A Practical Guide to a Productive Day and Life

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO A PRODUCTIVE DAY AND LIFE

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The first person who comes to my mind after achieving any goal is my Father, Dr. Hasan, who really supported me in every stage of my life. So, may God bless him for what he has done and is still doing with me. I also want to thank my dear mother, Khawla, for her prayers for me, and her emotional support throughout my journey. And, not to forget of course, my dear wife, Ola, for the support and help she lends me, and for all her patience and time devoted to me in the accomplishment of my goals. I would like to also thank all my brothers and sisters for making my life wonderful. Thanks also to my child, Hasan, for the nice environment he is creating at home.

INTRODUCTION

Having been bathed in academic life for a while now, mainly as a student, and moving abroad from undergraduate school to graduate school to conducting research, I often constantly feel like I need to keep my productivity levels high.

The importance of productivity became clear to me when I spent that tough year in London, going through the foundation year that was leading to the Medicine (MD) degree which I was planning to enter. The seats were limited, and the options for me were also limited, as I already held a BSc Computer Science and MSc Software Engineering, and didn't want to lose more time. Why, may you ask, did I move from Computer Science to Medicine? This is a long story I may mention in another book…

It was a new feeling for me to be productive in a steady manner instead of short periods of time. Yes, that was a bit odd for me. Thus, I decided to trace the factors that lead to productivity and success.

I traced and wrote the factors, and wrote them in my first book: "How I Became Productive". In this book, I focus on practical tips and proven factors to be productive in your daily life.

Happy reading, and be productive!

Abder-Rahman Ali

1   PREPARE YOUR GOALS NOTEBOOK

> *"Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal."*
>
> – Henry Ford

> *"To succeed in your mission, you must have single-minded devotion to your goal."*
>
> – A.P.J. Abdul Kalam

> *"Know what you want to do, hold the thought firmly, and do every day what should be done, and every sunset will see you that much nearer to your goal."*
>
> – Elbert Hubbard

This chapter will present and explain everything about the **goals notebook**.

In order for you to be a productive person, the first step you need to take is to *set your goals*. Since this is a practical book, we will get our hands dirty from the start.

Go ahead, get your hands on an empty notebook, and write *Goals Notebook* on its cover.
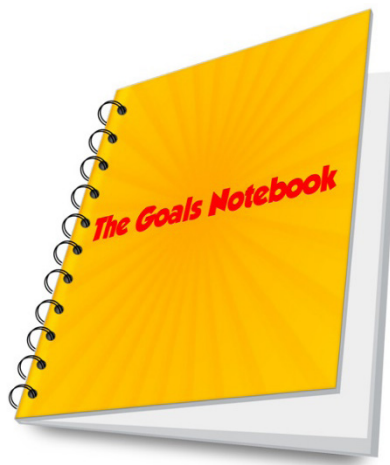

Figure 1: The goals notebook

Done? Great, let's move on to the next step.

Write down the title *Goals* at the top of the 1st page and start writing your main goals in separate boxes. If you'd like to cut up your goal into sub-goals, put them in relevant boxes. See figure 2.

