

Decide Guidelines

Strategies for deciding what to do with captured items after you have downloaded them from your mind.

Download gets it out of your head. Decide tells you what it means. Do turns it into progress.

This resource focuses on the middle step: Decide.

When you download something, you have only completed the first step. You have got it out of your head, but you have not yet decided what it means.

That is why so many task lists become overwhelming. They are full of half-processed thoughts, vague reminders, old ideas, other people's requests, and unfinished commitments.

Download

Gets it out of your head.

Decide

Tells you what it means.

Do

Turns it into progress.

The Core Principle

Do not leave captured items in limbo.

Every captured item should be clarified and moved to the right place. It may become a task, project, habit, calendar block, waiting-for item, reference note, someday idea, or deleted item.

The aim is not to do everything immediately. The aim is to make a clean decision so your mind can stop carrying the weight.

Clarify What You Captured

1. Ask: What Is This?

A captured item might be a task, project, habit, goal, worry, reminder, note, resource, waiting-for item, someday idea, reference information, or something to delete.

Many people feel overwhelmed because they treat everything they capture as a task.

Decision question: What is this really?

Trash It

Delete it if it has no value, no purpose, or no future use.

- An old idea you no longer care about
- Duplicate notes
- A request that no longer matters
- Information you will never use

Can I safely remove this?

File It

Save it as reference if it is useful information but does not require action.

- A receipt
- A document
- A quote
- A link, note, or resource

Where will I look for this when I need it?

2. Ask: Is It Actionable?

This is the most important first filter. An actionable item is something you can do something about. A non-actionable item may still be useful, but it should not sit on your task list.

Decision question: Can I do something about this?

Incubate It

Keep it for later if it might matter one day, but does not need action now.

- A future idea
- A course you might take
- A trip you might plan
- A project you are not ready to start

Might this be useful later, but not now?

3. Ask: Does It Need To Be Done At All?

Not everything that gets captured deserves to become a commitment. Some things are noise, guilt, old ideas, other people's urgency, or things that no longer fit your current season.

- Does this connect to my mission, goals, or responsibilities?
- Will there be a real consequence if I do not do this?
- Is this important, or just loud?
- Would deleting this create relief?

Does this matter enough to keep?

Classify The Action

4. Ask: Is This A Task, Project, Or Habit?

Once something is actionable, decide what kind of action it requires.

It Is A Task If It Takes One Step

A task is a single action you can complete.

- Send invoice to Sarah
- Book dentist appointment
- Reply to James about venue
- Buy printer paper

Can this be completed in one action?

It Is A Project If It Takes More Than One Step

A project is an outcome that requires multiple actions.

- Plan holiday
- Launch webinar
- Prepare tax return
- Redesign website

What does done look like? What is the very next action?

It Is A Habit If It Needs To Repeat

Some captured items are not one-off tasks. They are behaviours that need to happen consistently.

- Exercise three times per week
- Read daily
- Review tasks every afternoon
- Pray each morning

Do I need to do this once, or build it into my life?

5. Ask: What Is The Next Visible Action?

Vague items create resistance. Clear actions create movement. A next action should be something you can actually see yourself doing.

Not: Sort out finances, get healthy, fix website, work on proposal.

Rather: Email accountant for tax checklist, walk for 20 minutes, list five website changes, draft first three bullet points.

What is the next physical or visible step?

Useful Action Verbs

Email, call, draft, book, read, review, send, buy, decide, schedule, write, ask, check, prepare.

Start the next action with a verb.

6. Ask: Can I Do This In Two Minutes?

If the next action will take less than two minutes, do it immediately while you are processing. This prevents tiny tasks from becoming future clutter.

- Reply with a quick confirmation
- Send a file
- File a receipt
- Add a date to your calendar

Would tracking this take longer than doing it?

7. Do, Delegate, Defer, Or Delete

Do it if it is quick, important, or already in front of you.

Delegate it if someone else owns it or can do it better.

Defer it if it matters, but should be done later.

Delete it if it does not matter.

Do not leave items in limbo.

Prioritise What Matters

8. Ask: Is It Important Or Urgent?

Use the Important/Urgent filter to decide how to prioritise an item.

Important and urgent: Do it soon.

Important but not urgent: Schedule it.

Urgent but not important: Delegate it or limit it.

Not important and not urgent: Delete it.

Is this truly important, truly urgent, both, or neither?

9. Ask: Does This Connect To Mission And Passion?

When you have too many options, use two deeper filters: Passion and Mission.

- Does this connect to my current mission?
- Does this support one of my active goals?
- Does this fit this season of life?
- Do I have energy or conviction for this?
- Is this meaningful, or just noisy?

10. Ask: Is This One Of The Top Three?

A long list can paralyse you. A short list can move you.

- What are the top three outcomes for this week?
- What are the three must-do actions for the next 24 hours?
- If only three things got done today, which three would matter most?
- Which three items would make everything else easier or unnecessary?

Keep only three items on Next Actions Today.

11. Ask: What Context Does This Belong In?

Context helps you do the right tasks in the right place.

Home, office, computer, phone, email, errands, meeting, waiting for, someday, deep work, admin.

- “Call plumber” belongs in Phone.
- “Buy batteries” belongs in Errands.
- “Draft chapter outline” belongs in Deep Work.

Where, when, or with what tool can I do this?

12. Ask: What Energy Does This Require?

High-energy: Writing, strategy, planning, problem-solving, creating, difficult conversations.

