

Start it badly

A short book about putting off work that matters until the
deadline does the deciding for you

unbry · Free to read, yours to keep

<https://unbry.com/read/start-it-badly>

First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

Contents

1. Before you start
2. A week on Friday
3. What putting it off buys you
4. "I work best under pressure"
5. What the deadline decides
6. Why it's always the work that matters
7. "I'll start when I'm ready"
8. Longer than you think, and less awful
9. Start it badly
10. "If I start early, it'll eat my life"
11. "I've always been like this"
12. Work that nobody is waiting for
13. The decision
14. When you've left it late anyway
15. Sunday evening again
16. Notes

Before you start

This is a short book. You can read it in two or three sittings, and you don't have to finish it before acting on it. If something is due and you feel like working on it at any point, put the book down and go. It will keep.

It's about one pattern. There's a piece of work that matters to you. It might be a report, an application, a dissertation chapter, a talk or a portfolio. You have time to do it properly, and you don't start. Days go by. Then the deadline gets close enough to frighten you, and you do the whole thing in a rush. It turns out fine, or nearly fine, and you promise yourself that next time will be different.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the delay isn't laziness or bad time management. It's a way of getting relief from an uncomfortable feeling, and the feeling usually has to do with being judged, by other people or by yourself. The second is that the deadline does more than make you work. It makes decisions for you, about how good the work will be, what gets left out and who pays for the rush. They're decisions you'd make differently if anyone asked you. The third is that the most useful thing you can do is small and a bit undignified. Start early, and start badly, on purpose.

The title is an instruction and I mean it literally. Chapter 8 explains what a bad start is and why I think it works. The chapters before it explain why you need one.

A few things this book isn't. It isn't a time management system, and you've probably tried a couple of those already. It isn't about housework, bills or the dentist, where the feelings involved are different. And it isn't about laziness, because I don't think you're lazy. People who put off important work are often busy all day. They're busy with everything else.

Two cautions.

Putting things off can be part of something that deserves proper help. If you've lost interest and motivation across most of your life, and it has gone on for weeks, that's among the signs of depression the NHS lists, and a GP should hear about it. If you've had trouble since childhood with organising your time, finishing tasks and being easily distracted, in every part of life and not only with work you dread, it's worth asking a GP about ADHD. If worry is running your days, that's treatable too. Chapter 13 says more. A book like this can sit alongside that help. It can't replace it.

The second caution is about workload. If you're late with things because you've been given more than one person can do, the problem is the amount of work, and no change in your habits will fix it. This book is about the case where the time was there and you didn't use it.

The notes at the back give the studies I've relied on and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

A week on Friday

It's Sunday evening. The proposal is due a week on Friday at five o'clock. You've had the brief for three weeks.

There is a document. It has a title, your name and one heading that says "Background". You made it the day the brief arrived, in a burst of good intentions, and you've opened it four or five times since. Each time you read the heading, felt something you didn't stop to name, and found yourself doing something else. You answered email. You read around the subject. Once you reorganised the folder the document lives in.

You know how the next twelve days will go, because you've lived them before. This week you'll think about the proposal every day and do very little. Next weekend you'll plan to break the back of it, and you'll do an hour. On Wednesday the fear will arrive, the real kind that sits in the stomach. On Thursday you'll work until two in the morning, and at some point in that night you'll be astonished at how much you're getting done. On Friday at ten to five you'll send it, with a paragraph you know is weak and a budget you didn't have time to check. Then comes the relief, and the promise that next time you'll start earlier.

And it will probably be fine. That's what makes the pattern so hard to shift. You aren't failing. People think of you as capable, and you are. You may have a whole degree, or a whole career, built out of Thursday nights.

What nobody sees is the cost. They don't see twelve days of low dread, or the weekend you couldn't enjoy because the proposal was in the room with you. They don't see the version you'd have written with three more days. You don't see it either, which is part of the trouble. You only ever get to meet the rushed one.

Let me describe the pattern more exactly, because the details matter later.