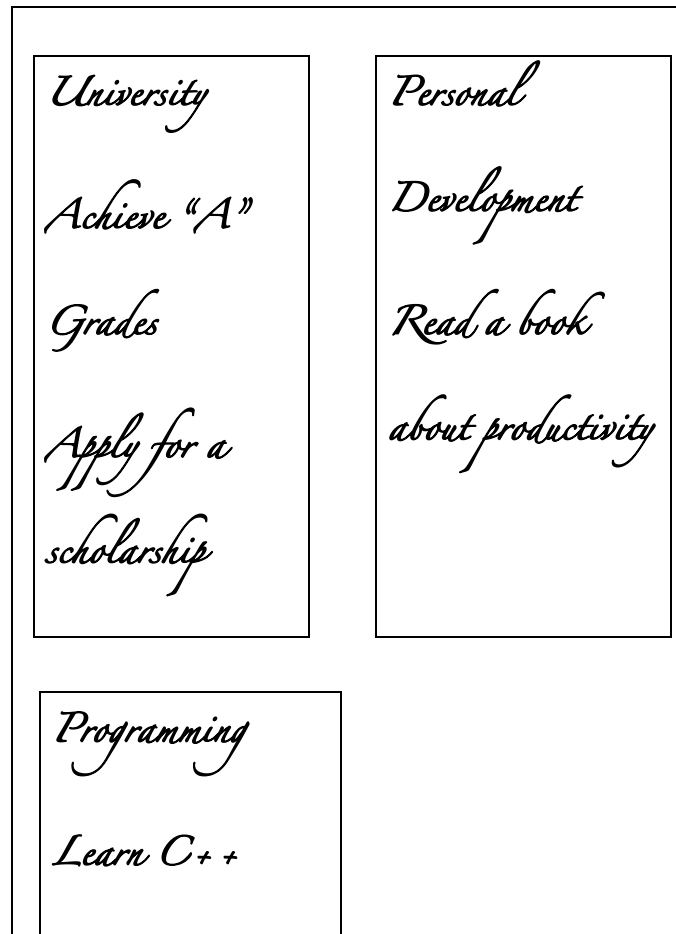**Figure 2:** Goals and sub-goals page

Of course, your goals may expand to more than one page!

Now that you have your main goals set, divide your notebook into sections, so that each section represents one main goal. The sections can be split up in terms of the number of pages. For example, say that each section consists of 5 pages: the first page of this section will be titled with your main goal.

The notebook will now serve as a place where you write down ideas that pop up in your mind while you are working on your goals. For instance, for the *Programming* goal shown in Figure 2, say that you came across a C++ text editor that you found suitable while working on the *learning C++* sub-goal, or that you found some good C++ references, etc. Instead of keeping those in your head and maybe forgetting them later on, just go to the *Programming* section, and write these notes down.

Say that you have some ideas for new main goals. These should go into boxes at the beginning of the notebook, and an appropriate section should be assigned to that main goal. Regarding sub-goals, you can add them to the appropriate boxes at the beginning of the notebook.

Using this notebook, you will be able to keep track of your main goals, sub-goals, and any ideas that come to mind.

With technology now surrounding us, you may be interested in listing your goals on one of your devices. This will be explained in chapter 2.

Chapter Checklist

- Prepare your *Goals Notebooks*
- Set main goals and sub-goals
- Assign sections for each main goal

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2   THE EVERNOTE WAY OF SETTING YOUR GOALS

> *"We've arranged a civilization in which most crucial elements profoundly depend on science and technology."*
>
> – Carl Sagan

> *"Once a new technology rolls over you, if you're not part of the steamroller, you're part of the road."*
>
> – Stewart Brand

> *"This is why I loved technology: if you used it right, it could give you power and privacy."*
>
> – Cory Doctorow

Before I delve into this chapter, let me briefly describe what *Evernote* is.

According to Wikipedia:

Evernote is a suite of software and services, designed for note taking and archiving. A "note" can be a piece of formatted text, a full webpage or webpage excerpt, a photograph, a voice memo, or a handwritten "ink" note. Notes can also have file attachments. Notes can be sorted into folders, then tagged, annotated, edited, given comments, searched and exported as part of a notebook.

This eBook is not a tutorial on Evernote, but will show how I use it in order to boost my productivity. In this chapter, we will perform the same strategies explained in the previous chapter, but the Evernote way. Let's get started!

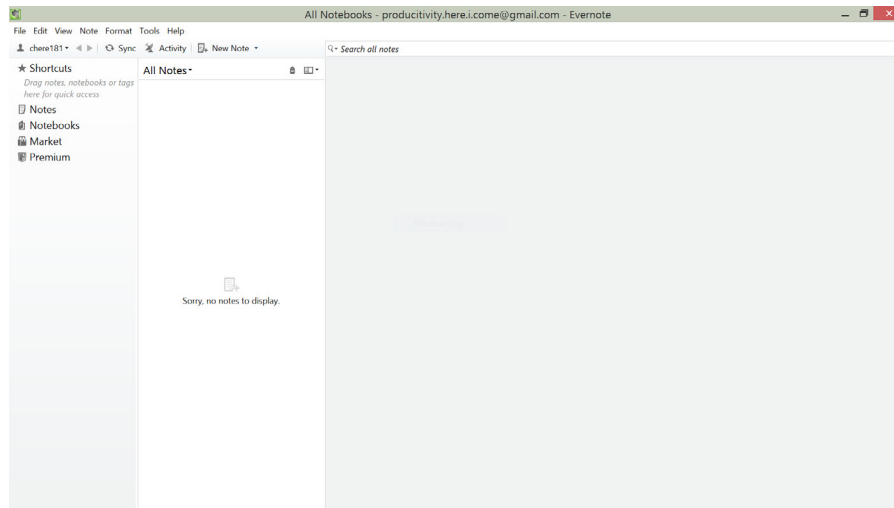As you open Evernote, you will see a similar screen to Figure 3.

