

Time blocking: what it is and how to do it

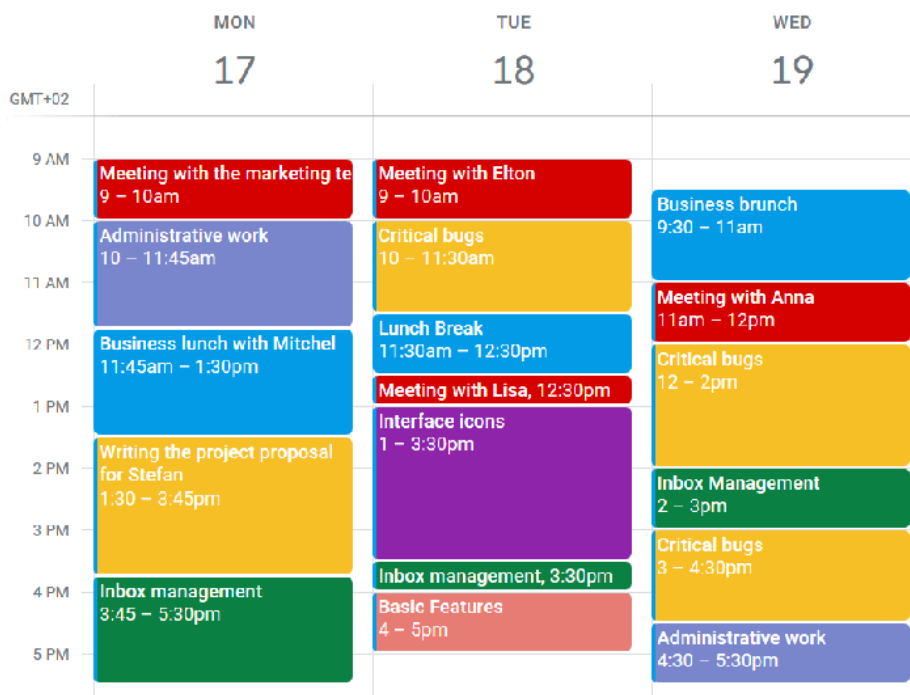
The exceptional entrepreneur Elon Musk always managed to find time for his kids, all while working 120+ hours per week and making plans with NASA to colonize Mars – thanks to a time management technique called **time blocking**.

What is time blocking?

Time blocking, or calendar blocking, involves defining specific time blocks for the tasks, events, and activities in your life, and then scheduling them against your calendar. You can schedule and follow time blocks for both business and personal tasks.

The gist of this time management technique is simple:

1. Add all your daily or weekly tasks to a to-do list
2. Select specific time slots in your calendar and reserve them for the tasks
3. Work on the tasks during the prescribed time blocks, and aim to complete them before it's time for the next time block



As mentioned, Elon Musk was the one who made this time management technique popular – he'd often work in 5-minute time blocks while he was the acting chairman of Tesla and SpaceX. Apart from helping him successfully run two colossal companies, time blocking also helped Musk exercise twice a week and spend about 4 days of quality time per week with his children.

How to time block your schedule

Now that you've understood the gist of time blocking, here's how it all works in more detail.



Time blocking involves 4 main steps you need to follow:

- Plan everything
- Define time blocks
- Act on your schedule
- Test and revise

1. Plan everything

This first step sets everything in motion – in it, you first need to brainstorm all tasks you may have to work on this week, and then work your way down from there.

Once you’re done brainstorming, you’ll likely find that you’ve listed a number of tasks that aren’t a priority or have a distant deadline – scrap these tasks for now, and aim to limit your daily schedules to 3-5 priority tasks per day.

These priorities can be recurring tasks you tackle every day, like answering important emails or handling client calls. Or, they can be tasks you tackle every-so-often, like handling some urgent administration work, or conducting research for your new project.

Either way, make sure you highlight these priority and unavoidable tasks in your to-do list. You can even add time estimates for each task, to make the next step easier.

Task name	Assignee	Estimation (h)
Time Block 1	Lisa Johnson	1 h
Time Block 2	Lisa Johnson	2 h
Time Block 3	Lisa Johnson	3 h
Time Block 4	Lisa Johnson	1 h
Time Block 5	Lisa Johnson	2 h

Moreover, to make matters easier, you can even parse these tasks into smaller tasks, if possible. For example, instead of allocating 1 hour to the task of “answering emails”, count the number of emails you’ve received that day and allocate 5 minutes to each email. This way, you’ll avoid wasting 10 minutes on one email, and then rushing to finish the next one in 2 minutes (resulting in numerous errors) just to keep up with your impractical time block.

