Time blocks and plan versus actual: build a calendar and learn from the difference

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A calendar block reserves an opportunity; an audit records what happened. Keep the two separate so an optimistic estimate does not become a false report. The following original examples show a day, a deadline and a short project. All figures are fictional teaching inputs, not claims that this schedule will suit everyone.

Separate importance from urgency

Importance concerns consequences and responsibilities; urgency concerns a real deadline. A loud notification does not make an item important. List concrete tasks, then ask what happens if each is delayed. A student's assignment due tomorrow may be important and urgent, while preparing a project due next month is important without requiring an immediate response. Marking everything as highest priority makes the label useless. If two tasks genuinely conflict, compare their consequences and clarify expectations with the people involved.

A worked Eisenhower matrix

The four combinations of importance and urgency prompt a decision rather than issuing a universal command. Important urgent work usually needs the next suitable time; important non-urgent work needs a planned place. An urgent low-value request may need clarification or an agreed alternative. Delegating requires a real agreement, not an automatic instruction from a table. Rest is not useless merely because it does not produce a work deliverable. The table contains original examples to show how the distinctions can be applied.

Combination	Example	Decision
Important and urgent	Check an assignment due tomorrow	Use the next suitable block
Important, not urgent	Prepare an example for a future project	Reserve time in advance
Urgent, less important	Clarify a secondary request	Check the deadline and agree a response
Neither urgent nor needed	Re-sort files that are already usable	Remove the unnecessary action

Build a bounded schedule after fixed commitments

List lessons, meetings, travel and shared responsibilities first. A block then needs a start, finish, specific result and material ready. Keep transition time. Our example uses a free morning for a small report; a student can replace the outputs with revision or an assignment. A teacher must fit the blocks around actual lessons, not copy the morning as free time.

The three work blocks total 120 minutes. The two 15-minute gaps add 30 minutes, so the whole planned window is 150 minutes. Do not call every minute in the window production time. If a new request arrives, decide what it replaces.

Planned time	Work	Ready condition
09:00-10:00	Draft the report	An original answer and example exist
10:00-10:15	Transition / buffer	Materials ready for the next action
10:15-10:45	Check calculations	Reasoning and totals checked
10:45-11:00	Transition / buffer	Unfinished point recorded
11:00-11:30	Check references and deliver	Links work and receipt is confirmed
My block		

Plan backwards from an actual deadline

Suppose a file must be delivered by 15:00. Reserve delivery margin and the final check, then place drafting and source preparation before them. This is a dependency sequence, not a promise that unfamiliar work fits the first estimate. If the available afternoon is shorter, reduce scope or discuss the deadline before filling overlapping blocks.

Time	Action	Dependency
14:50-15:00	Delivery margin	Checked file ready
14:30-14:50	Final file, source and requirement check	Draft complete
13:30-14:30	Write and revise the draft	Material selected
13:00-13:30	Prepare the needed sources	Question and requirements clear

Use ordinary Google Calendar events for blocks

On a computer, open the week or day view, select an empty time, enter an action title and its start/end, then save. Use a title such as “Draft the comparison” rather than “be productive”. Check the calendar and time zone, and edit a block when the agreement changes. A personal work block does not need invited guests.

Ordinary events and the special Focus time type are different. Google limits Focus time to eligible work/school accounts; its automatic meeting-decline options should not be promised for every account. You can plan ordinary events without claiming those features.

1. Put fixed commitments into the correct dates first.
2. Create an event for the selected action and check both start and finish.
3. Add the next block only where it really fits, including preparation and gaps.
4. After work, preserve the actual result separately; moving an event is not proof of completion.

Record actual intervals and their causes

Observe a few ordinary days with start, finish, activity and result. Keep interruptions or waiting distinguishable from the work if they explain a mismatch. The fictional actual times below total 140 work

minutes, plus the same 30 minutes of gaps. The actual window therefore ends at 11:50,20 minutes after the planned 11:30 finish.

Use consistent categories and units. This is a personal learning log, not a payroll record or monitoring of another person. A delayed task can still produce a good result; investigate the cause before deciding what to change.

Work	Planned minutes	Actual interval	Actual minutes	Observation
Draft	60	09:00-10:15	75	An example required clarification
Calculation check	30	10:30-10:50	20	Prepared data made the check shorter
References and delivery	30	11:05-11:50	45	One reference needed correction
Work total	120		140	Gaps excluded from both work totals
My entry				

Calculate the difference with the right denominator

Duration variance = actual work minutes - planned work minutes. Here 140 -120 = +20 minutes. Relative variance =20 /120 ×100 ≈16.7%. The denominator is planned work, not the 150-minute calendar window. A positive result here means more time used than planned; it is not a productivity or quality score.

For the 20-minute check against a 30-minute estimate, the difference is-10 minutes and the relative difference is about-33.3%. Record why it was shorter instead of assuming faster is always better. If planned duration is zero, the percentage is undefined: report the absolute difference and fix the estimate. Compare like with like, especially when the scope changes.

Compare project dates separately from work effort

A timeline compares when stages should finish and when they actually finish. It is different from the number of minutes worked. In this original sequential example, a draft’s delay moves later dependent stages. The final handover is one workday late; adding all three repeated one-day date differences would incorrectly claim three days of independent project delay.

Use the actual working calendar and preserve both baselines when a plan is formally revised. Add an owner, dependency and next decision. A coloured chart without those facts can make an incomplete plan look reliable.

Stage	Planned finish	Actual finish	Dependency / decision
Material ready	Day 1	Day 1	Question agreed
Draft	Day 2	Day 3	Required material; clarification needed
Review	Day 3	Day 4	Draft ready; reviewer agrees
Handover	Day 4	Day 5	Review resolved; confirm revised delivery
My stage			

Test usefulness and leave a clear restart point

Broader time-management research does not prove that this particular timetable works for every person. Try one suitable period, keep the work and compare the planning burden, interruptions and usable output. Change block size or method if maintaining the calendar becomes the main activity.

The Zeigarnik effect concerns memory for unfinished versus finished tasks; a 2025 synthesis did not find a universal unfinished-task advantage. A 2026 work-focused synthesis links unfinished work with more off-job work thoughts. These are different outcomes. In 2011 experiments, specific plans reduced task-related intrusions; this is not a promise that a planner resolves every worry.

A practical return note can simply say where you stopped, what is missing and which action becomes possible next. For our report, “reference unverified; check the publisher record before sending” is usable. “Finish everything tomorrow” is not. Choose the next date around actual commitments and revise the plan if the dependency remains blocked.

Is a calendar event the same as a to-do item?

A task describes work; an event reserves time. A task may need several blocks, and an event still needs an outcome check.

Can time variance show that someone is productive?

It shows a difference from an estimate. Quality, scope, constraints and delivered results need separate evidence.

Keep estimated and actual work distinct in My Day

In My Day for Windows, record the planned interval in a task or note and the actual observation after the session. Keep the deliverable and next action with the project. Use an external calendar if you need calendar events; the diary's manual workflow is not an automatic Google Calendar connection.

1. Choose one available block and a visible output.
2. Save actual time, result and cause of the difference.
3. Review the next action or revised commitment.

Sources

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