Figure 3: Evernote main screen

Your first step is setting your main goals. In this aim, I use *Notebooks* in Evernote. Following Figure 2 from the previous chapter, let us set the following three main goals: *University*, *Personal development*, and *Programming*. Each one of these main goals will serve as a new *Notebook*.

To create a new Notebook:

- Right-click on *Notebooks*
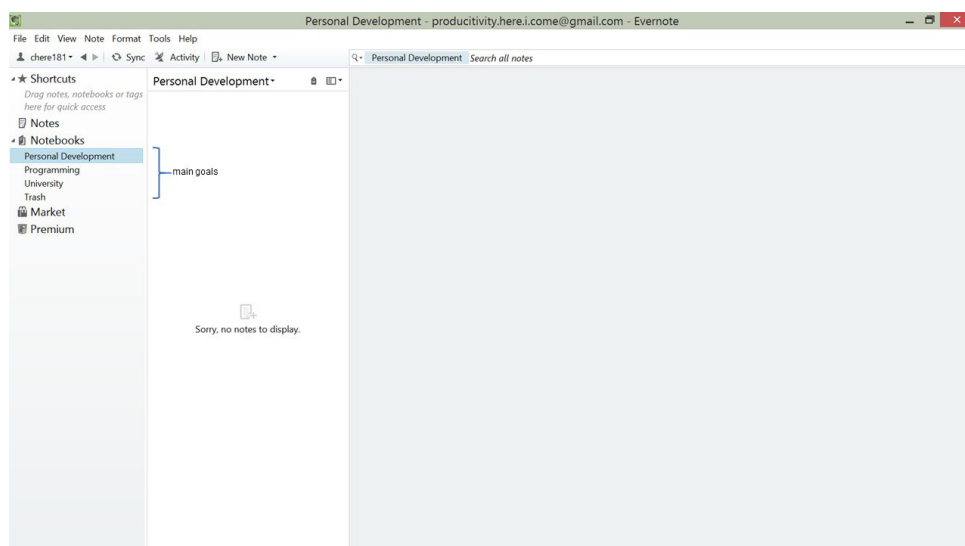- Select *Create Notebook*
- Type the main goal in the *Name* text box

Figure 4: Main goals (Notebooks)

The *Notebooks* in Evernote now correspond to your main goals. But what if you have sub-goals? How can you add them to Evernote? There is a nice feature in Evernote called *Notebooks Stacks*, which enables you to add sub-goals.

Let us add two sub-goals to the main goal: *Personal Development*

- Right-click on the Personal Development Notebook
- Select Add to stack a New stack
- Right-click on Notebook Stack that will show up after the previous step, and choose *Rename*
- Type Personal Development and hit the *Enter* key
- Rename the other *Personal Development* item that appears under the one created in the previous step. Right-click on that *Personal Development* item, and select *Rename*. Type *Read New Book* for instance, and hit the *Enter* key
- Add another sub-goal by right clicking on either *Personal Development* or *Read New Book*, and choose *Create Notebook* in *"Personal Development"*

We now have two sub-goals created as part of the *Personal Development* main goal. You should now have something similar to Figure 5.
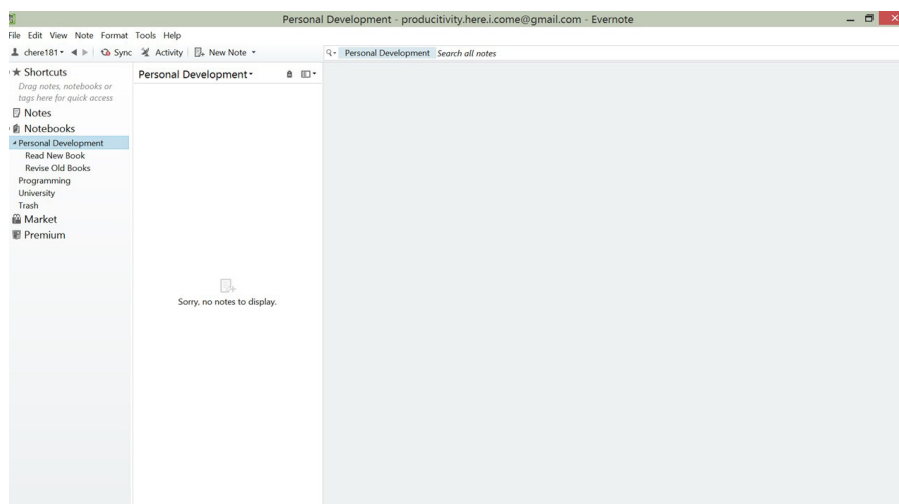

