



SIGNET
EDUCATION

A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO STRATEGIC ORGANIZATION:

How to Use Your Time More Efficiently, Charge Through Your To-Do List, and Never Lose Your Keys Again.

Being organized is one of those traits that is universally respected and admired. Who doesn't want to save time and energy, reduce stress, and get more done?

The ability to be organized is also a crucial part of academic success. Good grades are only pieces of the equation. Students are also balancing rigorous academics, clubs, sports, social activities, and family time. With a demanding schedule and pressure to perform well, students cannot afford to be disorganized.

Unfortunately, there are many organizational tools that are overly complicated and overwhelming.

At Signet, our goal is to help students work smarter, not harder. In this guide, we'll illustrate practical, simple protocols to get on track and stay organized!

What does being organized mean?

It means having a system in place to help you get things done. This system should be reliable enough that it reduces your stress, rather than add to it.

Cal Newport, an author and university professor, has done excellent field research on how organization can improve well-being: "When asked what one skill was most important in becoming a non-grind straight-A student, most of them [students] cited the ability to get work done quickly and with a minimum of wasted effort."¹

Anyone can learn to be organized.

Some people seem inherently organized, like they were born with a checklist and calendar in hand. Others would lose their body parts if they weren't attached. Although we all have different tendencies when it comes to organization, just remember: Organization is a 100% trainable skill. Anyone can improve their organization with the right tools and consistent practice.

Less is more.

At Signet, we embrace the "less is more" approach to organization, meaning we believe that students

should spend the least amount of time necessary to get their desired results. Organization should not require hours of effort each day!

However, being organized does require daily commitment, because even the best system is only helpful if it's used consistently. This investment of time and energy pays big returns. Imagine how much effort students could save by simply knowing where their stuff is and what they need to do next!

Three Components of Organization

The three basic components of organization are:

1. Managing Tasks.
2. Managing Time.
3. Managing Stuff.

These three elements will allow any student to build a strong foundation for organization. Once these three components are running consistently, students can address the fourth component of organization: Managing Energy.

STEP 1:

MANAGING TASKS

A task is an actionable item that needs to be accomplished. If a calendar holds blocks of time as appointments, tasks are the things you actually do during those appointments.

Good task management means the ability to:

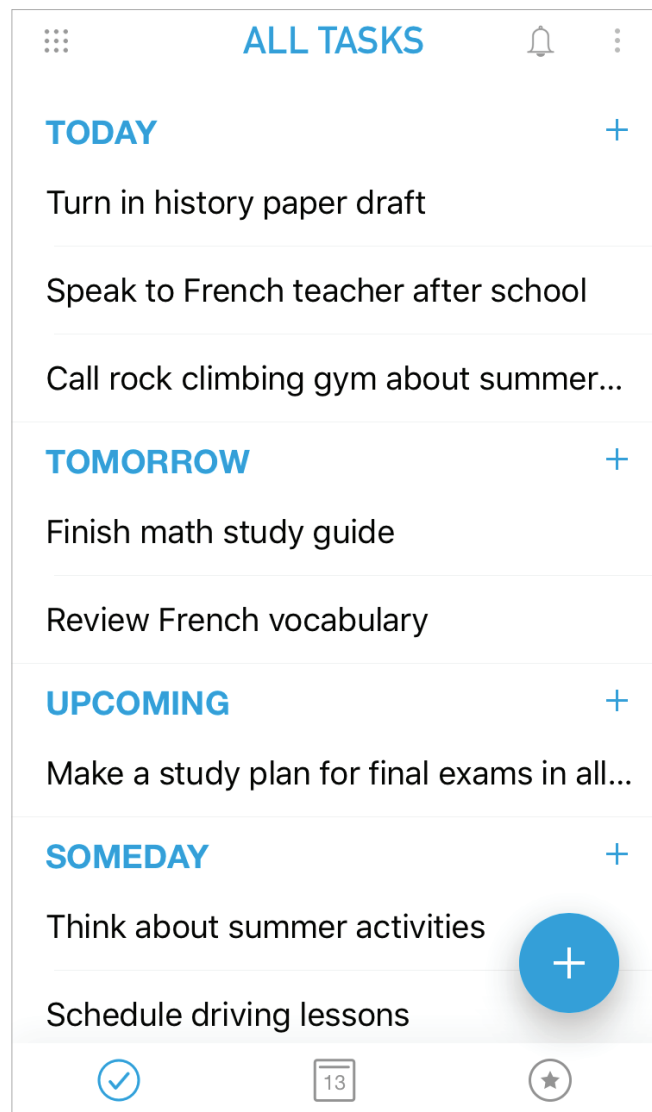
1. Identify a task
2. Capture that task in a system and ensure it is completed
3. Prioritize tasks by importance and due date
4. Break down big assignments into smaller, actionable chunks

The benefit of all this task-mastering? Students have a reliable system in place that accurately captures everything to be accounted for: no misremembered deadlines, no last-minute cramming, and no overlooked opportunities. Newport reminds us that "to-dos and deadlines that exist only in your mind drain your energy, distract your attention, create stress, and are more likely to be forgotten."