The screenshot shows a task management interface. At the top, a task titled "Answering John's email" is displayed, assigned to "Project 1: Time Block 4 - Jessica Bolton". Below the task title, there is a timer showing "00:00:16" and a "STOP" button. Below this, a section titled "Today" shows a list of tasks with a total time of "00:15:00". The tasks listed are:

Task name	Assignee	Time	Estimation
Answering Philip's email	Project 1: Time Block 3 - Jessica Bolton	9:10AM - 9:15AM	00:05:00
Answering Stella's email	Project 1: Time Block 2 - Jessica Bolton	9:05AM - 9:10AM	00:05:00
Answering Tom's email	Project 1: Time Block 1 - Jessica Bolton	9:00AM - 9:05AM	00:05:00

Once you’ve selected your priorities and compiled a comprehensive to-do list, it’s time that you define precise time blocks and mark them in your calendar.

2. Define time blocks

In the second step, time is the main component – you’ll need to decide:

- *When* you need to block time, by defining specific start and end times
- *For how long* you need to block time, by defining the task duration

When answering these questions, bear in mind that there are optimal time periods and duration for each task – you just need to figure them out.

When you need to block time

According to the science of circadian rhythms, each activity has an opportune moment – there’s an ideal time for sleeping, eating, relaxing, and working on your priorities. So, unless you have no choice (or find this practice natural for you), you shouldn’t sleep for 8 hours during the day, and then start working on priority tasks at 3 AM.

You likely already have a history of studying or working, so you likely already know when it’s your ideal time for work – the time when you’re the most alert, concentrated, and most likely to focus without distractions. This is the time when you should schedule your priority tasks – schedule other tasks, either business or personal, around this “prime” time, to different time slots.

For how long you need to block time

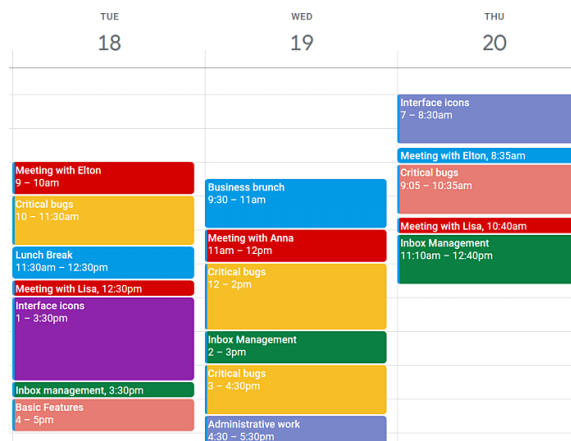
According to the science of Ultradian rhythms, peoples’ minds work in 90-minute cycles – and, according to the popular **Pomodoro principle**, you should parse your work day into 25-minute work-time and 5-minute break-time.

What do we get from this?

Well, first, you should never define more than 90 minutes for a time block – science shows you cannot concentrate on one activity without a break for more than an hour and a half in a quality way.

Both the science of Ultradian rhythms and the Pomodoro time management technique insist you take frequent breaks – at least for 5 minutes after each work session. If you find the 90 nonstop minutes for work too much, you can instead choose 25 minutes for your time blocks – this time is long enough for you to fully focus on something, but short enough so that you don’t tire yourself.

Once you’ve decided how you’ll handle your time blocks, simply add them to your calendar.



3. Act on your schedule

Once you've selected the *what*, and defined the *when* and *for how long*, you'll need to "act" on your promises and follow your schedule.

Start with your first-time block – start working on it at the prescribed start time, and stop working on it at the prescribed end time. Then, repeat, until you reach the end of the schedule for today.

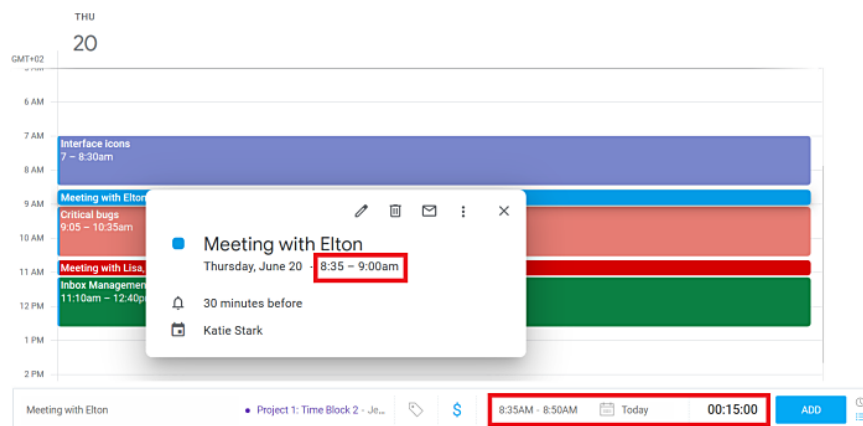
This may seem like the easiest step in the time blocking process – you've laid out the ground rules, now you just need to follow them. But, acting on your schedule will only become easy and simple once you figure out whether your prescribed time blocks work in real life – and this is where the revision step kicks in.