Medium-energy: Meetings, reviewing, editing, preparing, follow-up.

Low-energy: Filing, admin, tidying, simple replies, updating lists.

When am I most likely to have the energy this requires?

13. Ask: How Much Time Does This Need?

Time is a practical decision filter. Some actions fit into small gaps. Others need a protected block.

- Will this take 2, 15, 30, or 90 minutes?
- Can I do a small first step now?
- Does this need focused time?
- Do I need to break it into smaller actions?

If it is too big to fit anywhere, break it down.

Place It In The Right System

14. Ask: Does This Need A Due Date?

A due date should mean something. Use a due date when there is a real deadline or a genuine commitment.

- Submit form by Friday
- Pay invoice by 30 July
- Send slides before the webinar
- Renew licence before expiry

Avoid giving everything a fake due date. Fake deadlines make your system noisy.

Is there a real date by which this must be done?

15. Ask: Does This Need A Calendar Block?

Some items cannot be trusted to a list. They need time protected in the calendar.

- The task needs deep focus
- It will take more than 30 minutes
- It must happen at a specific time
- It supports an important goal
- It keeps getting delayed

Will this happen if it stays only on a list?

16. Ask: Who Owns This?

Some captured items are not yours to do. They may require a response, but not personal ownership.

- Am I responsible for this outcome?
- Who should take the next step?
- Am I waiting for someone?
- Do I need to ask, remind, or follow up?
- Should this go on a Waiting For list?

Is this mine to do, mine to delegate, or mine to track?

17. Ask: Where Does This Live?

Every captured item needs a home. If you do not know where something lives, you do not have a system. You have a pile.

Task list, project list, calendar, habit tracker, waiting for list, someday/maybe list, reference folder, notes app, CRM, journal, trash.

Where will I look for this later?

18. Ask: What Would Close The Loop?

The real enemy of productivity is not always too much work. It is too many open loops: unfinished, unclear, or undecided items that keep tugging at your attention.

- Do it
- Delegate it
- Defer it
- Delete it
- File it
- Incubate it
- Turn it into a project
- Define the next action
- Schedule it
- Add it to Waiting For

What decision would stop me from having to rethink this again?

The Captured Item Decision Checklist

Use this checklist when you process your inbox, notebook, task list, email, messages, or mind download.

1. What is this?
2. Is it actionable?
3. If not actionable, should I trash it, incubate it, or file it?
4. Does it need to be done at all?
5. Is it a task, project, or habit?
6. What is the next visible action?
7. Can I do it in two minutes?
8. Should I do, delegate, defer, or delete it?
9. Is it important, urgent, both, or neither?
10. Does it connect to my mission and current goals?
11. Is it one of the top three actions for today or this week?
12. What context does it belong in?
13. What energy does it require?
14. How much time does it need?
15. Does it need a real due date?
16. Does it need a calendar block?
17. Who owns it?
18. Where does it live?
19. What would close the loop?

A Simple Processing Flow

PROCESS ONE ITEM AT A TIME

1. **Clarify it:** What is this?
2. **Filter it:** Is it actionable? Does it matter?
3. **Classify it:** Task, project, habit, reference, someday, waiting for, or trash.
4. **Define it:** What is the next visible action?
5. **Place it:** Put it in the right list, calendar, project, folder, or tracker.
6. **Prioritise it:** Decide whether it belongs in your top three, later list, or waiting list.
7. **Close the loop:** Make sure nothing is left vague.

Examples

Captured Item: “Website”

Bad decision: Add “Website” to your task list.

- What is this? A project.
- Desired outcome: Website homepage updated.
- Next action: Open homepage and list five changes.
- Context: Computer.
- Energy: Medium. Time: 30 minutes.
- Home: Website Update project.

Captured Item: “Dentist”

Bad decision: Leave “Dentist” on your list.

- What is this? A task.
- Next action: Call dentist to book appointment.
- Context: Phone.
- Time: 2 minutes.
- Decision: Do it now.

Captured Item: “Get Fit”

Bad decision: Add “Get fit” as a task.

- What is this? A goal and habit.
- Finish line: Walk 5km without stopping.
- Repeatable action: Walk 30 minutes three times per week.
- Calendar: Mon/Wed/Fri 06:30-07:00.
- Home: Habit tracker.

Captured Item: “Article About Leadership”

Bad decision: Put it on the task list.

- What is this? Reference material.
- Actionable? No.
- Decision: File it in Resources.
- Possible future use: Leadership content.

Captured Item: “Ask Peter About Quote”

- What is this? A task.
- Next action: Message Peter for updated quote.
- Context: Message/Phone.
- Time: 2 minutes.
- Decision: Do now or add to today’s message burst.

The One-Sentence Rule

If you cannot write the item as one clear sentence, it is not ready to be done.

Use this format: Verb + outcome + detail

- Email Sarah the updated invoice by Friday.
- Book dentist appointment for next week.
- Draft three bullet points for the proposal.
- Ask Peter for the updated quote.
- Schedule 30 minutes to review the budget.

Clear wording creates clear action.

Final Thought

You do not need to do everything you capture.

You need to decide what each item means.

Some things must be done. Some must be delegated. Some must be scheduled. Some must become projects. Some must become habits. Some must be filed. Some must be deleted.

The power of a good capture system is not that it holds everything.

The power is that it helps you decide what matters, clarify the next step, and move forward with confidence.

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