It's selective. You don't put everything off. You answer messages quickly. You do favours for colleagues the same day. Dull admin often gets done without fuss. The things that wait are the things that count, where the result says something about you or could change something for you. I'll call that "work that matters" all the way through, and chapter 5 is about why that's the work that waits.

It isn't idleness. While the proposal waits, you're rarely lying on the sofa. You're doing smaller work, or getting ready to work, and you end most days tired.

It doesn't feel like a decision. You never sat down and chose to write the proposal on the last night. You chose, a dozen separate times, not to write it this afternoon. Each of those choices was small and reasonable. Added up, they hand the big decisions to the calendar. That's what I mean by the deadline deciding for you, and chapter 4 lists what it decides.

And it turns on a moment. You open the document, or think about opening it, and something in you swerves. It takes a second or two. I'm going to call that moment the swerve, and most of this book is about what happens inside it.

The usual explanations fit badly. If you were lazy, you wouldn't be working at two in the morning. If you couldn't manage time, you wouldn't hit the deadline so reliably. If you didn't care, the twelve days wouldn't hurt. Something else is going on, and it's easier to understand than any of those.

Here's something to try this week, if you have work waiting. The next time you go to it and swerve, don't fight. Catch the feeling that came a second before, and give it a rough name. It might be dread, or boredom, or confusion about where to begin, or a quick sinking thought that this won't be any good. You don't have to do anything about it yet. Knowing which feeling it is will be useful in the next chapter.

What putting it off buys you

Nobody keeps up a habit for years if it pays them nothing. Putting off the proposal pays you, and it pays at once.

Go back to the swerve. You opened the document and felt something unpleasant. You closed it, or drifted to your inbox, and the unpleasant feeling eased. That easing is the payment. It arrives within seconds, it's reliable, and it costs nothing you can see at that moment. For the part of you that wants to feel all right this afternoon, swerving works perfectly.

Two researchers who have spent much of their careers on procrastination, Fuschia Sirois and Timothy Pychyl, set this view out in a 2013 review. Procrastination, they argue, has less to do with managing time than with managing mood. A task brings up a bad feeling, and avoiding the task is a quick way to repair the feeling. They add a second point. The relief goes to you today, and the cost is passed to the person you'll be a week on Thursday. They call that person the future self, and note how easily we assume that he or she will somehow be better placed to cope.

There's a neat experiment behind the idea. Dianne Tice, Ellen Bratslavsky and Roy Baumeister put people into a bad mood and then gave them time to prepare for the next task, with pleasant distractions to hand. People in a bad mood spent more of that time on the distractions. The clever part was a further group who were led to believe that their mood was fixed for the time being and nothing would shift it. Those people stopped putting the preparation off. If swerving couldn't make them feel better, they

didn't bother to swerve. That tells you what the swerve is for. It's an attempt to feel better, and it has nothing to do with a shortage of effort or a wish to fail.

So the relief is real, and I'd sooner say so clearly than pretend the habit gives you nothing. Tice and Baumeister also followed students through a term. Early on, the students who put things off reported lower stress and less illness than the ones who got on with their work. For the first few weeks, putting it off was the better deal.

Then came the rest of the result. Late in the term the same students reported more stress and more illness, enough that over the whole term they came out sicker. They also got lower marks on every assignment. The authors summed the pattern up as short-term benefit and long-term cost.

Relief is the main payment, and there are others worth naming, because each gets a chapter. Putting it off buys you the sense that you work best under pressure, along with a focus on the last night that you can't seem to find on a quiet Tuesday. It buys protection, because a disappointing result from rushed work says nothing about what you can do. It buys the comfortable idea that you're waiting for the right moment, when you'll be clear-headed and ready. And it seems to buy efficiency. The job took one night, and started early it might have eaten a fortnight.

Now look at what the relief does to the feeling it relieves. The proposal is still there tomorrow, and it's slightly worse. There's a day less to do it in. On top of the original feeling there's a new

layer, made of guilt about not having started and a little alarm. So tomorrow's swerve has more to swerve from, and the relief is that much more welcome. The habit feeds itself.

