



Start Finishing Action Guide

25 Exercises to Guide You from Idea to Done



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The Start Finishing Action Guide

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[This book can be printed out or filled out because it's an interactive PDF. If you print it, use stickers, colored pens, tabs, or whatever else works for you. Make it yours and have fun.]

You have a lot of ideas. But ideas don't get done; projects do.

THIS WORKBOOK WILL HELP YOU turn the ideas worth doing into projects you can finish. It contains some of the questions that I ask creative people every day when they're buzzing with ideas and inspiration but don't know how to get any grip with them.

At the root of why most projects don't get done is a fear of failure and uncertainty. You know this.

This workbook will help you see exactly what needs to be done, so we've got the uncertainty part covered. It'll also help you get clear on what success looks like and what you'll need to put in place to hit it.

Don't just read the questions; **physically write down your answers**. Doing so will boost your commitment and make it more real. If you're a perfectionist, use a pencil so you can change your mind as you go along without checking out because a scratched-out pen mark bothers you.

One last thing: this workbook is for *one* project. Some really big projects can contain other sub-projects—that's both natural and good—but do your best to keep this workbook focused on one goal. Unless cleaning out the Closet of Doom *really* does bear on your creative or professional projects, don't mix the two. (But you can use this workbook to make a project out of cleaning out the Closet of Doom.)

You've got what it takes to start finishing the stuff that matters to you. This workbook will help you use what you have to do what it takes to succeed.

Begin with the end in mind: what do you want to accomplish?

KEEP THIS ROUGH FOR NOW; we'll hone the goal as we go. Some examples:

- ★ "I want to write a book."
- ★ "I want to start a business."
- ★ "I want to get a promotion."
- ★ "I want to clean out the basement. (Because, dammit, it's been hanging over my head for three years.)"
- ★ "I want to go back to school to get another degree."

It doesn't matter what it is, as long as it matters to you. Remember: one project.

Fill in the blanks.

I want to:

Why does this project matter to you?

YOU HAVE ALL SORTS OF OTHER THINGS that you want and need to do. Each one matters in different ways, to different people.

What is it about this project that matters to you? How will you be better off when it's done?

If you don't care about it, it won't get done. So what makes you care about it?

Whom will this project's completion benefit?

YOU MAY HAVE ALREADY LISTED THESE people on the last page. That's cool. But this might also be a good place to think about who else besides you will benefit from this project's completion, because most of us are more motivated to achieve goals that benefit others than we are to achieve goals that benefit just us.

Here are some examples to serve as a springboard for your thinking:

- ★ Your friends and family
- ★ Your community
- ★ Your customers
- ★ Your coworkers
- ★ Your colleagues
- ★ Your industry
- ★ Humankind as a whole

P.S. Your project doesn't *have* to benefit anyone but you. Mattering to you is enough.

Who will benefit from this project, and how?

Is your goal SMART?

LET'S START GETTING SPECIFIC on the goal of your project. The SMART framework helps with that.

The traditional SMART framework stands for:

- ★ **S**pecific
- ★ **M**easurable
- ★ **A**ctionable
- ★ **R**ealistic
- ★ **T**ime-bound

I sometimes use a slight variant:

- ★ **S**pecific
- ★ **M**eaningful
- ★ **A**ctionable
- ★ **R**ealistic
- ★ **T**rackable

Yes, the only differences are in what the “M” and the “T” stand for. In my experience, meaningfulness and trackability (of progress) work better for creative people than measurability and time-boundness do. If you use the second framework, you have meaning covered from the first two prompts.

An example is in order.

Instead of “I want to write a book,” a SMART (variant 2) goal would be:

“I want to finish a book on project planning so creative people who have a bunch of ideas have a tool to use to start finishing the stuff that matters.”

Some of the prompts later in this book will help with the time-bound, trackability, and realistic parts of the project, so don’t stress about these yet. You can always come back and refine your goal.

Make your goal SMART:

By what date does your project need to be completed?

Truth #1: Without a date it needs to be done by, it's easy for the project to remain in someday/maybe land.

Truth #2: Many of the most important projects have no external due date. As Stephen Covey so rightly pointed out, the Important but Not Urgent stuff requires intentional prioritization precisely because there's no deadline looming.

When does this project need to be completed? For projects that don't have an external deadline, when do you want to complete this project, and why did you pick that date?

What level of success are you aiming for?

NOT ALL OUTCOMES ARE EQUAL. In projects that matter, there's more to the outcome than winning or losing; there are levels of winning and losing. We'll not worry about the levels of losing here because that's not what we're looking for.

Think in terms of three levels of success:

- ★ **Small success** — You accomplish the bare minimum of your goal.
- ★ **Moderate success** — You go a good way beyond the bare minimum of your goal.
- ★ **Epic success** — You knock it out of the park. If you wouldn't run around your house doing your own victory dance or call a friend about it, it's not epic success. (If "epic" gives you the willies or sounds way too Millennial for you, substitute "extreme" here. I won't mind.)