¹Newport, Cal. How to Become a Straight-A Student. (New York: Three River Press, 2006).

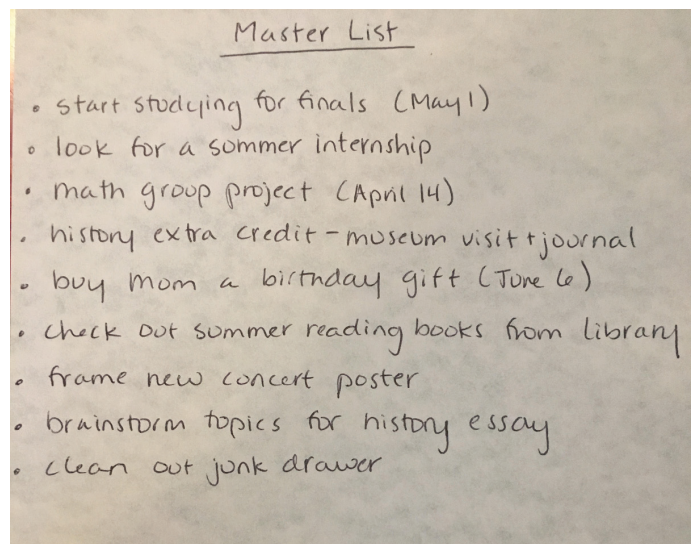
TOOL: A TASK LIST – All tasks should be stored in one place, which can be digital or physical. Easily re-organize tasks by date using tasking apps like any.do and Wunderlist. A simple paper notebook can be just as effective.

PROTOCOL: Place tasks and assignments on the task list immediately, and sort them by priority (since not every task takes the same amount of time, has the same due date, or is of the same importance).



Screenshot from any.do

We also like working with a **Master List** (here shown in paper format) that contains all of the tasks and activities that need to be accomplished. From there, students can pull upcoming tasks into the task app.



Once the task has been captured, and its due date/priority assigned, students can assign time on the calendar to work on it, (which we'll address in Step 2). Let's refer back to our Math and History homework example. A student's task list might look like this:

- *Math: read pages 37-53, work through questions page 54-57 (due tomorrow)*
- *History: handout with discussion questions and read Chapter 4 (due tomorrow)*

The task list contains the details of the assignments. The student can use that information to determine how much time they need to complete each task. In this case, the student allotted 2 hours on Monday to complete Math and History homework.

Simple, short tasks, such as "get permission slip signed" or "bring Hamlet to English class" generally don't need to be added to the calendar, because they don't need special time allotted to complete them.

Projects vs. Tasks

A task is an item that can be accomplished in a set block of time. A project is a series of tasks grouped together under one assignment. Writing a paper, for example, is a single project composed of many individual tasks.

When a student is assigned a project, they should write it down on their task list. Then, during daily

review, they can break that project out into its various tasks, and set appointments on the calendar to complete those tasks as necessary.

For larger projects, students can use our **Project Planning Sheet** (see Appendix), which will help turn an overwhelming assignment into a set of logical, concrete tasks.

ROUTINES: The task list is most effective when reviewed and maintained on a daily basis. The daily review is the time for prioritizing and re-sequencing the task list as needed.

Another important routine is taking things OFF the task list. Sometimes there are items that sit on a task list for weeks, adding extra pressure and unnecessary guilt. Students should regularly ask themselves “Is there anything on my task list I can let go of?” and remove those items accordingly.

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STEP 2:

MANAGING TIME

Time management is so important since we only have a finite number of hours each day. When you’re in school, fitting the right activities into the right time slots can feel like a game of Tetris. If you play the game well, you have time for everything, with room to spare. If you don’t manage time well, those demands keep piling up...and it’s game over.

Good time management requires defining what’s non-negotiable in a student’s schedule. School hours, team practices, and club meetings are all non-negotiables. Students who manage time well show up consistently and promptly for these obligations.

Students must also manage their time in order to complete homework, work on long-term projects, and have a social life. These activities are not automatically scheduled into the student’s day. Organizing a schedule helps students estimate how long their homework will take each night so they can allot enough hours to complete it.

Cal Newport writes that most students “misunderstand the purpose of time management —they believe it’s used only to cram as much work as possible into the day.”² The benefits of time management go beyond high productivity. Healthy time management reduces stress, and allows a student to concentrate fully on the task in front of them, rather than worrying about everything else they need to accomplish.

