

Big-Picture Productivity: Defining Actionable Projects

Module 2, worksheet 4

Step 1: Make your projects actionable and completable

It is easier to start and easier to make progress when you focus on completing actionable projects than when you focus directly on achieving your goals. So let's practice defining actionable projects.

We want to create projects that are **completable**. Put differently: we want to create projects that have a defined outcome—an end point. If something is never-ending, it is not a project.

For example, "Exercise three times a week" is not completable. You can exercise three times this week, but then there will be next week, and you'll have to do it all over again. The never-ending nature of the statement "exercise three times a week" makes it difficult to work with. Instead, focus on a completable project, such as "set up a weekly exercise schedule". You'll do that project once and complete it. Or, choose "schedule weekly exercises on my calendar".

We also want to create projects that are **actionable**. This means you know how to start taking action and that the action is feasible for you right now.

For example, "become a better writer" is not actionable. Where do you start? You can complete that, but there is no clue of how you'll get there. In fact, "become a better writer" isn't a project at all—it's a goal. A better project would be "sign up for a fiction-writing masterclass". This project is much more actionable because you know how to do it: you'll research online classes and/or in-person classes and sign up for the one that appeals to you the most.

LET'S PRACTICE

I'll supply some non-completable, non-actionable statements. You'll convert them into actionable projects.

Example non-completable, non-actionable statement: Spend more time with my partner

Example actionable project: Create an every-other-week schedule for dates with my partner

Example non-completable, non-actionable statement: Get stronger

Example actionable project: Learn a beginner weightlifting routine

Now it's your turn. Turn the following statements into actionable projects:

Non-completable, non-actionable statement	Actionable project
Take more breaks	
Produce higher-quality videos	
Spend more time on deep work and less time in meetings	
Spend more time with my parents	
Take better photos on our next vacation	
Get my accounting up-to-date	
Organize my notes	
Sleep better	

Here's how you might have filled out the actionable projects in the table above:

Non-completable, non-actionable statement	Actionable project
Take more breaks	Test-drive a schedule of working for an hour, followed by a 15-minute break, for one week
Produce higher-quality videos	Buy professional lights and camera for home studio
Spend more time on deep work and less time in meetings	Set up recurring "deep work" blocks on my calendar (so that people cannot schedule meetings with me during that time)
Spend more time with my parents	Plan a sailing trip with my parents for this summer
Take better photos on our next vacation	Sign up for a vacation photography course
Get my accounting up-to-date	Process incoming and outgoing invoices through the end of last quarter
Organize my notes	In my notes app, create folders for this quarter's projects, and move the relevant notes into those folders
Sleep better	Remove all sound and light sources from the bedroom

Step 2: Get the scope right

Now you know how to make your projects actionable and completable. The next step is to get the scope of your projects right.

We'll be scheduling your actionable projects by quarter of the year. That means that you want your actionable projects to have such a scope that you can complete at least a few of them each quarter. If you have projects in mind that are bigger, that's no problem—just cut them down into smaller bits.

We want your projects to be neither too broad nor too narrow, but instead *just right*.

TOO BROAD

If you define your projects too broadly, you'll make it more difficult to get started.

Example (too broad): Start a wedding photography business

Example (too broad): Publish more peer-reviewed papers

Example (too broad): Get help with losing weight

"Projects" that are too broad, like the ones above, are usually in fact goals.

TOO NARROW

If you define your projects too narrowly, you'll end up with way too many of them, and it will be hard to keep track of them all.

Example (too narrow): Email Janelle offering to photograph her wedding for a discount

Example (too narrow): Talk to one colleague about collaborating on a new paper

Example (too narrow): Ask for recommendations for weight coaches on social media

JUST RIGHT

If you get the scope of your projects just right, you'll be able to complete them in a quarter, and they will meaningfully move you forward.

Example (just right): Build a portfolio by photographing five weddings for a discount

Example (just right): Outline a new paper to submit to the *New England Journal of Medicine*

Example (just right): Hire a nutrition and fitness coach

LET'S PRACTICE

Now it's your turn again. Turn the overly broad and overly narrow example projects into "just right" ones.

Example (too broad): Make more business connections

Example (too narrow): Connect on LinkedIn with the other participants from that workshop

Just right:

Example (too broad): Improve my home office

Example (too narrow): Buy two plants for my home office

Just right:

Example (too broad): Outsource my accounting

Example (too narrow): Set up a phone call with an accountant

Just right:

Example (too broad): Market my consulting services

Example (too narrow): Write a blog post about the services I offer

Just right:

Step 3: Create actionable projects for one of your goals

Finally, let's practice creating actionable projects for one of your goals. We'll take just one of your goals here, as you're learning to properly define your projects. Then, in the next lesson, you'll create actionable projects for your other goals.

First, choose the goal you'd most like to make progress on. Write that goal down below:

Goal:

Then, write down some actionable projects to help you achieve this goal. Remember to keep the projects completable, actionable, and of just the right scope.

Q: What actionable projects come to mind for achieving this goal?

Done? Awesome! You should have gotten the hang of this whole "actionable projects" idea by now. Move on to the next lesson to create actionable projects for your other goals.