Unstuck:

Why You Put Things Off and How to Start Anyway



Finally

GET MOVING

Less guilt, more done

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A man with a full-time job at the Post Office once published 47 novels.

He didn't quit his job to write, and he didn't wait for weekends, a free month or the mood to strike.

What he did sounds almost too small to matter.

He sat down at 5:30 every morning, put his watch on the desk, and asked himself for 250 words every quarter of an hour.

Then he did it again, and again, and went off to work.

The novelist was Anthony Trollope, and I love his story because his trick was never willpower.

Every 15 minutes he got a small win he could see, so the big book never had a chance to feel big.

Now think about the thing you keep putting off, like the report, the course you paid for, or the side project you talk about at dinner and never open.

You care about it, and that's exactly what makes it so strange that you can't start.

I wrote this for you. You already have the plans and the ideas, and I want you sitting down tomorrow and starting without the fight.

There are three things I'm sure of.

You are not lazy; you're avoiding a feeling, which is a very different problem with a much easier fix.

Getting more organised is the most overrated advice there is for putting things off.

And being kind to yourself after a bad day does more for tomorrow than any amount of telling yourself off.

The research is firmly on your side here. Students who dreaded a project found it far easier than they expected once they finally began.

Students who forgave themselves for putting off study went on to put off less before the next exam.

And across hundreds of tests, one kind of sentence written in advance gets people moving far better than a time in a calendar.

In the pages ahead you'll find

- Why the thing you care about most is the one you avoid, and what to do with that feeling
- How to get going on a day you don't feel ready, without waiting for motivation
- The one sentence that starts your work for you, so willpower stops being the deciding vote
- How to stop polishing the first step and actually take it
- How to find the one decision hiding inside a stuck task
- How to bounce back after a missed day so one slip never becomes a lost month

None of it takes long, and most of it fits in five minutes. Pick one idea tonight and leave the rest for later.

By the last page you'll know why you've been stuck and exactly how tomorrow's start will go.

Trollope had his watch, so let's find your quarter of an hour.



You're Dodging a Feeling, and the Feeling Lies About the Size of the Job

Putting something off is a way to feel better right now.

The task brings up something unpleasant, like boredom, doubt or the worry that you'll do it badly, and walking away gives you quick relief.

The stronger that feeling, the harder you avoid the task, and that's why the thing you care about most is so often the one that never gets touched.

> **Good time management works best once the feeling behind the delay is handled, because the feeling is what starts it.**
>
> A psychologist who has spent her career studying why people put things off

The relief doesn't even last. When researchers ask people how they feel while they're actually off task, they don't say they're happier.

They describe a mix of feelings, and guilt is one of them.

So the trade you're making with yourself doesn't pay out, and the guilt makes the task feel heavier tomorrow.

There's a second reason you dodge the things that matter.

Those are the tasks with a verdict attached, so if you try hard and it doesn't work, it can feel like proof you weren't good enough.

Starting the important thing at 11pm after a day of tidy admin gives you a ready excuse.

Researchers who pulled together **43 studies** of about 10,000 people found that worry about mistakes and doubt about your own work were what drove delay, while high standards on their own did not.