Three things to keep in mind:

1. If you can achieve the goal by yourself, it's not epic. It's at best a moderate success. Go back and try again, thinking about who you know who will make the outcome of your project *exponentially* better.
2. You don't have to aim for epic success with everything. Good enough is good enough on some projects. For example, I'm aiming for a small success on my dissertation because I mostly just want to finish it; the extra juice I might get from making it a moderate or epic success is not worth all the squeezing to do it. I'd much rather put that extra effort into another book or community project.
3. By articulating the requirements of the different levels of success, you're automatically able to see what needs to be in place to be successful at that level. It thus helps address the realistic and actionable components of your SMART goal.

Over to you. What needs to be in place for a ...

Small success:

Moderate success (Feel free to carry over the items above.):

Epic success (Remember, you can't do this without the help of other people.):

What are the drag points that might get in the way of your success?

WHEN ENGINEERS DESIGN AIRPLANES, cars, and boats, they account for drag in their designs. They know it exists, so it's better to make a design that addresses drag rather than pretends it's not there. They also know the different aspects of their designs that are going to cause drag, and they do the best they can to account for, minimize, and sometimes leverage those drag points.

Our projects always have drag points, too. They come up because of our individual weaknesses and because of the particular aspects of the project itself.

For instance, you might be shipping your project into a crowded environment, whether it's a marketplace or a field. You'll have to work harder to make that project stand out.

Or the flip side: you're shipping your project in unknown or unfamiliar territory, so you'll have to work more to make people understand the relevance, importance, or delight of your project.

Maybe you're not a good executor and need someone to help with that. Or you get too focused on the execution details and need someone to be your strategic counterpart.

You get the idea.

List the drag points that might get in the way of your success, as well as one way to mitigate each drag point.

—

Who is involved in this project?

LIST ALL THE PEOPLE who are involved in this project. They could be teammates, coworkers, colleagues, family, friends, or neighbors, depending on the type of project.

When you commit to this project, you'll need to let these people know.

Make sure to put an asterisk next to or highlight the name of the project owner—the person responsible for seeing the project through—if it's not you. It's probably good to share a draft of this workbook with them before kicking off the project, as they may have helpful suggestions and/or need some clarification to see it through.

Who is involved in this project?

Who can support you with this project?

THE LAST PROMPT WAS ABOUT PEOPLE working on the project with you. This one is more about people who are outside of the *doing* of the project who may be able to help you in different ways.

Maybe they're experts or people with experience whom you can ask a few questions. Maybe they're Connectors who can introduce you to someone. Or maybe they will share your project with someone else who needs to see it.

These are often the people who can take your outcome from moderate success to epic success, but talking to them may require some courage and vulnerability. Reaching out is worth it.

Who can support you with this project, and how?

Who can block or derail this project?

YOU MIGHT HAVE DONE THIS when you listed the drag points, but if not, now is a good time to list the people who might block or derail this project.

Knowing who they are is good; knowing why they might block or derail your project is even better, because you can figure out how to either maneuver around them or coopt them. It's okay to rock your inner Machiavelli if it advances your project.

In the table below, list the people who can block or derail your project, why they might, and what you can do to maneuver around or coopt them.

You get bonus points if you list yourself.

Who's in the Way	Why They're in the Way	What You Can Do

Budget: How much time and money do you have to spend on this project?

EVERY PROJECT REQUIRES SOME TIME to complete it. Some projects cost money to complete or can be completed faster, better, and smarter if you pay someone else to help you with it.

If nothing else, being clear about how much time and money you'll spend on a project helps you determine what completing the project is worth to you, and it may give you an anchor for determining what level of success you're aiming for. Remember, good enough is good enough.

Most people minimize their money budget or assume they have none and instead decide they'll put more time into the project. It's okay if you decide to do that, but I want you to do that intentionally rather than as a matter of habit. Your time is worth something—if nothing else, put your hourly pay rate down as what your time is worth just to see how that would change things for you.

Also think about whether spending some money to finish sooner—let's say three or four months sooner, just to put a stake in the ground—is worth it. What else could you do with those three or four months?

You might not have money to spend on this project at this time, but it's always good to think through all the time and money costs of a project.

How much time are you willing to spend on this project? _____

How much money are you willing to spend on this project? _____

What are the key assumptions you have about this project?

THIS IS ACTUALLY ONE OF THE HARDER QUESTIONS to answer in this workbook, as we're normally not conscious of, or don't articulate, most of our assumptions. For instance, most of us don't think about the sun coming up tomorrow, our economy working, or our power being on—they're just givens.