Figure 5: Sub-goals of the Personal Development main goal

Chapter Checklist

- Download and set up Evernote
- Create new notebooks (main goals)
- Create sub-goals (if necessary)

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3   MANAGE YOUR GOALS

> *"Arriving at one goal is the starting point to another."*
>
> – John Dewey

> *"Goals are the fuel in the furnace of achievement."*
>
> – Brian Tracy, Eat that Frog

> *"Most "impossible" goals can be met simply by breaking them down into bite size chunks, writing them down, believing them, and then going full speed ahead as if they were routine."*
>
> – Don Lancaster

To take all of this even further, you need one *notebook per goal*. For each main goal you have listed in your *goals notebooks*, you need to have a separate physical notebook with a new title.

This notebook will be where you will write *detailed* notes. Say you have a notebook for the main goal *Programming*. Here, you will be working towards *Learning C++* as we saw in Chapter 1. While learning C++, you will have notes to write down, thoughts, summaries, etc. These will all go into this notebook.

What if your notebook runs out of space? Simply create a new notebook with the same title (main goal), and give it a new version number (i.e., Programming 0.2).

If you prefer technology, you can simply use a text editor like Microsoft Office Word, or any similar software. For each main goal, create a separate document with the main goal's name. See Figures 6 and 7.
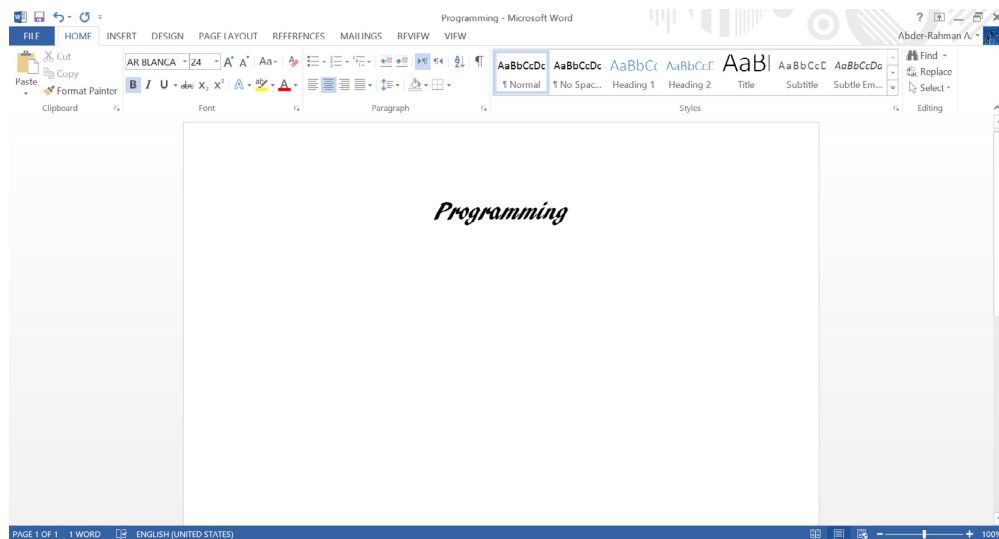
Figure 6: First page of the Microsoft Office Word document for the main goal *Programming*
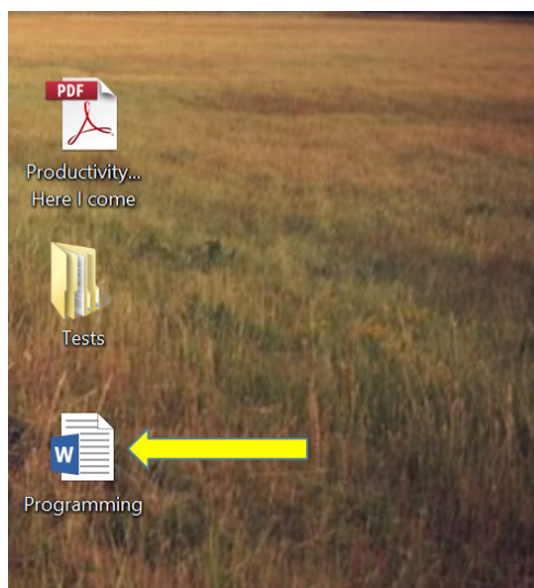
Figure 7: The *Programming* main goal as a Microsoft Office Word document

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Chapter Checklist

- Make a separate notebook for each main goal
- Make a separate text document for each main goal
  (if you want to go the technology way)

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4 KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR GOALS

"Keep yourself motivated. You've got to be motivated, you've got to wake up every day and understand what that day is about; you've got to have personal goals – short term goals, intermediate goals, and long term goals. Be flexible in getting to those goals, but if you do not have goals, you will not achieve them."