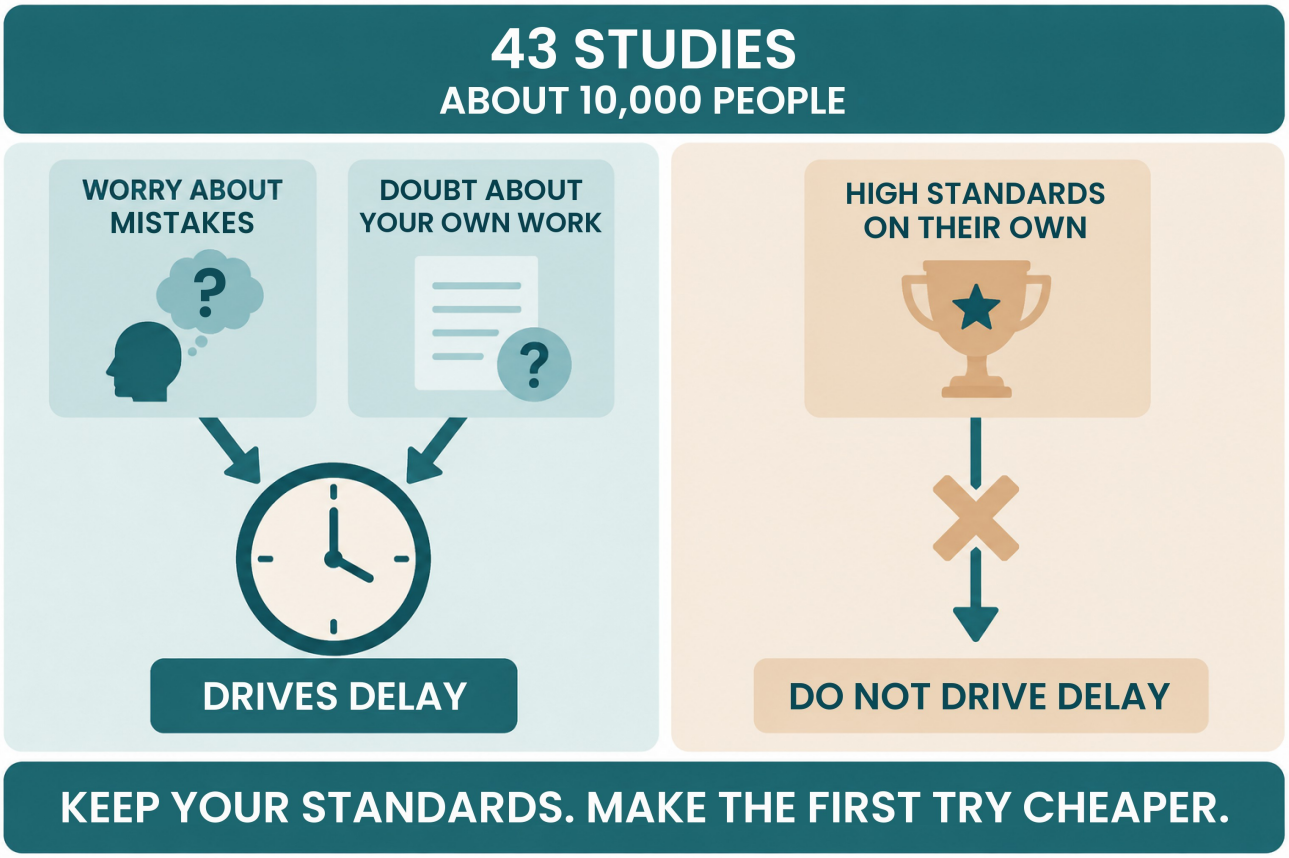
That means you can keep your standards exactly where they are and make the first try cheaper.

So drop the labels.

The person who is late with coursework is usually on time for a friend, a boss or a free concert, and that shows the delay comes from the task in front of you.

You're protecting yourself from a verdict.


PUTTING A TASK OFF GIVES YOU QUICK RELIEF, BUT THE GUILT THAT FOLLOWS MAKES THE TASK FEEL HEAVIER TOMORROW.
WHAT IF IT'S BAD?
REPORT
THE REPORT SHE CARES ABOUT BRINGS UP DOUBT AND THE WORRY THAT SHE WILL DO IT BADLY.
RELIEF
WALKING AWAY FROM THE TASK GIVES HER A QUICK FEELING OF RELIEF.
GUILT
BORED
UNEASY
THE RELIEF DOES NOT LAST, BECAUSE TIME OFF THE TASK COMES WITH A MIX OF FEELINGS, AND GUILT IS ONE OF THEM.
A DAY LATER
REPORT
THE GUILT MAKES THE REPORT FEEL HEAVIER TOMORROW, SO THE TRADE DOES NOT PAY OUT AND IT IS BETTER TO FACE THE FEELING TODAY.



Why Busywork, Waiting to Feel Ready and Tighter Schedules Keep You Stuck

In a study of about 1,100 students, the most common way to delay something hard was to do an easier, related task first.

It beat scrolling and TV, and it goes unnoticed because it looks like work.

Clearing the inbox, reorganising files and reading one more productivity tip all fit that same shape.

Waiting to feel ready is the other quiet trap.

It feels sensible to wait until tomorrow, when you'll have more energy, but tomorrow-you feels just the same, because the good feeling arrives after you start.

That's why you can start without feeling ready, and it's how the people who got better did it.