The key word here is "key," as in those few assumptions that, if false, would radically alter the outcome of your project. Keep in mind that we can have some key assumptions that limit our belief in positive outcomes, as well as the over-optimistic key assumptions that make us believe we'll be wildly successful. (Creative people tend to be overly optimistic about timelines and outcomes, but that optimism is a functional delusion that's necessary for their long-term success.)

Some examples of things you might have assumptions about:

- ★ Your ability to prioritize the project
- ★ The reception of your market, audience, or industry
- ★ Your desire to do the project once you kick it off
- ★ The willingness of other people to help
- ★ Your ability to meet the timelines

What key assumptions, if false, would dramatically change the outcome of your project? How can you test those assumptions?

What are the key decisions you need to make?

EVERY PROJECT HAS AT LEAST ONE KEY DECISION (when to start the project), but most have many more. The prompts above probably generated quite a few things to think about, so this page is where you can place some of those musings as actual decisions.

For instance, if you're wondering about whether you're up for asking other people to help you, that's a key decision for you to list here. The same goes for deciding about your time and money budgets.

Feel free to come back to this page as you start working through the pages that follow. More stuff that you'll have to make decisions about will come up, so this is your place to list those decisions.

Tip: This page is a good one to review before exercising, going on trips, and eating so you can be processing decisions when you're not actively focusing on something else that requires a heavy cognitive bandwidth.

What key decisions do you need to make about this project?

What are you afraid of?

EMOTION DRIVES ACTION. When it comes to the projects that matter, fear often causes inaction on them by diverting our attention elsewhere. Better to spend some time vacuuming than working on that project that intimidates you.

Creative people often don't realize that they're scared of succeeding, as well. Baked into the creative consciousness is the idea that success means they have to give up something important—they have to sell out, be seen as a weirdo, lose friends and family, or be broke.

As it relates to this project, what are you afraid of? Why?

("Failure" is not enough—what specific types of failure are you scared of? Boogeymans win only when you can't see them.)

Action items: List all the items that need to be done to complete your project.

THIS IS GOING TO BE A TWO-STEP PROCESS.

Step 1:

List all the items that need to be done to complete your project. DO NOT worry about when they'll be done or what order they need to be done in, because that will slow you down. Get all the action items out of your head first.

Only when you can't think of any other action items should you move on to the second step.

Step 2:

Go back and put start and/or finish dates on items that need to be done by a certain day. If it's not immediately apparent, don't fuss over it. The following exercises will help with the timelines.

Like the key-decisions page, this may be one you want to flag and come back to repeatedly.

Tip: If you're the mind-mapping type, you might want to do a mind-map as Step 1 on a separate piece of paper or whiteboard and then transfer items from the mind-map to here for Step 2. That way you get the best of both worlds: the big creative space for the braindump and this space to start putting some structure around it.

Action Item	Start Date	Finish Date

Roadmap, version 1

TAKE THE ITEMS YOU JUST LISTED above and lay them out *in the order in which they need to be done* in the space below. This process is called sequencing and it's a critical step in making sure you work efficiently and effectively through your project.

In case you're curious, there's a method to the multi-step and repetitive madness. Doing this planning and sequencing in three passes helps you work through the action items because you're focusing on only one thing at a time. Planning is hard creative work, and working on one aspect of it at a time makes it easier to do. It also helps you internalize what needs to be done.

Suggestion: If you're not familiar with sequencing your projects and/or with backwards planning, write the action item with the latest date about 80% down the page, and write the action item with the earliest date about 10% down the page, at the marks suggested. As you work through this and the following exercises, you'll think of things that need to go at the beginning and the end, so we want to leave room for them.

Remember, a pencil is your friend. **This is a rough draft**—your inner perfectionist isn't invited to this party.

If you find that you need a lot more room for this step, you might want to check out our free Individual Project Planner, accessible from our Free Planners page. It has our methodology baked in, so you can swap it in here. All of our products are hot-swappable that way.

[illegible]

What happens after you complete the project?

FINISHING THE WORK PART OF THE PROJECT is rarely the actual finish line of the project. Creative projects are like the mythical hydra: you chop one head of the project off and two sprout in its place.

If nothing else, there's the wrap-up work that needs to be done, like sorting and archiving project files, letting people know the project is done, doing a project post-mortem, and so on.

For instance, take finishing a book. Where will you keep the manuscript and how will you know which one is the final version? What are all the places where you need to make sure your published book is listed? Whom do you need to send copies to? How many might you need on hand to share with people in the upcoming months? And so on.

Better to wrap up all of these items while the project is hot than to spend the next year remembering all the wrap-up stuff you need to do.

Go back to the last page and add the action items that need to happen after you complete the project.

Simplify your project

LIST 3–5 THINGS you can *remove* from the action list that are not essential to the project or whose removal would help you complete the project sooner or that wouldn't change your outcome significantly.

