

A YEAR OF LIVING PRODUCTIVELY

Weekly Experiments in
Getting *MORE* Done

Melanie Wilson, Ph.D.

SAMPLE



A Year of Living Productively helped me quickly see which productivity method would work with my current habits. It's an encyclopedia of productivity strategies! Dr. Wilson outlines how each strategy works with real-life pros and cons. You can quickly identify which method will work for you based on your unique situation.

Amy Michaels

BookBrilliantKids.com

I was encouraged as I read about Dr. Wilson's productivity experiments. Before reading *A Year of Living Productively*, I had never thought of habits I already have as productivity tools and was empowered to know I'm already doing some things well. And I gained understanding of new strategies to try, especially those recommended for specific situations. Thank you, Melanie, for compiling your experience and research into such an easily digested format.

Beth Napoli

TechieHomeschoolMom.com

Some of us are born to productivity, and others of us ... not so much. If you count yourself amongst the not-so-naturally-productive, you've just got to pick up this book. Step-by-step, Melanie walks us through those areas of our lives that seem to vex the non-intuitive and shows the reader the way to a more productive, far less stressful life.

Kendra Fletcher

Author of *Leaving Legalism* and *Lost and Found:
Losing Religion, Finding Grace*

A Year of Living Productively is likely to be one of your wisest purchases! You will save precious time, money, and the agony of staying on the hamster wheel we often find ourselves on. Melanie has compiled 80+ productivity strategies to fit your unique situation and personality. Tried and true methods are described along with the strategies that didn't work. If you are ready to discover the productivity you deserve, this book is for you.

Brandy Alderman

OurThriftyHome.com



A Year of Living Productively

Melanie Wilson's commitment to truthful, firsthand experience made me fall in love. Why? She follows the tradition of brave scientists who experiment on themselves first, before drawing conclusions. This approach takes courage and persistence, making this book a must-have for anyone interested in personal development.

Francis Wade

2Time Labs and author of *Perfect Time-Based Productivity*

Everyone wants that magical productivity approach which will relieve guilt, end overwhelm, bring clarity, and achieve massive results. The bad news is this one-size-fits-all system doesn't exist. The good news is you can create your own approach – one that truly works for you as an individual. The best way to discover what works for you will be to learn what works for others, to think about your situation, and then to possibly experiment with some new strategies or behaviors. To that end, Melanie has assembled the best list I've seen of popular productivity systems and tips. *A Year of Living Productively* will get you thinking deeply about your own way of working and will give you more than enough ideas to dramatically improve how you perform.

Loren Pinilis

LifeOfASteward.com

This book is one of the most practical solutions I have seen on organization and time management. It is full of strategies to help you get more done and be more on top of your life, but in a way that is easy to follow. You can identify if the strategies will work for you, weigh the pros and cons, and learn about similar systems that might be a better fit. Whether you are a parent, student, business owner, or anyone who wants to stop being a victim of the chaos of their lives, this is an amazing tool that you need on your shelf!

Rebecca Spooner
HomeschoolOn.com

As a busy work-at-home, homeschooling mother, my to-do list is always so long that I find myself doing a lot but accomplishing nothing. *A Year of Living Productively* has allowed me to try different methods of productivity to determine which techniques work best for me and my life. Thank you, Melanie, for giving me the tools to say goodbye to merely surviving while giving me ideas and confidence to truly thrive in all areas of my life.