Time ticks by, no matter what we do. At its core, time management is a way for students to gain control over the passage of time. By matching tasks with time in deliberate ways, they can dictate their own pace of life and fill it with more activities they truly enjoy.

TOOL: A CALENDER – We like Google Calendar.

PROTOCOLS: The calendar should contain non-negotiable activities, which are appointments students set with other people. Activities should be added to the calendar as soon as they arise to avoid forgetting or double-booking their schedules. Examples can include:

- *Tues 7-9pm: Soccer practice*
- *Wed 6-7pm: Bio study group*
- *Thurs 4-5pm: Math Club meeting*

Once all the non-negotiables have been filled in, students can also use the calendar to set appointments with themselves. Examples may include:

- *Mon 5-7pm: Math & History homework*
- *Fri 3-4pm: Me time!*

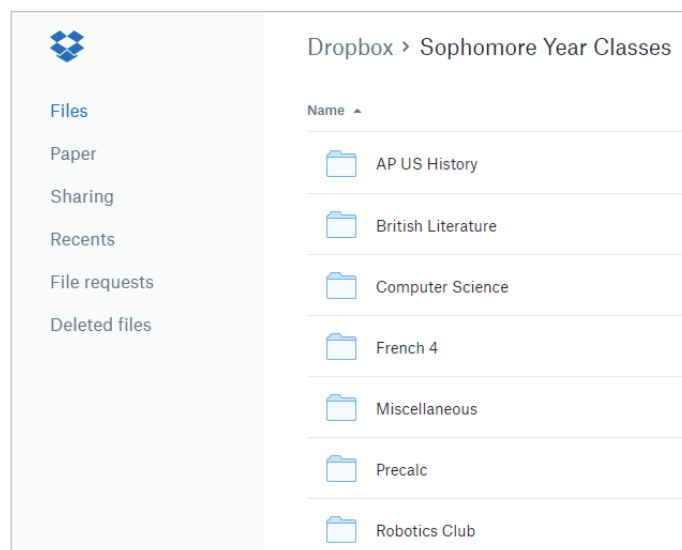
DON'T:

- * Overcrowd the calendar with details. There's a separate tool for this that we'll cover.
- * Clutter up the calendar with “maybe” activities. Students should treat their calendar as gospel. If an appointment makes it onto the calendar, it’s a firm commitment. Otherwise the calendar loses its authority, and students may end up not “listening” to it.

²Newport, Cal. *How to Become a Straight-A Student*. (New York: Three River Press, 2006).

The end result might look something like this:

GMT-04	Mon 9/18	Tue 9/19	Wed 9/20	Thu 9/21	Fri 9/22
8am	7:30 - 2:30p School Day	7:30 - 2:30p School Day	7:30 - 2:30p School Day	7:30 - 2:30p School Day	7:30 - 2:30p School Day
9am					
10am					
11am					
12pm					
1pm					
2pm					
3pm	3p - 4:30p Cross Country Practice	3p - 4:30p Cross Country Practice	3p - 4:30p Cross Country Practice	3p - 4:30p Cross Country Practice	
4pm					
5pm	5p - 7p Math and History Homework	4:45p - 6p Math Club	5p - 6:30p Read Picture of Dorian Gray	5p - 7p Study for Chemistry quiz; Start History paper	
6pm					
7pm		6:30p - 7:30p French Vocabulary			7p - 10p Birthday Party for Annalise



ROUTINES: Students should get in the habit of reviewing their calendar at least once per day to make sure it's up to date. Morning is the ideal time to review, and a second, quick review each evening can prepare students for the following day.

Be consistent about moving digital files into the proper folders! Students can take advantage of the ability to rename each file, adding the date and a description that makes sense to them.

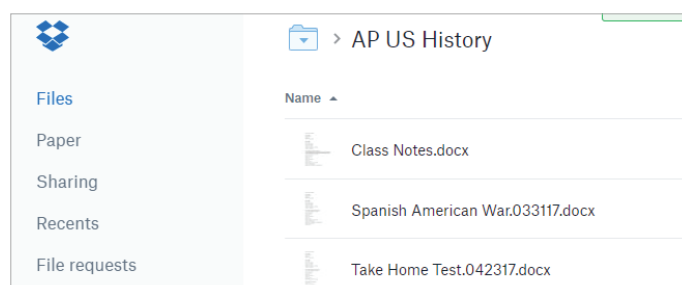
STEP 3: MANAGING STUFF

"Stuff" is the physical (or in some cases digital) element, the tangible things students need to keep tabs on.

Good stuff management means being able to track academic tools, such as a laptop, notebooks, or folders, as well as the various papers being distributed back and forth between teachers and students.