– Gary Cohn

"It's important to set your own goals and work hard to achieve them."

– Yuichiro Miura

"I traced the path I walk today and my goals are many. I think that I'm achieving my goals."

– Elie Saab

With so many distractions nowadays, we sometimes forget about our main goal(s). We are swamped with to-do lists. It is scary to see your main goal(s) on your to-do list, and to imagine how much time it will take. Thus, you find yourself simply postponing that goal. This means you've fallen into the procrastination trap!

This is why you always need to keep an eye on your goal(s).

Let me make this more practical. Here is a strategy I like to follow: when working through my goals, I focus on one at a time, and write a particular goal on a memo card, or on a sticky note on my computer's desktop.

Figure 8: A sticky note with the goal shown on a desktop

It may sound simplistic, but it's powerful. The most powerful part is that it keeps you motivated. Whenever you spot your goal, you feel the motivation and passion for reaching it.

Chapter Checklist

- Keep a memo card or a sticky note of some goal in front of you whenever working towards that goal

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5   SET YOUR TASKS

"The price of success is hard work, dedication to the job at hand, and the determination that whether we win or lose, we have applied the best of ourselves to the task at hand."

— Vince Lombardi

"Each morning sees some task begun, each evening sees it close; Something attempted, something done, has earned a night's repose."

— Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

"Always render more and better service than is expected of you, no matter what your task may be."

— Og Mandion

You have reached so much already: you know your goal(s) and are keeping an eye on them.

Now, let's ask ourselves: how do we really carry out our goals?

Of course, one approach would be to *plan*. But, in this book, I will not be talking about planning. However, you can read more about planning from my other book: *Productivity, Here I Come: Proven Factors to being the Productive You*. If you don't want to buy the book, you can simply request a sample book chapter from: http://abder.io/howibecameproductive, which is actually the planning chapter.

Let's resume our topic. Another way to tackle your goals is to set *tasks*. Your goal is a destination you are aiming to reach. If you were able to reach it in one day, that would be great! But, if we think about it, most big goals are time-consuming. They may need some time to be reached, but, when they are, they are a huge reward.

So, you need steps through which you will be moving towards your goal. You cannot jump into it at once. Those steps are the *tasks*.

Let us assume that the goal you are currently working towards is *Learn C++*. As you start your day, assign yourself tasks you would like to do. This will help you move closer towards your goal.

On a sheet of paper entitled *Learn C++*, list the tasks you wish to achieve on that particular day.

From a technology perspective, you can use a *To-Do* software. See Fig. 9 for a To-Do list example.
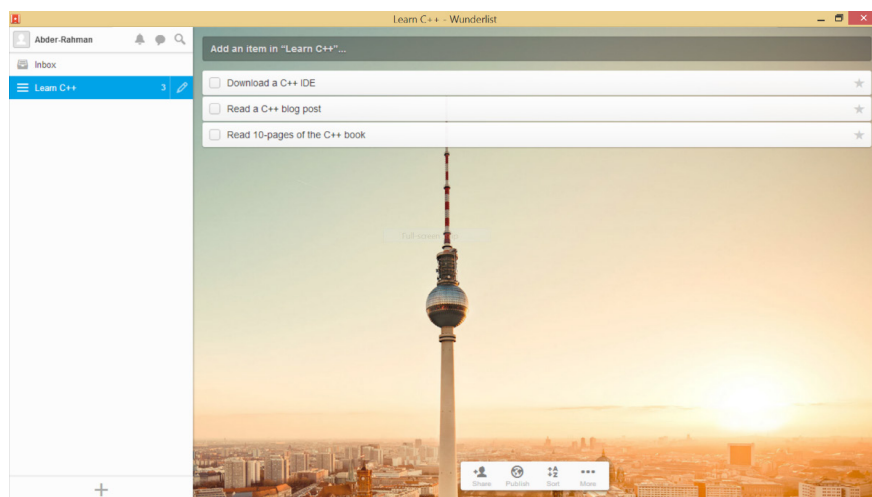
Figure 9: A To-Do list showing the tasks to be achieved for the *Learn C++* goal

By following this strategy, not only will you be organized when tackling your goal, it will also serve as an assessment of your work towards a particular day's goal. Once you finish each task, tick it. You will then have an overview of how much work you can handle per day.