I don't want to push this too far. The original discomfort was real, the work is hard, and delay didn't create either fact. What delay does is add to the discomfort daily and then offer you relief from the total.

You might object that you sometimes put things off for good reasons, and you do. Delay isn't always this habit. If you're waiting for figures from someone else, or the brief is about to change, or something more urgent really has come in, then waiting is a plan. There's a rough test. A plan has a date in it, and a reason you could say out loud to a colleague without embarrassment. The habit has the word "later" and a feeling.

The name you gave the feeling in chapter 1 matters here. Whatever it was, that's what the swerve has been treating. The rest of this book is about treating it some other way, one that doesn't make next week worse.

"I work best under pressure"

This belief holds the whole habit up. It deserves a fair hearing, because it's built on something that has happened to you many times.

The last night is different. You sit down at eight and the swerve doesn't come. The doubts that stopped you for three weeks have gone quiet. You make decisions quickly, you don't reread every sentence, and pages appear. Around midnight you may even enjoy it. Compared with the grey, distracted half-hours you managed earlier in the month, it feels as if a different person is doing the work. It's natural to conclude that you need the pressure, and that starting early would only mean more grey half-hours.

So what does the last night supply? I count four things.

It removes the choice. For three weeks, every possible session began with a question, whether to do this now or later, and later kept winning. On the last night there is no later. You spend nothing on deciding, so everything goes on the work.

It quiets the judge. There's no time to wonder whether the opening is good enough, so you stop wondering. You have permission to write an adequate sentence and move on, and the clock is what gave it to you.

It shrinks the job. With one night left you can't do the ideal version, so you do a version that fits the night. You cut the section that needed more research. On a calm afternoon you'd never have let yourself cut it.

And it settles the argument. Not doing the work has at last become more frightening than doing it.

Read that list again, because none of the four is pressure. They're a removed choice, a quiet judge, a smaller job and a settled argument. Pressure was only how they got delivered, and it's an expensive way to get them. Each can be had on a quiet Tuesday. A fixed time removes the choice. Permission to be bad quiets the judge. A time limit shrinks the job. Most of the second half of this book is about arranging those on purpose.

You can get to the airport in forty minutes if you're about to miss the flight. That proves you can drive fast when frightened. It doesn't show that's how you drive best, or that you'd have arrived any later by leaving on time.

There's a problem with the word "best", too. If every important piece of work for ten years was done in the final stretch, you have a long record of what you produce under pressure. You have almost no record of what you'd produce with a rough version on day two and ten days to improve it. The comparison has never been run. The grey half-hours don't count as a test, by the way. In those you were trying to write the good version cold, with the judge wide awake and the option to stop. That's the hardest way to work that I know of, and it's no surprise it went badly.

Where the comparison has been measured, the last night doesn't come out ahead. The students in Tice and Baumeister's study who put things off got lower marks on every assignment. In 2007 Piers Steel pulled together 691 correlations from the procrastination research. One of his findings bears on the idea that last-minute

workers are people who need a thrill to function. If that were so, you'd expect procrastination to go with sensation seeking, and Steel found only a weak connection. Sirois and Pychyl, discussing later studies that went looking for the thrill-seeking procrastinator, called the idea unfounded. They suggested it's more often a story told afterwards to save face. That's blunter than I'd be. I think it's an honest mistake, made by people who have only ever seen one side of the comparison.

There is research on the other side, and you should have it. In 2005 two researchers, Chu and Choi, surveyed students and described a group they called active procrastinators. These people choose to leave things late, like the pressure, hit their deadlines, and do about as well as people who don't procrastinate at all. They have similar confidence and a similar sense of control over their time. It's a single questionnaire study of students, but I don't doubt such people exist.

Their description makes a useful test. Did you decide to do this piece of work late, with a date in mind, and then spend the waiting time untroubled? Were you satisfied with what you sent? If so, this chapter isn't about that piece of work, and you can leave a working arrangement alone. If the waiting time was full of dread and the honest word for the result is "fine", then you didn't choose the pressure. You ran out of alternatives.