Heather Bowen
Blogger & owner of LifeofaHomeschoolMom.com
and HomeschoolBlogging.com

A Year of Living Productively is another masterpiece written by Dr. Melanie Wilson. In this must-read self-help book, she shares a compilation of executive skills used by those who have accomplished life-long goals. Whether you are homeschooling, working, or earning a degree, use the tools presented by Dr. Wilson and you will have your most productive year ever. Makes a great gift for graduates or anyone who wants to succeed. ★★★★★

JK Mergens
LearnMathFastBooks.com

After having used *The Organized Homeschool Life* successfully for two years, I was thrilled to read *A Year of Living Productively*! Dr. Melanie Wilson is one of the most organized and productive persons I know. She is straight to the point and has a gift to help others become organized and productive as well. In her new book, she includes clear descriptions of several productivity methods she has experimented with, along with pros and cons to each and practical examples we can all relate to. This book saves us hours of reading about each of these systems. It helps us to easily identify which systems would work best for us according to our own personality, needs, lifestyle, and season in life. Reading *A Year of Living Productively* helped me identify where I was lacking productivity and how to maximize my time to be more fruitful.

Ana Willis
HebrewForHomeschoolers.com



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Creating routines changed my life. I started to believe I could homeschool, accomplish my writing and speaking goals, and still have time for hobbies. Soon, other people believed it, too.

I tried other methods to increase my productivity even more. Some worked; some didn't. I was confused when some of the popular methods I tried didn't work for me. I wondered if something was wrong with me or if I hadn't used them correctly. But I kept experimenting and improving.

I continued homeschooling, writing, and speaking, and we added three more children to our family.

The Beginning of “A Year of Living Productively”

In 2013, I decided to write about my experience testing a different productivity hack each week on my blog, Psychowith6. (I'm a psychologist with six kids, thus the name.) I was surprised and delighted by the response to my series of experiments. Business people, productivity experts, as well as homeschooling moms followed my journey. Many wrote to tell me of their success in using the methods I introduced them to. My plan was to write a book about my experience at the end of a year. In fact, one of the experiments was testing whether I could write the book in 21 days. The answer, as this book is being published five years later, is obviously no. At least it wasn't possible for me then.

After “A Year of Living Productively”

In the years since completing the series, I have continued to experiment. In the process, I have found new methods that have greatly increased my productivity. I also obtained new results with old methods. Some that had initially worked no longer did, and some that hadn't worked in 2013 were performing brilliantly. My experience changed the way I thought about productivity.

How A Year of Living Productively Can Make You More Productive

When I began outlining the book based on my year of experimenting, I thought I would be writing a best-practices book. I foolishly believed that I could determine which methods would work best for you. The years that followed the series taught me that I couldn't even predict which methods would work for me!

A YEAR OF
LIVING
PRODUCTIVELY

Weekly Experiments in
Getting **MORE** Done

Melanie Wilson, Ph.D.



Introduction

You're overwhelmed. You have such a long to-do list, whether the list is mental, paper, or digital, that you don't know what to do first. For every task you cross off your list, two more appear. You want to honor your commitment to your work, your family, and even to yourself, but getting everything done feels impossible.

So you procrastinate. You put off working on your goals because just getting through the day is exhausting. You tell yourself you'll make progress on those important projects later, after you get organized. You'll clear the clutter, clean out your email inbox, and be ready to work...as soon as you have a free weekend.

But you know you're capable of getting more done. There was a time in your life when you were productive, but for some reason, you cannot regain your fire. You blame it on your work, your family, or your season of life, but you wonder if there's another explanation.

If you're overwhelmed, procrastinating, or unhappy with how you spend your time, this book is the answer.

Whether you work in an office or at home; whether you're a professional or a student; whether you're a home educator, entrepreneur, or both, you now have the solution to getting more done. You can become two, five, or even ten times more productive as you complete the experiments described in this book. I am confident of this because these pages do not offer a one-size-fits-all productivity solution. Instead, I will show you the path that has led me to the most productive, most satisfying days of my life. By studying how you work best, you will have an approach customized to your circumstances today that can easily adjust to changes in the future.

How can I make such a bold claim?

This is the point at which I am to inspire you with my story and convince you of my authority to write a productivity book. Here's the short version. I have a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. I have experience conducting research. But that isn't why I have the authority to write a book about productivity experiments. Instead, I have the authority to write because I've gone from being stuck in disorganization, procrastination, and overwhelm to living as an accomplished entrepreneur, author, and home educator.