4. Test and revise

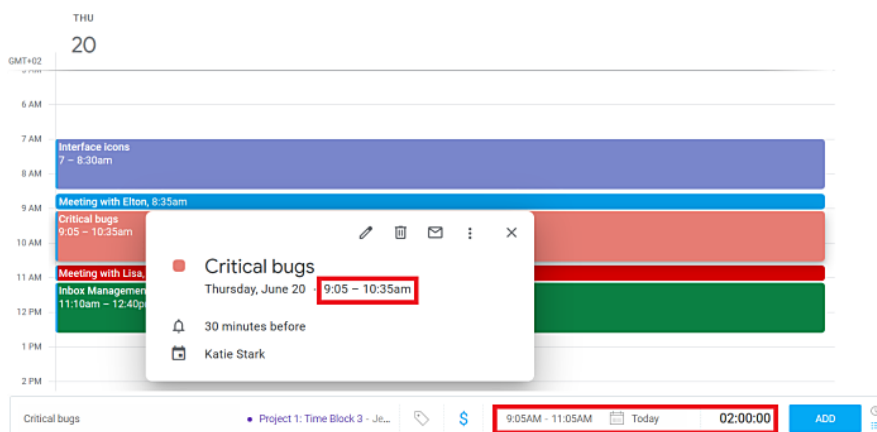
As you start working on your time blocks, it's best that you track time on them as you work – this way, you'll know whether some time blocks are too short or too long, and you'll be able to revise and perfect them in the future.

For example, you block all your tasks with 25 and 90 minutes, and your time tracking results tell you that this works about 80% of the time – but you also find out that some tasks take much more or less than that.

Perhaps you'll find that effective meetings typically take 15 minutes and that you waste the other 10 minutes in an effort to live up to your prescribed time block.



Perhaps you'll find that you take 2 hours to tackle critical bugs in your program, so your schedule falls half an hour short.





Either way, you should change your approach- next time you create a schedule, use your real-life time tracking results for each task to define time blocks. With time tracking, you'll already have proof they work, so you'll know you'll finish on schedule.

Additional time blocking tips

Create time blocking templates

Blocking time in your calendar may take time, but you'll speed things up if you create time blocking templates – you can create empty time slots with start and end times, and just fill them out with tasks as you are tasked with them.

Reserve empty time slots for your everyday activities – for example, reserve the times when you'll exercise, take a morning shower, eat breakfast.

You can also reserve empty time slots for your priority tasks – if you've calculated your biological prime time, you'll understand when your most effective time window is, and you'll know to always reserve these pre-made time slots for your priority tasks.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
7:00 - 7:15	shower	shower	shower	shower	shower
7:15 - 7:45	breakfast	breakfast	breakfast	breakfast	breakfast
8:00 - 9:30					
9:30 - 10:30					
10:30 - 1:00					
1:00 - 2:30					
2:30 - 4:00	inbox management	inbox management	inbox management	inbox management	inbox management

Follow theme days

You can do various tasks during the day, or you can define theme days when you'll tackle only a certain type of tasks – The CEO of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, follows this practice, so he spends entire Tuesdays on product-related activities, and entire Wednesdays on marketing activities.

Following suit, you can block your own days of the week only for specific tasks – for example, block Mondays for meetings and client calls, Tuesdays for research activities, and Wednesdays for administration.

This way, you'll fully immerse yourself in one type of activity, avoid multitasking, and make sure you have the tools and materials you need for this type of tasks.

Remain flexible

Sticking to a rigid schedule makes sure you achieve everything on your agenda, but what if something unexpected pops ups?

To prevent surprises that ruin your schedules, make sure you block at least an hour each day for unexpected tasks – if something unexpected happens, you'll be covered, and if not, you'll have an additional hour to work on your already scheduled priorities some more.