For instance, removing a person from the project might make it go faster. Changing your expectations of outcomes—going down a level of success because that matches what you most want to happen—will usually simplify the project as well.

You don't *have* to simplify the project. We're just pressing limits here so you can commit to the project with eyes-wide-open clarity.

Below, list 3–5 non-essential action items or aspects of the project that can be removed. You're not committing to removing them yet.

Amplify your project

LIST 3–5 THINGS you can *add* to the project that would significantly improve your outcome.

For instance, adding a person to the project might make the quality of the product or outcome that much better. Or adding something special but non-essential to the project might make it stand out more.

Good enough is good enough, AND it's always helpful to consider what might make the project that much better.

Below, list 3–5 non-essential action items or aspects of the project that can be added. You're not committing to adding them yet.

Leverage your experience

You've probably done something similar to what you're doing now, so you have some experience you can leverage here. If nothing else, this isn't your first project, so you have some experience with your own work habits that you can incorporate.

What do you have a tendency to do that makes your projects go more smoothly or creates better outcomes?

What do you have a tendency to do that slows down your projects or creates worse outcomes?

Plan your celebration

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO TO CELEBRATE once you're done with this project? Just checking the box isn't enough, as you may be working on this project for a while.

It doesn't need to be a big celebration. It doesn't have to cost you anything.

But it needs to be there so you take stock of what you've done and reward yourself for getting it done.

Fill in the blanks below. Bonus points if your celebration includes the people who have directly or indirectly supported you in the completion of the project. It takes a village, after all.

To celebrate the completion of this project, I will:

Roadmap, version 2

YOUR ORIGINAL ROADMAP was just a first draft. In case you made a mess of it—good for you!—or need more room after the last 5 questions, here's space to do it again. This version is the one you might want to share, pin in your office, or keep in your project folder, so your inner perfectionist can join the party now, as long as she or he doesn't misbehave or ruin the fun.

Action Item	Start Date	Finish Date

Share it!

WHO NEEDS TO SEE THE PROJECT PLAN SOON? Don't sit on it all by yourself.

Social sharing and commitment tend to enhance project completion, so that's one really good reason to share the plan soon.

If you have a team workflow, sharing the plan also allows your teammates to get in on the project sooner. The sooner you all start as a team, the sooner you all can finish as a team.

This step doesn't need to be a huge ordeal. Email them this completed workbook. Take a picture of the last page and text or email it to them.

If you don't have anyone to send it to, send it to me. I won't be able to comment on it or help you work through it, but I will send a note of encouragement.

List who needs to see the project:

Post your plan

Where will your roadmap live?

Some suggestions:

- ★ On your bathroom mirror
- ★ On your refrigerator door
- ★ On a corkboard or whiteboard in your office
- ★ On your digital desktop
- ★ In your Productive Flourishing Planners
- ★ In your task management system (Basecamp, Asana, OmniFocus, Things, RememberTheMilk, etc.)

Reminder: If it's a team project, it needs to live in a team workspace, too.

Where will your project roadmap live, who's responsible for getting it there, and when will they do it?

Where will it live? (Multiple places are encouraged) _____

Who's responsible for getting it there? _____

When will they get it there? _____

You've done some amazing work on this project plan. Do not let it go to waste by hiding it away

Start finishing

WE'RE AT THE GRAND FINALE. You've done a lot of brainstorming and possibility-making, but you haven't committed to the project yet.

You can still walk away without feeling like you've got another project that needs attention. You can put it on the shelf. You can decide that the fun was all in figuring out how you'd do the project.

However, if completing this project is something you *will* do, now is the time to make that commitment.

Ready?

I will start this project by _____

I will finish this project by _____

Get on it. You've got what it takes.

More tools and resources to help you finish the stuff that matters

YOU MIGHT FIND THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES to be useful as you start digging into your project.

Our Free Planners

We have a collection of free planners, worksheets, and aids available on our Free Planners page. Some enhanced versions of those worksheets are available for sale from our website as well. [Go here to grab your planners.](#)

The Monthly Momentum Call

On the second Monday of every month, I host a no-cost Q&A webinar for the Productive Flourishing community. This is a great time to ask questions about your project or anything else related to productivity, time management, creativity-in-practice, entrepreneurship, or, well, just about anything you want to ask. [Sign up for the Monthly Momentum Calls here.](#)

The Creative Giant Show

We publish one episode of the Creative Giant Show (our podcast) every Tuesday. Guests and I discuss what it takes to thrive as a creative person actually doing the work. We discuss the ups, downs, and WTHs? that happen on the road to creative success, and the show features well-known Creative Giants as well as new and up-and-coming Creative Giants. If you're ever feeling like you don't have what it takes and everyone else has it figured out, listen to the show for some inspiration and a quick kick/nudge/fistbump. [Go here to listen to the Creative Giant Show.](#)