Since writing a blog series by the same title as this book, I have achieved my biggest goals. I have successfully graduated three of my homeschooled students and have continued to homeschool three more; I've created three years of podcasts for *The Homeschool Sanity Show*; I've written *The Organized Homeschool Life* book and planner; and I've published three volumes of the elementary language arts curriculum, *Grammar Galaxy*. I've become a popular publisher and speaker in the homeschooling niche. Yet I still have time for my family and friends, volunteer work, and several hobbies. I have never been happier. But it took a number of trials to arrive at this place. Your learning curve can be much, much quicker.

In as little as one day of testing the right method, you can enjoy:

- **Improved clarity.** Know what to do when you start your work day.
- **A sense of control.** Experience peace of mind, improved focus, and a relaxed approach to your work.
- **Progress on your most important goals.** Accomplish more than you dreamed was possible and be more effective in your daily work.

I know you can experience these results because I have been your research assistant and your guinea pig. First, I have assembled a list of more than 80 of the most powerful productivity methods available. In your hands you have the instructions for using each one. But you don't have to try them blind. I've tested them! You'll know how a psychologist turned homeschooling mother of six, who writes and speaks for a living, responds to each one.

I know what you're thinking. (They taught us mind reading in graduate school.) If I'm not a psychologist, home educator, writer, or entrepreneur, how do you

make a good guinea pig for me? Good question. I'll answer it shortly. But first I want to explain why I started experimenting with productivity.

Before “A Year of Living Productively”

In high school and college, I managed to succeed in my classes and activities, despite my distractibility, habit of overcommitting, and lack of any type of productivity system. I relied on my memory and all-nighters.

When I started graduate school in psychology, life began to unravel. I lived alone for the first time and did not regularly do dishes, take out the trash, or put papers away. I had no method for managing my finances, my schedule, or my laundry. I feared I would be kicked out of my graduate program and my apartment.

I got married before finishing my degree. My husband's daily habits made me a better housekeeper, but I was still disorganized. When we had guests on the way, I would shove everything into laundry baskets and stow them in the garage. Once out of sight, the items in the baskets (which included bills and other important papers) were out of mind. I missed appointments and put work off until just before the deadline. As a result, I had to work weeks of 18-hour days to finish my dissertation and earn my Ph.D.

After graduation, I worked in a private practice and taught developmental psychology. After our first two children arrived, I chose to stay home and do freelance writing and speaking. When I was expecting our third child I felt called to homeschool. I was reluctant because I didn't believe I could homeschool and write and speak, too. But I decided to give homeschooling my oldest for preschool a try. How hard could that be?

It turns out that homeschooling was very hard for me. Yes, I had a baby and a toddler in addition to a preschooler, but each day I accomplished nothing. Nothing. I wasn't teaching, my home was a wreck, and I had no idea what to have for dinner. My husband wasn't happy. Neither was I. I realized that I would have to send my kids to school and that having any more children was out of the question.

That's when I was introduced to a foundational productivity method: routines.

I realized that experimenting with productivity methods IS the best practice. It isn't something to undertake for just a year but for as long as you desire to get more done. My concept for how the book could help you changed from being a prescription to a method in itself. To that end, the book is divided into three sections: Before "A Year of Living Productively," "A Year of Living Productively," and After "A Year of Living Productively."

In the section titled Before "A Year of Living Productively," I share my results with methods I tried before I began the series of weekly experiments. Some of these methods were life changing for me and are still key to the productivity I enjoy today.

The section titled "A Year of Living Productively" details the results of my weekly experiments as they were originally published on the Psychowith6 blog. I have edited them only to make them appropriate for book format. I left in the ubiquitous proclamations of having found the productivity Holy Grail (how embarrassing), and I added an update. In the update, I share my current experience with each method.

The section titled After "A Year of Living Productively" includes my experience with new methods since completing the blog series.