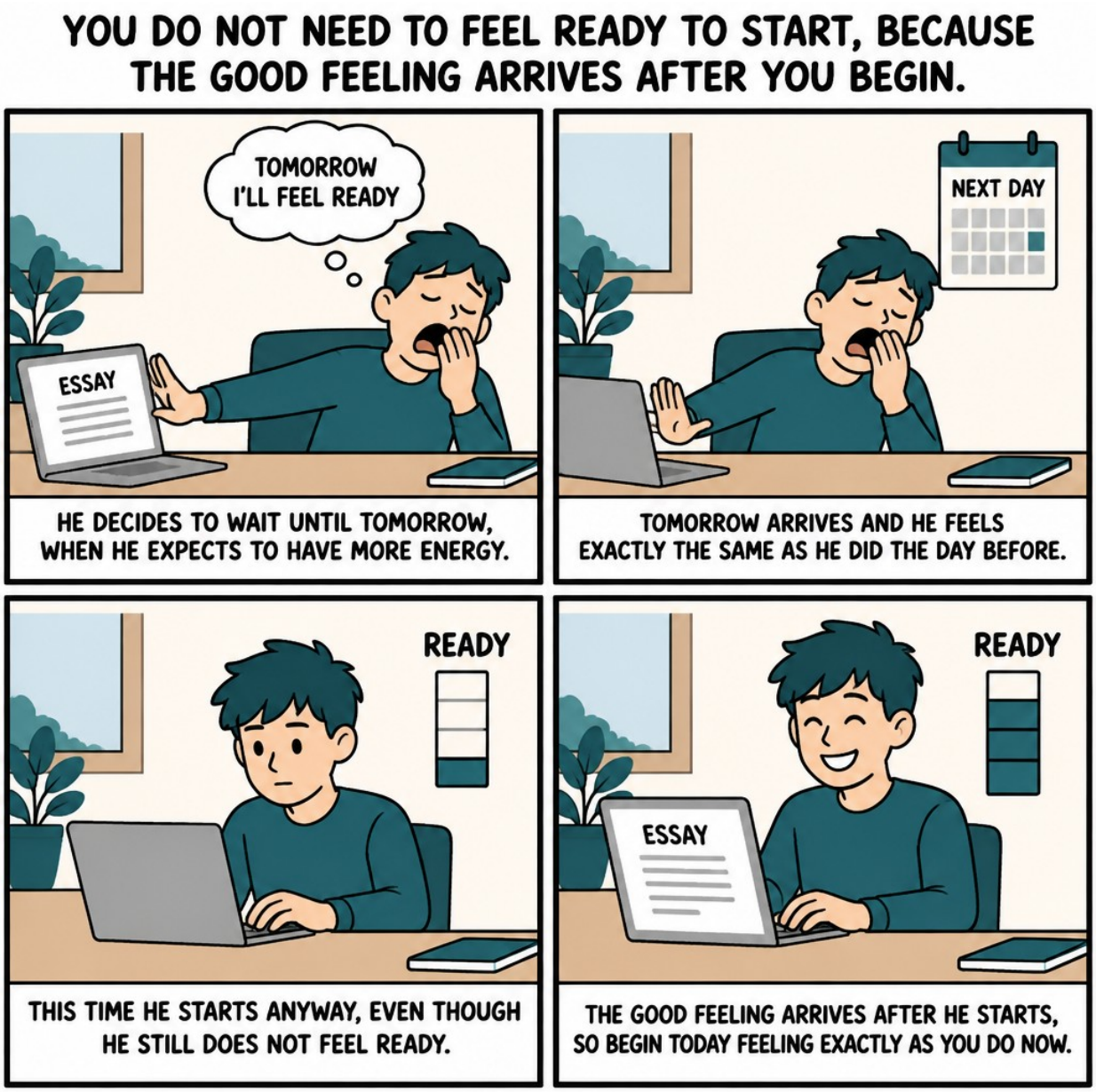
Starting first and letting confidence catch up works. In a trial with 71 students, putting things off dropped sharply while their confidence barely moved.

So you can begin today, feeling exactly as you do now.

Stricter schedules help with the when, but a time in a calendar does nothing about the feeling, so 9am arrives and you negotiate all over again.

Deadlines you set for yourself tend to slide, too, because most people pick the latest date they can.

