but getting the right stuff done.

Takeaway

Build a master to-do list system using the following methods:

1. Capture your to-dos in one of three lists: **M**ajor project (one for each major project), **M**iscellaneous, **M**aybe. Assign a deadline to every task you add to a major project list or the miscellaneous list.
2. Write every to-do in your master to-do list system using the same three-part structure: ***A**ction (**C**ommitment) - **E**xpected result.*
3. Use "**Lo**cation," "**L**ow energy," and/or "**L**ess than 15 minutes" labels/tags to quickly filter your to-do list and find special items.

Each day, move no more than seven high-impact tasks from your master to-do list system to your current day's to-do list.

Key Quotes

"Most people underestimate the importance of their to-do lists. They misjudge the impact their lists have on their productivity."

"The main purpose of your to-do list is to help you organize your tasks and projects, and highlight the important stuff. It allows you to get everything out of your head, where things are likely to fall through the cracks. By writing them down, you'll collect them in one place and gain a bird's-eye view of your biggest priorities."

"Your task list isn't a tool for getting everything done. Rather, it's a tool that will ensure you get the right things done."

"41% of to-do items are never completed. 50% of completed to-do items are done within a day. 18% of completed to-do items are done within an hour. 10% of completed to-do items are done within a minute." – iDoneThis

"A to-do list without deadlines is a wish list. Nothing more. Without deadlines, we lean toward inaction."

"Recall Parkinson's Law: 'Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.' If you choose not to assign deadlines to your to-do items, don't be surprised when those items linger on your list."

"Confronted with too many options, you avoid picking from among them because doing so requires too much mental effort. Instead, you spend valuable time checking email, visiting Facebook, and reading news headlines, all in an attempt to sidestep the act of deciding what to work on. The result is predictable. Your productivity plummets and your to-do items, including the important ones, go unfinished."

"Defining tasks too broadly is detrimental to their completion. Their vagueness ensures they linger. If you're having trouble completing to-do items, check whether they can be broken down to smaller tasks."

"You must attach a specific goal to each task on your to-do list. Know the reason each item needs to be completed. If you neglect this step, you'll be less motivated to get the item done."

"The simplest way to get through your daily to-do list is to assign a "why" to each item found on it. Know the reason the item is on your list. Determine why you need to get it done. Write the reason down next to the task."

"All other variables being equal, the more certain we are of the outcome, the greater the likelihood we'll act."

Bonus Insights from *To-do List Formula* by Damon Zahariades

Popular task management methods to further enhance your to-do list system:

The "2-3" and "1-3-5" method

If you start the day with an overly optimistic to-do list and fail to meet your expectations, you'll refrain from making daily to-do lists. Manage your expectations while making significant progress each day by using the 2-3 or 1-3-5 method.

The daily 2-3 method

Plan to complete two big tasks and three smaller tasks each day. Think of your big and small tasks in terms of *Pomodoros*. A Pomodoro is a 25-minute block of undistracted focus, followed by five minutes of rest and relaxation. The two large tasks on your 2-3 daily to-do list should take at least three Pomodoros each, and the three small tasks should take just one Pomodoro each. Thinking of tasks in terms of Pomodoros makes your 2-3 to-do list seem manageable, even if you're tired and don't feel like working.

The daily 1-3-5 method

Plan to complete one major, three medium, and five minor tasks each day. A major task might be *"Draft a proposal for my next book."* A medium task might be *"Prepare meals for the week."* A minor task might be *"Call vendor to update credit card information."*

Many people prefer the 1-3-5 method over the 2-3 method because it forces them to focus on one big thing they can prioritize over everything else. However, the 2-3 method is still popular because it provides flexibility when waiting on people – if you're waiting on information to complete a big task, start working on the other big task on your to-do list.

Action Plan #1:

If you consistently overestimate what you can do in a day, make your daily to-do list using the 2-3 method or the 1-3-5 method.

The Kanban method

The Kanban method is a visual task management system that turns tasks into cards or post-it notes and puts those tasks in either a "to-do," "doing," or "done" column on your wall or in a software program like Trello (tasks move from "to-do" to "doing" to "done").

The "to-do" column is your prioritized backlog of tasks. The "doing" column is the task you're working on and is typically limited to three items.

I love using Kanban boards for my major projects because when I see the "to-do" column shrink and the "done" column grow, I'm motivated to complete a project.

The Kanban method is excellent for project teams because when everyone on a project team looks at a shared board with names assigned to each task, they're driven to move their tasks from doing to done and show the team that they're doing their part to complete the project.

Bonus Insights from *To-do List Formula* by Damon Zahariades

When teammates see a task stuck in the "doing" column preventing tasks in the "to-do" column from moving to the "doing" column, they will offer to help clear the bottleneck. For example, if members of a mechanical engineering team at a car manufacturer notice "design the car chassis" has been sitting in the "doing" column for too long, they'll talk to the person in charge of that task to see if they can help.

A project Kanban board also makes for great project meetings because teammates can look at the board and discuss potential problems with upcoming tasks in the "to-do" column that could delay the project, like not having the right tools or resources to start a task.

Action Plan #2:

> Use a Kanban board for your next major project by setting up a "to-do," "doing," and "done" column on your wall or in the free software program Trello.
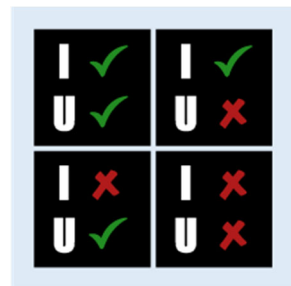
The Eisenhower matrix

Dwight D. Eisenhower managed over a million troops in World War II and an endless barrage of requests as President of the United States by relying on a 2x2 task management matrix. When a potential action item came Eisenhower's way, he considered which quadrant of the 2x2 matrix it fit into:

➢ Quadrant #1 (top-left): Important and urgent
➢ Quadrant #2 (top-right): Important and not urgent
➢ Quadrant #3 (bottom-left): Not important but urgent
➢ Quadrant #4 (bottom-right): Not important nor urgent

A task was important (Q1 or Q2) if it was essential to achieving his long-term vision and mission. A task was urgent (Q1 or Q3) if he felt pressure to do it quickly.

Eisenhower completed all Q1 tasks, made time for Q2 tasks, did a select few Q3 tasks, and mostly ignored Q4 tasks.

Separately assessing the importance and urgency of each task lead Eisenhower to believe, ***"The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent."*** This is the Eisenhower Principle.

You can see that most urgent tasks are not important by routinely asking, "*What is the worst that it's like could happen if I don't do this? And can I live with that?*" Or "*How might NOT doing this impact my long-term goals?*"

Action Plan #3:

> When you add a new task to your miscellaneous list, consider which quadrant of the important-urgent matrix the task belongs in, then flag the task with a Q1, Q2, Q3, or Q4 label.
>
> When working on your miscellaneous list, start with Q1 tasks, then Q2 tasks, then Q3 tasks, and finally Q4 tasks (only work on Q4 tasks if all other tasks are complete).
>
> If you rarely finish your Q2 tasks, block out at least one hour a day to treat Q2 tasks like Q1 tasks.