> **Chapter Checklist**
>
> - Write down the tasks you want to achieve in the day when working towards a goal

6   MAKE NOTES

> *"Paper is no longer a big part of my day. I get 90% of my news online, and when I go to a meeting and want to jot things down, I bring my Tablet PC. It's fully synchronized with my office machine, so I have all the files I need. It also has a note-taking piece of software called OneNote."*
>
> **– Bill Gates**

> *"When I write notes in my journal, I'm just trying to scribble down as much as possible. Later on, I decide whether to follow some of those first impressions or whether to abandon them."*
>
> **– Natasha Trethewey**

> *"He listens well who takes notes."*
>
> **– Dante Alighieri**

When working through your tasks, I'm pretty sure you need to write things down. I must admit I always prefer the pen and paper option.

However, I've noticed that many of my notes go missing: either I lose a piece of paper, or coffee gets spilled on it, or I throw it away by mistake… Software presented itself as the better choice: Microsoft OneNote is definitely my favorite.

How can OneNote be used a productive way?

By now, you should have your goals set. For each goal you have, you can create what is called a *notebook*. Each goal has its own notebook.

Fig. 10 shows a Microsoft OneNote *programming* page. This page is meant for you to write notes, add figures etc.
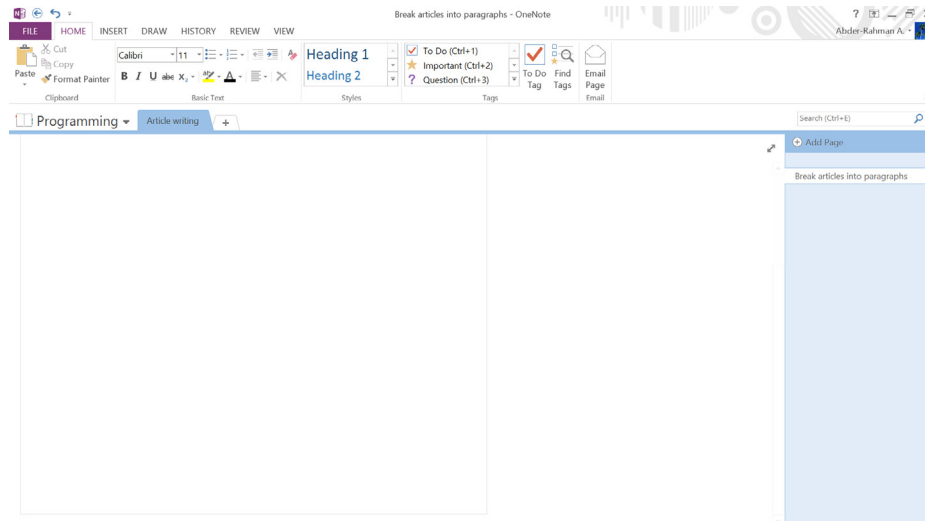
Figure 10: Microsoft OneNote programming notebook

Your notes will be more organize and searchable, and you will be able to return to them more easily.

Chapter Checklist

- Set up Microsoft OneNote on your computer
- For each goal, create a notebook in Microsoft OneNote

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7 SAVE YOUR DATA

> *"It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data."*
>
> – Arthur Conan Doyle

> *"Errors using inadequate data are much less than those using no data at all."*
>
> – Charles Babbage

> *"We're entering a new world in which data may be more important than software."*
>
> – Tim O'Reilly

Computers are not perfect. While we use them every day, I for example sometimes face issues and lose data because of malware or viruses.

A great solution for this is backing up work on an external medium like a CD or USB stick. Careful, these can break be lost or broken as well.

Therefore, I chose the *cloud*. This is a way of storing data, and is referred to as cloud storage.

Before I continue, you may ask: what does the Cloud have to do with productivity? Good question. With my last computer, the one I used before starting to write this book, I faced many issues and lost data on a regular basis.

I used to spend so much time just trying to fix my computer. Thanks to the Cloud storage, my data was always there, and I got to pick up my work from where I had left off. Imagine that you have been writing an article in Word for several days and BOOM: your device crashes and everything is lost. This is a true nightmare.

When you have a secure place where to store your data, the worst thing that could happen is that you need to replace a broken computer.

Here are worthwhile Cloud storage platforms:

- Dropbox
- Google Drive
- OneDrive

The nice thing about these platforms is that you can use them directly from your machine, without having to add your files through their websites. In addition, they provide a lot of storage space.

Gaining the habit of immediately storing important data in such folders will save you a vast amount of time should any issues arise. You are also able to access your data from anywhere. You will have access to your data whenever you need it.