A date someone else is waiting on works better, so ask a friend or colleague to expect your draft on Friday morning.


YOU DO NOT NEED TO FEEL READY TO START, BECAUSE THE GOOD FEELING ARRIVES AFTER YOU BEGIN.
TOMORROW I'LL FEEL READY
ESSAY
HE DECIDES TO WAIT UNTIL TOMORROW, WHEN HE EXPECTS TO HAVE MORE ENERGY.
NEXT DAY
TOMORROW ARRIVES AND HE FEELS EXACTLY THE SAME AS HE DID THE DAY BEFORE.
READY
THIS TIME HE STARTS ANYWAY, EVEN THOUGH HE STILL DOES NOT FEEL READY.
READY
ESSAY
THE GOOD FEELING ARRIVES AFTER HE STARTS, SO BEGIN TODAY FEELING EXACTLY AS YOU DO NOW.

Three quiet traps that keep you stuck, and what works instead

THE TRAP	WHY IT FAILS	WHAT WORKS
BUSYWORK	LOOKS LIKE WORK, SO NOBODY NOTICES	SPOT IT: THE EASIER TASK IS THE DELAY
WAITING TO FEEL READY	TOMORROW-YOU FEELS THE SAME	START FIRST, CONFIDENCE CATCHES UP
TIGHTER SCHEDULES	A TIME DOES NOTHING ABOUT THE FEELING	SOMEONE ELSE EXPECTS YOUR DRAFT ON FRIDAY

Start for Five Minutes, and Leave It Open

Pick the task you've been avoiding, set a real timer for five minutes and start anywhere. When it rings, you are completely free to stop.

That last part is what makes it work, because the part of you that's avoiding the task only believes the deal if the exit is real.

If five minutes feels too big, shrink the task until it fits, like opening the document and writing one sentence.

The point of those five minutes is to leave the task open.

People naturally drift back to a task they've started and left unfinished, and a large review of the research found that pull holds up again and again.

In one experiment, people interrupted by a fake network problem dismissed the message and went straight back to work.

So once something is started, it starts tugging at you in a good way.

> **The scariest moment is always just before you start. After that, things can only get better.**
> Stephen King

Jerry Seinfeld does the same thing from the other end.

He told his daughter, who planned to write all day, to try one hour, because a session should have an end time.

Stopping when the alarm rings is the reward for doing the work. Knowing the end is close makes sitting down far less daunting.

> **Leave a note for tomorrow** Before you stop, write one line saying where you are, what comes next and what to open first. That way tomorrow you just carry on from where you left off.


WORK FOR FIVE MINUTES WITH A REAL WAY OUT, AND THE UNFINISHED TASK WILL PULL YOU BACK.
ONLINE COURSE
5:00
HE SETS A REAL TIMER FOR FIVE MINUTES AND PROMISES HIMSELF HE CAN STOP WHEN IT RINGS.
2:14
HE STARTS ANYWHERE, BECAUSE THE ONLY GOAL IS TO GET THE TASK OPEN.
0:00
NEXT: LESSON 2, OPEN NOTES FIRST
WHEN THE TIMER RINGS HE STOPS AND WRITES ONE LINE ABOUT WHERE HE IS AND WHAT COMES NEXT.
NEXT MORNING
NEXT: LESSON 2, OPEN NOTES FIRST
THE UNFINISHED TASK TUGS AT HIM, AND THE NOTE LETS HIM CARRY ON EXACTLY WHERE HE LEFT OFF.

Swap the Time for a Trigger with The Doorknob Sentence

The Doorknob Sentence replaces ‘I’ll do it at 9’ with one if-then sentence tied to something you physically touch or see: ‘If the coffee is made, then I open the script and write one paragraph.’ A cue plus a response fires on its own, while a time in a calendar still waits for you to feel like it.

If-then plans like this are among the best-tested ways to follow through there are, with hundreds of tests behind them.

When researchers compared them directly, plans that named a cue and a response clearly beat plans that only named a time.

Both parts are needed: the cue says when, and the response says what you do.

Add a second sentence for the moment you drift: ‘If I reach for my phone, then I write the thought on paper and keep going.’

It tells you what to do instead of what to avoid. Then make the phone harder to reach, because distance beats resolve every time.