Each method, independent of its section, is presented as follows:

- **Why the method should make us more productive.** While I didn't examine the research literature for most methods, I had reason to believe it could improve productivity. That rationale is outlined.
- **Instructions.** You will not have to read a book or article to implement the productivity method immediately. A simple explanation plus how I chose to test the method is given.
- **What worked.** For each method, I will tell you what worked for me during the testing period. I included not just greater productivity but satisfaction and any side benefits of the methods here.
- **What didn't work.** I listed the cons of the method for me during the testing period here.
- **Rating.** I didn't have a metric for my results other than "Did it make me more productive?" Tracking number of tasks completed each week would

have been interesting but not entirely helpful. Some experiments motivated me to do many small, unimportant tasks while others prompted me to make great progress on one critical project. I have rated each method on a 1-5-star scale based on its usefulness to me overall. These ratings have changed over the years and are likely to change in the future. I assigned top, five-star ratings to methods I believe to be valuable to me long-term.

- **You may also like.** For each method, I share similar methods for you to try or avoid as your results dictate.

What you won't find in the description of each method are links to further reading materials or resources for implementation. These can be found at AYearLivingProductively.com where outdated links can be easily updated.

In reading about my experiments in each of the sections, you'll learn:

- Methods that have helped me overcome procrastination and disorganization
- Tweaks that turned unproductive methods into strategies I rely on today
- How I managed to publish this book after a five-year delay

In reading my experiences, you may find we have a lot more in common than you first thought. But when I am not a good guinea pig for you, you may wish to read others' reviews of the methods. I have collected links to many of these reviews into a document you can download at AYearLivingProductively.com. You may discover methods that work well for people whose work and style is more similar to yours.

The most important thing I hope you'll learn, however, is that there is no one quite like you. In coordinating drug trials in graduate school, I learned that each person has a unique response to a medication. Something that makes one person feel better will make another sicker. In the same way, you're not wrong if you hate my five-star methods. You're normal even if you're the only one of your peers who doesn't rise early, use a paper planner, or benefit from the latest productivity craze.

You can get more done when you discover the unique combination of

productivity methods that works for you. That's the essence of what I've learned from my years of experimenting. It's also what I hope to help you do: find the productivity strategies that are a perfect fit for your life and work.

How to Use This Book

I wish I could say there was a reasoned plan for the order in which I did my productivity experiments. There wasn't. In fact, there's a good chance that completing all the experiments in the order I did them will be completely crazy-making. I want to make this crystal clear: *You can do any of the experiments in any order you choose.* You can also adapt them and test them for any timeframe you choose.

The instructions given for each experiment are just suggestions. Keep using a method that worked for you while you test another or stop it while you try something new. Try one of the methods at the end of the last section that I didn't test. It's your choice.

Many people want more guidance in where to start testing. So here are three approaches to using this book that I recommend:

Approach #1

Read the entire book and then decide which of the 80+ methods you'd like to test.

Approach #2

Start testing any or all of my 5-star methods, which are starred in the Table of Contents.

Approach #3

Test my top recommendations for common issues.

Procrastination

Deadlines

Start Early

Resistance-Free
Filing & Tidying

Working Alone vs. Working with Others

Remember Your Why

Eat That Frog

Little and Often

Focus and Relief List

Mentors

Random Task Actioning

Manage Anxiety

Disorganization or Overwhelm

Sacred Time

Decluttering

Exercise

Cut Commitments

Routines

Eat That Frog

Zen to Done

Adequate Sleep

Manage Anxiety

Establish Boundaries

Master Your
Workday Now

Lack of Progress on Goals

Rising Early

12 Week Year

Zen to Done

Time Blocking

Change the Work Environment

Establish Boundaries

Manage Anxiety

Deep Work

Refuse to Choose

Systems

Mentors

Lack of Energy or Purpose

Sacred Time

Adequate Sleep

Work with Your Personality

Exercise

Nutrition

Paper Planner

Vacations

Do It Now

Little & Often

Treat Depression

Break Bad Habits and Addictions

Daily Rewards

ADD/ADHD/Easily Distracted

Exercise

Resistance-Free Filing and Tidying

Reminders

Rules

Treat Depression

Break Bad Habits and Addictions

Do It Now

Deep Work

Home Educators

Sacred Time
Remember Your Why
Routines
Paper Planners
Do It Now
Daily Rewards
Loop Scheduling