Chapter Checklist

- Choose a cloud storage platform you would like to work with, and familiarize yourself with that platform
- Get in the habit of storing your important data in such platform

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8 TRACK WHAT YOU WANT TO READ

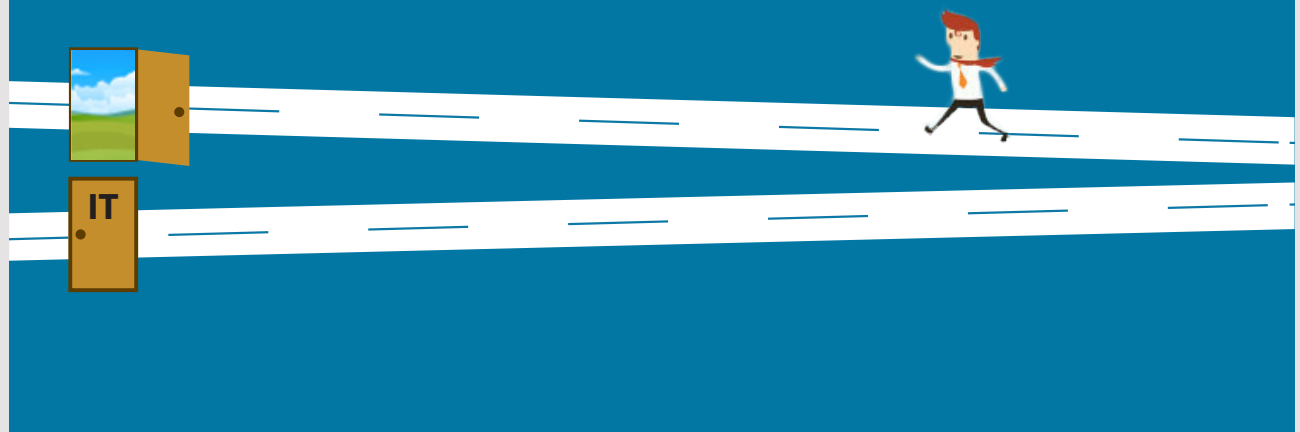> *"The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go."*
>
> – Dr. Seuss

> *"It is what you read when you don't have to that determines what you will be when you can't help it."*
>
> – Oscar Wilde

"I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book! – When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I have not an excellent library."

– Jane Austen

While surfing the web, one is sure to come across interesting websites and articles, as well as friend's recommendations.

What do I do in this case? I open different tabs and tell myself I will look at them later.

As days pass, the number of tabs increases. Unfortunately, your computer may need an update and you may be forced to restart your machine. Your browser my also crash and you lose all your tabs.

Is there a solution?

Of course there is! I came across a very nice tool, Instapaper, where you can save that interesting piece of work you wanted to read later in one place, and come back to it anytime without losing anything.

Again, you may ask, what does this have to do with productivity?

By using this strategy, you will make sure not to lose anything you planned on reading at a later time. You also won't have to spend hours looking for the information again.

Chapter Checklist

- Create an Instapaper account
- Develop the habit of adding the work you want to read later to Instapaper

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9 PRODUCTIVITY TEMPLATES

> *"The first thing I do when I get up is I look out the window. I've been looking at the same image for six years. It's imprinted in my mind like an afterimage template."*
>
> **– Chris Ware**

> *"A work-only zone does wonders for your productivity. So, I prefer working at the office now. I spend 8 focused hours there, then I go home to be present with my family."*
>
> **– Derek Sivers**

> *"Productivity is being able to do things that you were never able to do before."*
>
> **– Franz Kafka**

