

## The case for starting with paper

I'm pretty certain that many novice Getting Things Done (GTD) users focus their attention on configuring their {fill in gadget, web-based service, or computer program of choice} early on in the adoption process.

Because without a working GTD system, there's no GTD, and systems these days ought to be digital, right?

However, consider this:

Digital tools generate noise. I don't mean noise as in sound (although some PC's are annoyingly loud). I mean the mental noise of how-the-heck-do-I-do-this-on-my-computer. After all, there's no software without bugs, undocumented features, usability idiosyncrasies, hidden functionality, and what have you.

It takes hours at least (more likely: days) to set up a digital GTD system and get familiar with it. Furthermore, most digital tools also somehow stimulate continuous inter-project scanning whereas it's a lot easier to maintain 'vertical focus' on a single coverslip (and thus single project) with a paper-based solution.<sup>1</sup>

It seems to me that, for most people, the best way to start with GTD is with a paper-based system. Here's why:

- It's simple.
- It's quick.
- It's cheap.
- It's stable.
- It's noise-free.

No doubt it pays off over time to go digital (I'm almost entirely digital myself), but for the beginning GTD user who isn't necessarily technology savvy or simply doesn't have the bandwidth, in my opinion, paper is by far the best way to *start*. All there is to it is a trip to the store to get some stationary, and off you go.

Sure, there's no way to let the software locate specific actions across projects. Sheets will have to be re-written from time to time because paper notes tends to get messy with intensive use. And there's no quick way to do backups.

But still, paper is a fantastic way to get started with GTD within minutes.

Here's my recommended set-up.

## Building blocks of your paper-based system

First of all, get yourself an in-tray. This is what you'll use to collect all pieces of information, actions, etcetera. This could be a box, desk drawer, or something creative, so long as it's a single 'net' where you catch and retain all the physical stuff that comes your way. Every GTD system will have this, whether it's largely digital or entirely paper-based.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on: <http://www.43folders.com/2005/05/27/impressive-paper-based-project-management-workflow>

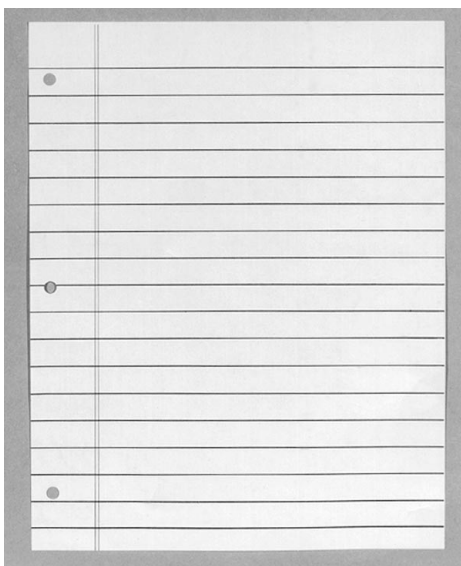
Second, get yourself a loose-leaf folder



with some tab-dividers:



and of course some loose-leaf paper:



The heart of your GTD system is based on these three cheap items. Plain and simple!

Third you'll need a calendar. This may or may not be digital. It doesn't matter too much.

Fourth, you'll need an archive and folders.

Fifth, you'll want a small notepad and pen to capture ideas on the go. Like the in-tray, calendar, archive and folders, this is part of the standard GTD set-up and I won't elaborate on these here.

Let's now have a look at how the heart of the paper-based GTD system may be 'configured'.

### Setting up your paper-based system

As the first page, I would recommend you print off a couple of GTD's quick reference cards. There's some great information [here](#) (from [this website](#)). By sticking these in the front you'll be reminded of how to process and organise your workstreams.

It's probably best to put these in plastic pockets to prevent wear and tear.

Then, generally I would have a separate tab for each project.

Some of the default projects are Read & Review, Waiting For, Someday / Maybe, Personal Development, Learning GTD, and Home.

By treating these as projects they'll get the necessary attention during the Weekly Review.

In addition you can create any project you'll need.

I suggest you put all your projects in alphabetical order so you'll get used to locating each one quickly. You might end up with 20-30 projects and that's fine. It's much better to manage these projects and their corresponding actions on paper rather than in your head!

### Using the paper-based system

Actions that come in should be recorded with the appropriate project. So-called Next Actions can be marked by pre-fixing them with an @-sign, or by using a yellow text marker so that they stand out.

Your work will be driven by what's on these various project lists and what's in your calendar.



The Weekly Review probably means rewriting / updating actions lists to some extent (unless you're naturally very tidy!). This I don't think should be seen just as overhead and wasted time. There's something valuable about sitting down without any distractions and committing your thoughts to paper.

I imagine that particularly lists which get updated very regularly and somewhat randomly—such as the Waiting For list—would benefit from mindmapping. You can then easily add new branches to the chart.

One could also consider writing tasks down on a small-ish card of say 3x5 inch. Put only one task per card. You can then easily re-shuffle and remove the completed tasks without having to rewrite an entire list. However this means storing the small cards in a box rather than folder.<sup>2</sup>

**Further reading:**

[This document](#) on paper-based implementations can be purchased free of charge on David Allen's website.

I hope this whitepaper is of any value to you!

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<sup>2</sup> Based on: [http://groups.google.com/group/43Folders/browse\\_thread/thread/3facc75352f7ca6a?hide\\_quotes=no&pli=1](http://groups.google.com/group/43Folders/browse_thread/thread/3facc75352f7ca6a?hide_quotes=no&pli=1)