



Write it down: Getting the most out of your mind



By *Seth Macbeth*

If there was ever a top prize awarded for guilty pleasures, I would have to award mine to making lists. Although dipping Rolos in sea salt and listening to Sean Paul both come close, when it comes to making lists, there is nothing better. I. I. LOVE. Lists.

I think we all have that love inside of us – there’s a fascination and allure to list making that has created something of an art form. In fact, there are books that we can purchase that help us create the perfect list; the Listography series by Lisa Nola is a great example of this. We can also read lists made by others, like in Shaun Usher’s ‘Lists of Note’ – a collection of 125 lists spanning from Ancient Egypt to F. Scott Fitzgerald.

We create lists for everything; things to do, possessions we own, schedules to keep, life goals to achieve, instructions to follow, recipes to make... the list of lists goes on!

But why do we love them so? What is it about making a list that is not only helps us to remember and achieve our goals, but also makes us feel more at peace, more secure, and better able to achieve?



The illusion of order in chaos.

When I write a list it’s mainly because my memory is awful, and I need a helping hand keeping all my thoughts at the forefront of my mind. It’s a mess in there, cluttered up with tasks for the day, funny things I saw on the internet, groceries to pick up, projects to get started, new ideas, old ideas, things to tell my Mum etc etc. Chaotic.

By creating a list, we are essentially emptying all of that out, and clearing our mind of the chaos and noise so that we can think more clearly, and calm a storm of thousands of thoughts rushing through our heads. Yes it helps us remember, but that sense of calm and release of stress when we write things down comes from our brains not feeling the pressure to hold so many things right there and then. Instead of wasting brain power trying to keep these thoughts somewhere we’ll remember them, a list helps us to take that stress off our minds, and helps to work through the thoughts and questions we have.

Categorize and focus.

So now our minds are quieter thanks to our handy scrap of paper we poured our brain onto. But if you have a lot of wild and crazy thoughts, or a lot to do in a day, it can seem overwhelming to have a tall receipt of things to accomplish as long as your arm sitting on the desk.

By writing tasks down, we can hand select the most important things to do first, prioritize what we need to get done, and achieve our goals more efficiently, and with less stress. It also helps us break down bigger, scarier tasks into bite-size, manageable chunks that are more likely to get done. For example, you can write “destroy vampires” to get it out of your head. Then, when you break that down, you have a selection of more manageable tasks that don’t seem quite so daunting, and you can tick them off one at a time – “whittle steaks” / “patrol graveyard” / “engage in combat.”



Preventing procrastination.

If you’ve got a long list of things you want to do or goals you want to achieve in your head, then that’s usually where they stay. They get lost in the mix and never really turn into action. Putting a name to a thing makes it easier for us to process, and less likely to block it out – you know that annoying feeling when you’re sick, but you don’t know what’s wrong? Then the doctor says “it’s strep throat” and you say “I’m relieved I know what it is now!” – same thing.

Combat avoidance by having it written there in front of you, so you can’t shy away. Whatever the task, it stops being a dream, or a thought, and becomes an actual event to tick off. This reminds me of an awesome Zen Pencils comic that really rang true with me. Make some time to read it, and their other work!

See it, do it, achieve it.

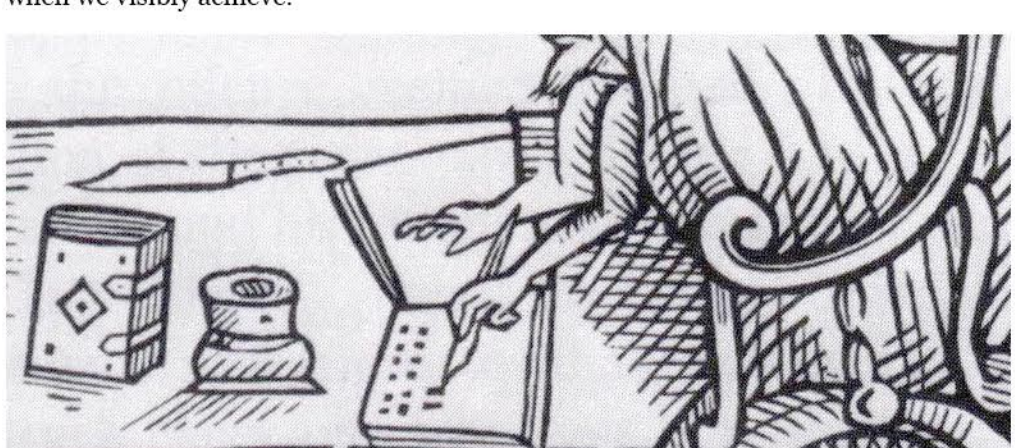
Writing a list of things to do around the house, goals in life, people to call, anything at all, gives us a visual target that we can see and adhere to. There is someone there in paper form to hold us accountable for our actions or inaction, and make sure we are aware of the things that aren’t getting completed or achieved.

Pete always tells me to do 3 things a day. My lists are endless, and sometimes I look at them and despair. Because even if I tick off 7 things, if the list is 10 things long, I feel like I’ve failed. This is not true. Achieving even one cross-off on a list means you’re heading in the right direction. If you set a sensible and easily manageable goal for the day – 3 things will be ticked off the list – not only will you feel great to accomplish your goal, but anything after that is extra credit.

More than a feeling.

What a rush it is to grab that marker and pull a thick, heavy line through a completed task! I don’t know what it feels like to give birth to a child, or win an Olympic medal, but I gotta tell you, I think crossing off something on your to-do list comes pretty close.

The cross-off is our reward. It’s visible proof that we have accomplished something we set out to do, and that feels amazing. Even the little things feel good, because combining pleasure and duty makes us want to work more, because we feel good when we visibly achieve.



If you’re new to the power of lists, and have so far only used them to remember to get milk, bread and three tins of tuna, here are a few things to help you get started on loving the world of listing –

-- WRITE. IT. DOWN. – No matter what it is, how big or small the thought, idea, question, item, whatever. Write it down. Write it down! The biggest lie we as humans tell ourselves is “...I’ll remember that” – get it out of your brain, and give your mind a rest, you’ll feel better.

-- What works for you – Figure out what works best for you, instead of trying to push yourself to list in a certain way. Like to make charts? Use arrows? Write questions? Draw doodles? Do it. Fall in love with your list.

-- Verb it up – In every item you add, be sure to add a verb, or ‘doing word’ – this makes it more likely for us to actually do that task, because it’s far less ambiguous, and you’re less likely to forget what it means or stress on it because it’s still in your mind. E.g. “EMPIRE?” all in caps becomes “buy stately ball gown” / “woo powerful emperor” / “WRITE 2 paragraphs of wedding” etc. – don’t forget to break it into manageable chunks.

-- Categorize – If your brain just vomited ten thousand things onto a piece of paper, there’s probably little chance that you’ll want to look at that every day and try and decipher anything from it. So take some time to go through and make categories for your lists – long term goals, household chores, ideas for children’s books etc. Setting timelines for each item can help too.

-- Keep it to yourself – Try not to talk about the things on your list until you’ve ticked them off. Talking about goals and things we want to do are great, but if we do it too much we create the false sense of achievement, because we get praise from our peers for the idea, rather than the action itself.

Tick it off! – Oh boy, this is the best bit. Enjoy it. Find a way to really savour that process. I like to cross things out with a specific highlighter pen, so that it really stands out how much I’ve achieved. You might want to draw a big tick, scribble across it, have your photo taken next to it...whatever it is, revel in it. It’s awesome.