Leave it in another room, switch the screen to grey, and keep it out of the bedroom so late scrolling doesn’t steal tomorrow’s energy.

TIE YOUR START TO SOMETHING YOU TOUCH OR SEE, BECAUSE A TIME IN A CALENDAR STILL WAITS FOR YOU TO FEEL LIKE IT.



WHEN 9 O'CLOCK ARRIVES, SHE STARTS NEGOTIATING WITH HERSELF ALL OVER AGAIN.

SHE WRITES ONE IF-THEN SENTENCE THAT TIES THE START TO HER MORNING COFFEE.

THE NEXT MORNING THE FINISHED COFFEE IS HER CUE, AND SHE OPENS THE SCRIPT WITHOUT THINKING ABOUT IT.

FOR THE MOMENT SHE DRIFTS, A SECOND IF-THEN SENTENCE TELLS HER WHAT TO DO, AND THE PHONE SITS IN ANOTHER ROOM.



Decide What Good Enough Looks Like, Then Find the Hidden Decision

Before you begin, write down two or three things that make the result acceptable and how much time you'll give it.

Then give the first step a clear finish line: a verb, the exact thing, how much, and what proves it's done. 'Work on the report' has no finish line, while 'open the draft and write one paragraph' does.

Your standards stay high, and the doubt has nothing left to argue with.

When a task feels stuck and you don't know where to begin, there's usually one decision hiding inside it.

Studies of fire commanders found that experts rarely weigh up a list of options.

They pick one, walk it through in their head, and act, adjust or drop it.

Do the same: choose one way forward and picture yourself doing it. If it holds up, start.

> **Set up tonight** Open the right file with the cursor where the work begins, put your materials out, and decide where you'll sit. A famous choreographer said her real ritual was hailing the taxi to the gym, because once the taxi was moving the decision was already made.



The Evening Pardon:

Coming Back After a Slip

The Roman thinker Seneca ended each day with an honest review at bedtime, and he closed it with 'this time I pardon you.'

The Evening Pardon brings that habit into your evening.

At the end of a day you put something off, say the lapse in one plain sentence, such as 'I didn't do what I said I'd do.'

Then pardon it, out loud or on paper, and name the time you'll start next.

Forgiving yourself works because it removes the extra layer of bad feeling that sits on top of the task.

In a study of 134 first-year university students, those who forgave themselves for putting off study before their first exams put it off less before the next ones.

Their forgiveness also predicted better marks on the second exam. So kindness is the part that gets you moving again.

It also protects you from the all-or-nothing flip.

Once people believe they've broken their own rule, they tend to give up completely, the way dieters who've had a milkshake go on to eat more.

What does the damage is the story you tell about the slip, like 'the week is ruined'.

That's why you write down in advance what a missed day means, and why you never make a catch-up plan.

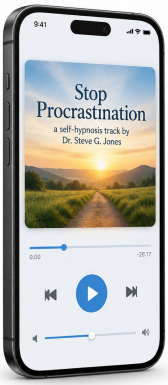
Trying to make up lost time is what turns one missed day into a dropped project.

How to start

1. Tonight, write one rule on the first page of a notebook: ‘One miss, back at the next start.’
2. On any evening you put something off, write the lapse in one sentence, then write ‘I pardon it’ underneath.
3. Add the time and place of your next start, and use The Doorknob Sentence to tie it to something you’ll touch.
4. Leave the task open and ready, then close the notebook. When starting the next day feels lighter, the pardon is doing its job.



Make starting feel lighter, from the email you keep avoiding to the big project



This guide showed you that putting things off starts with the feeling a task brings up, and the clock is the smaller part.

Stop Procrastination is a self-hypnosis audio track by Dr Steve G Jones, made for people who keep putting important things off and then feel bad about it.

- It's an audio track, so it fits into the evening you've just set up, right alongside your Evening Pardon.
- It covers the whole range of putting things off, from the one email you keep skipping to the big project you haven't touched.
- It's made for the guilt that comes afterwards, which is the extra layer of bad feeling that makes tomorrow's start even heavier.

You can listen to it tonight, after you've laid out tomorrow's first step.

Get the audio track

I may earn a commission if you buy through this link, at no extra cost to you.

Follow me for more small, kind ways to get the things you care about started.

- **Instagram** **instagram.com/focuswith_ava/**

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