This final chapter will serve as a small gift: the following templates will help your productivity. Feel free to print these templates, as they are on separate pages.
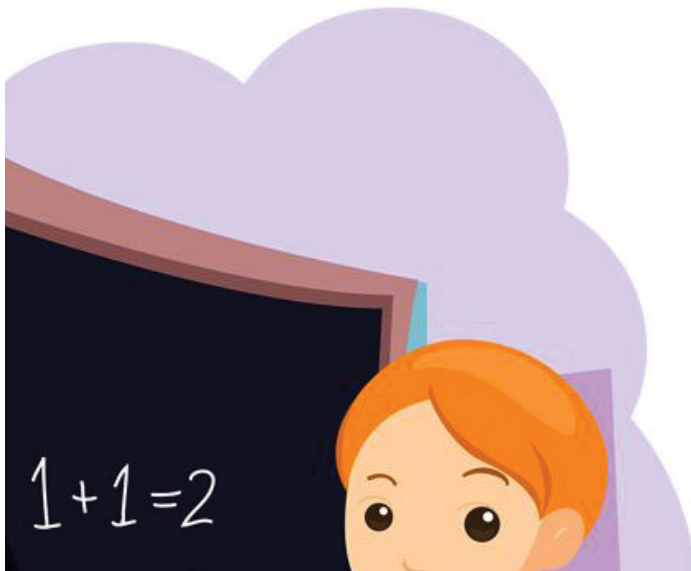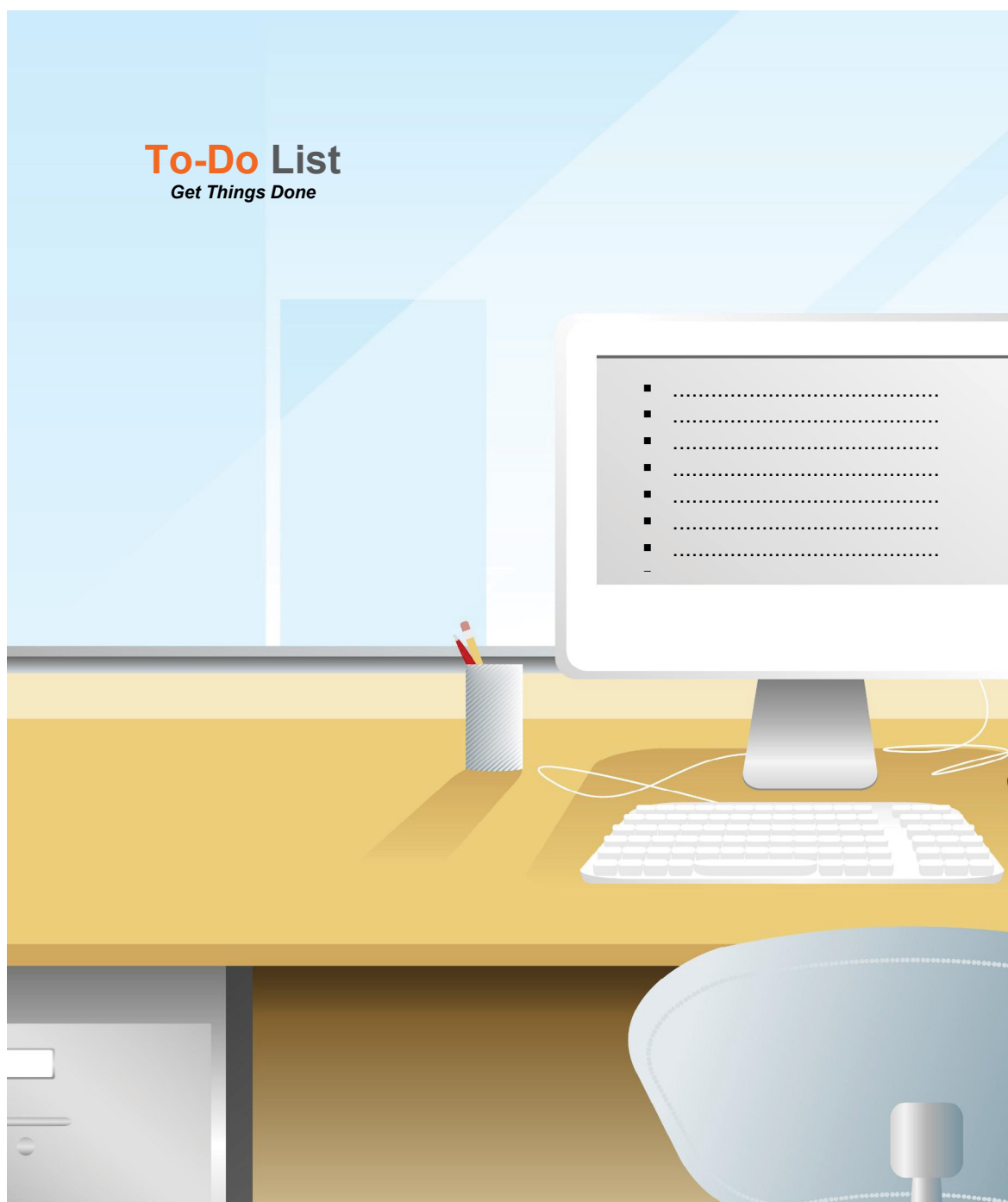
Goal

Tasks

GOALS

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IN PROGRESS

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Check out my other book: http://abder.io/howibecameproductive