TOOLS: For stuff management, we recommend having a separate folder/binder and notebook for each class. The folder/binder holds handouts, quizzes, exams, and papers that the student receives or turns in. The notebook includes notes, homework problems, and any questions the student has.

If there are digital files, create a separate digital folder for that class with all relevant files in it. We recommend a cloud-sharing platform like Dropbox or Google Drive, so that files are accessible from any device.



The result is that everything for a class is in one of three places: the folder, the notebook, or the digital folder.

PROTOCOLS: When students receive any materials in class, they should put the date on top, then order the materials chronologically in the appropriate folder.

If taking notes on a laptop, use one text file for each class. Each time the class meets, create a new section and add the date. This makes it easier to search for specific references and reduces the number of files to keep track of. If taking notes in a notebook, start a new page and put the date at the top each time the class meets.

ROUTINES: "A place for everything and everything in its place" may sound cliché, but it's true! Students should try putting pencils in the same pouch and leaving their backpack in the same

spot each day. These habits take effort at first, but eventually they become second nature.

Perform a daily “clean-up” of stuff to ensure materials are easy to find. If a folder or binder for one class becomes too cumbersome, file away older assignments at home.

When organization seems like a drag, remember that being organized isn’t an end to itself. An organized student reaps serious benefits, including better focus, higher productivity, less stress, and a happier, more satisfying high school experience. So grab your calendar and your task list, and let’s get cracking!

STEP 4:

MANAGING ENERGY

There is a fourth component to organization, and that’s managing energy. It’s a next-level skill that we can approach in more detail once the three foundational components of organization in this guide are in place.

The good news is that students who efficiently manage their time, tasks, and stuff will already be managing their energy better. How? By establishing routines that reduce the need for constant decision-making. This reduces decision fatigue, frees up mental headspace, and provides a greater ability for students to accomplish what they need to.

A more nuanced exploration of energy management might include the influence of diet, study environment, sleep, exercise, and concentration levels on a student’s performance. This information could then be used to design an ideal study and activity schedule. But let’s not get too ahead of ourselves here. Students beginning their organizational journey should first focus on time, tasks, and stuff.

Conclusion

We hope this guide has been helpful in providing a simple, straightforward system students can use to track the three basic components of organization: time, tasks, and stuff. While adopting an “organized outlook” will be unfamiliar to many high-schoolers (and grown-ups too!), it’s well worth the effort. Students who want a more in-depth look at any of the processes described below can reach out to us for information on our academic organizational coaching services.

DAILY/WEEKLY ROUTINES

Remember: you can have the best organizational system in the world, but it will only work effectively if it is tended to on a regular basis. Consistency and practice are the glue that holds organization together.

DAILY

- ☐ Review calendar and task list in the morning.
- ☐ Make general plan for the day.
- ☐ Collect and gather materials as they come in during the day.
- ☐ In the afternoon before homework, check back in on the plan to integrate any urgent activities that came in that day.
- ☐ Resequence activities if needed and work through the plan.
- ☐ In the evening, tidy up the calendar and task list (glance ahead at the next day, cross off, recategorize, and reschedule as needed)
- ☐ Get rid of any items on the list that do NOT actually need to be completed

WEEKLY

- ☐ Look ahead at the following week, either on Friday/Saturday or Sunday/Monday.
- ☐ Go through each class, as well as clubs, teams, etc. and note anything that needs to be planned for in advance.
- ☐ Identify any projects that need to be broken down into tasks, and break them down accordingly.
- ☐ Tidy up calendar and task list as needed.
- ☐ Evaluate the calendar and task list for items that are unnecessary and should NOT be done.
- ☐ As this becomes easier, start to look two to three weeks out, instead of just at the week ahead.

SEMESTER REFLECTION

This section is intended to help you evaluate your past semester. This will give you a sense of the progress you have made so far, and help you identify areas where you'd like to see growth as you look toward next semester.

On a holistic scale of 1 to 10 (1 = never want to go through that again; 10 = that was awesome!), how would you rate your semester? Why?

What are three things that went well?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are three things you'd like to work on?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Pick three goals for next semester. These goals can be academic, health-related, social, extracurricular, relational, or spiritual. While it may be tempting to choose more, limit yourself to three in order to keep your goals manageable. Bring your goals to life. For example, you might create a Health-related goal of "getting more sleep," but also include "feeling well-rested and energized throughout the day."

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

How will you measure each goal? How will you know when you've reached it?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

When will you review your progress? With whom? Set yourself up for success by reviewing on an ongoing basis (weekly or even monthly). Revisiting your goals often makes it easier to maintain focus throughout the semester. Set a specific time to review your progress, and ask a friend, parent, teacher, or tutor to help you review. The extra accountability will help you stay consistent.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.