Bloggers, Authors & Entrepreneurs

Remember Your Why
Deadlines
Scheduling
Theme Days
12 Week Year
Time Blocking
Digital Multitasking
Systems

Need a Complete System

Productivity Evaluation
Paper Planner
Zen to Done

Whichever approach you choose, I recommend that you review each strategy you test. If you don't have a record of your experiments, you'll be left wondering why you didn't keep using a method. As a result, you may find yourself repeating the same experiments over and over and not improving. When your circumstances change, your reviews will give you a good idea of which methods may be useful. I have a free printable at AYearLivingProductively.com that you can use to review each method you try. It may be printed or completed digitally.

Experimenting can be more motivating in a group. When I started the blog series, I was an active participant in a productivity forum. The forum was a

fruitful place for friendship and ideas. My hope is that our Supertaskers Facebook group ([Facebook.com/groups/Supertaskers](https://www.facebook.com/groups/Supertaskers)), for people who want to get more done, will serve the same purpose. We would love to have you join and share the results of your experimentation with us.

But for now, let's not waste any more time. You have important things to accomplish! Choose an approach to using this book and start your own year of living productively.



WEEK 1

Paper To-Do List

Why a paper to-do list could make us more productive. Writing things down is a proven memory aid. Having a visual list can also transform the overwhelm in our heads into manageable tasks that fit on a sheet. Paper also allows us to get away from the computer, which can be a distraction.

Instructions. You can use a sheet of paper, a pretty notebook, or a note card—just no sticky notes. Write down anything you have to do on your list and cross it off as you complete it. There are no other rules than that.

Results

When I told a friend whom I met on a productivity forum that I was going to be using a paper to-do list this week, she laughed and said, “Techno Girl is going paper, huh?”

Yeah, I’m out of my element. I haven’t consistently used a paper to-do list in many years. Those of you who’ve always used paper may be frustrated with me. First, I’ve discovered benefits of paper that are no-brainers for you. But second, I’ve also discovered some frustrations with paper that you will think aren’t an issue at all.

What Worked

- **A sense of completion.** The biggest unexpected benefit was feeling like I actually accomplished something. I do think I did more than normal, but even if I didn’t, I felt like I did. Most digital to-do lists dismiss completed tasks from view, leaving me with the feeling that I haven’t accomplished anything. In fact, I assumed that I hadn’t gotten much done this week until I noticed that most of my tasks are crossed off. There’s just something about crossing off a task with a pen, too.

- **Reduced overwhelm.** Because I only planned to use paper for the workweek, I didn't list everything that I could potentially do in twenty lifetimes—which is what I tend to do on a digital list. Several times when I felt stressed, I reviewed my list and thought, “That’s all?” A limited number of potential tasks is a very good thing for someone like me.
- **I left it behind.** One of the things I assumed was a drawback of paper was actually a benefit to me this week. Because I didn't take my list everywhere with me like I do with digital lists on my phone, I felt like I didn't have to do anything but enjoy the activity at hand. So I chatted with friends at the kids' P.E. class rather than trying to figure out what tasks I could do at the same time.

What Didn't Work

- **Lack of integration with e-mail.** I am accustomed to having my email and tasks work together. I didn't like the feeling of wasting time writing down email-related tasks. I expect that paper users don't do this, but because I clean out my inbox constantly, I didn't know what else to do.
- **Pen failure.** Not only did my pen run out of ink, but it tore my paper as I tried to get it to work. Then I couldn't find a decent pen. That's the kind of thing that drives me nutty.
- **Poor follow-up system.** If I knew I wasn't going to work on a task until after this week, I didn't have a good place to put it. I chose to use a digital approach because I no longer use a paper planner, nor do I keep written notes. For me, it seemed silly to have to move back and forth from paper to digital, and all-paper is out of the question for this woman who needs digital alarms to remember any kind of appointment.

Did a Paper To-Do List Help Me Get More Done?

Yes! I was more motivated to cross off tasks that remained on my list and felt productive finishing my to-do's for a change. While I am ready to return to a digital list this week, I realize that I have to find a way to limit my lists AND see everything that I've finished.

Update

I still occasionally make paper lists and like them when I do. But my primary

task lists are digital because of integration with email and the convenience of having my phone with me at all times.

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

You May Also Like:

Paper Planner

AutoFocus

Focus and Relief List



WEEK 2

Covey's Quadrant Approach

Why Covey's quadrant approach could make us more productive. The late Dr. Stephen Covey's approach to productivity explained in *First Things First* can be distilled down to his focus on four kinds of work: urgent/important (Quadrant I); not urgent/important (Quadrant II); urgent/unimportant (Quadrant III); and not urgent/unimportant (Quadrant IV). He emphasized the importance of spending time in Quadrant II: not urgent/important. Urgent and important tasks are attended to without much effort, but those activities which enable us to grow, build relationships, or fulfill our dreams are so often put on the back burner because they don't demand our time. That is unless you have my kids and husband. They demand my time! But I'm thankful for that. Of course, Covey urged us to spend less time doing unimportant things, urgent or not.

Instructions. Categorize your tasks by quadrant. Tag them in a digital to-do list or divide a sheet of paper into four squares and write them in the applicable quadrant. Seek to spend most of your time in Quadrants I & II and little to no time in Quadrants III & IV.

Results

I chose to create labels for each quadrant using a digital task manager. I spent quite a bit of time assigning my tasks to these categories and here's what I discovered about this productivity philosophy.

What Worked

- **I know I already understand what's important and I do important things.** I had about twice the amount of important and non-urgent tasks as I did important and urgent tasks. I don't think that's because I am not spending enough time in Quadrant II, however. I am with my children,

and to a significant extent, my husband all day. Next to my time set apart for prayer and Bible reading, they are my top priority. The tasks in Quadrant II are generally related to writing and organizing. There are just a LOT of things I should get around to doing in those areas. And I do spend a lot of time doing them. All of that to say, *knowing what's important in your life is paramount to choosing tasks*. Committing to spending time doing those important, non-urgent tasks is also vital. I have both of those down, but there are problems using this philosophy as your only productivity method.

What Didn't Work

- **I already have my tasks tagged for priority.** The Important/Urgent tasks correspond to my must-do tasks with due dates. The Important/Not Urgent tasks correspond to my should-do tasks with no or longer-term due dates. The labels added nothing new.
- **I was overwhelmed.** Using only the categories to work from, I had 40 important/urgent tasks and 80 important/non-urgent tasks. As opposed to last week when I tested paper and felt motivated, this week I didn't want to do anything.
- **I don't put unimportant tasks in my task list.** I don't write down "surf the web" or "spend an hour on Facebook." I just DO those things. The matrix had no effect on whether or not I engaged in certain activities.
- **Importance is confusing.** Even the activities that most people would label unimportant may have been important to me at the time. Social media is important to me, whereas it isn't to other people.

Did Covey's Quadrants Help Me Get More Done?

Unequivocally, NO. My productivity took a nosedive. Was that because I didn't use paper as I did last week? I'm certainly willing to entertain that possibility and plan to test other paper approaches this year. For me, though, Covey's quadrants are more of a philosophical approach to tasks that have nothing to do with how much you do—even important things.

Update

While I don't organize my tasks in a task list by quadrants, I have a new

appreciation for focusing on the important but not urgent tasks. My current approach is to schedule these types of tasks as early in the day as possible and plan them using the 12 Week Year.

Rating: ★ ★

You May Also Like:

Remember Your Why

Eat That Frog

12 Week Year