The fear underneath this belief is that without the deadline you'd have no engine at all. I understand it, and I'd only ask you to hold the question open until chapter 8. What I'm going to suggest keeps the things the last night gives you. It moves them to the front.

What the deadline decides

A deadline is supposed to decide one thing, which is when the work gets handed over. Leave the work until the deadline is the only thing making you do it, and the deadline ends up deciding a good deal more. None of these decisions gets announced. They're made by default, by the plain fact that there are nine hours left.

It decides the quality. Your first draft becomes your final draft, with a read-through if you're lucky. Much of what makes work good happens on the second pass, when you can see what you've said and fix it. People who start late are handing in first drafts for a living. They're often good first drafts, which is how the habit survives.

It decides the scope. The section you meant to research, the second example and the appendix with the costs all get cut at one in the morning. The person cutting them is tired, and the only test applied is what can be left out without anyone noticing.

It decides what you learn. Work that's finished with days to spare can be shown to someone. A colleague reads it and tells you the third section lost her. You can't get that on a Thursday night. Over years it adds up to a great deal of feedback you never received, and I suspect that's one reason the dread never shrinks.

It decides who else pays. There's the colleague who needed your part by Wednesday to do theirs. There's the person who proofreads at midnight as a favour. There's whoever lives with you, who gets a

short-tempered version of you for three days and a wrecked one on Friday evening.

It decides how the waiting feels. This is the one I'd most like you to notice, because you pay it on the days when you did no work and thought you were at least getting a rest. E.J. Masicampo and Roy Baumeister ran a series of studies on unfinished goals. People who had been reminded of something important they hadn't done had more intrusive thoughts while reading something unrelated. They also did worse on an unrelated word puzzle. The unfinished thing went on using up attention. You'll know this from the inside. It's the proposal turning up in the middle of a film, or at two o'clock on a Saturday afternoon for no reason. The days you took off from the proposal weren't off. The same studies found a way to quiet those thoughts, and I'll come to it in chapter 12.

It may decide something about your health, though here I'll be careful. A 2023 study followed 3,525 university students in Sweden. Those who procrastinated more had somewhat higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress symptoms nine months later, along with poorer sleep. That held after the researchers allowed for a long list of other factors. The differences were small, and a study of this kind can't prove cause. Tice and Baumeister's students, as we saw, ended their term sicker. I'll mention health this once and leave it there.

And for some work, the deadline decides never. If the only thing that gets you to do important work is a date with consequences attached, then important work with no date doesn't get done. Think of the portfolio you'd need to change jobs, the application for a course that takes new people every term, or the plan for the

business. Nobody is going to ring you about these. They often matter more than anything in your inbox, and the system you're running has no way of ever reaching them. Chapter 11 is about that.

You might answer that the work gets done and people are happy with it. Both are probably true. I'm not claiming your work is poor. I'm saying you have never chosen its quality, its scope, its cost to other people or its cost to your weekends. The calendar chose. If a colleague made those decisions on your behalf without asking, you'd object, and you'd be right to.

So the aim here is narrower than turning you into someone who starts early out of virtue. It's to put those decisions back in your hands. You may still decide to do a quick version of something, and chapter 9 is in favour of that. The difference is that you'll have decided.

Why it's always the work that matters

Here's an odd thing about your working day. A colleague asks you to look over their slides, and you do it within the hour and do it well. An expenses form gets filled in. A difficult customer gets a careful reply. Meanwhile the one piece of work that could affect your year sits untouched. If the problem were a general inability to get on with things, the slides and the form would be waiting too.

The difference is what the result can say about you. Nobody's opinion of you hangs on an expenses form. The proposal will be read by people who'll form a view of how good you are. Worse, it will be read by you. A piece of work that matters is a measurement, and the swerve is what you do when you'd rather not be measured today.

This explains some things that look strange otherwise. The feeling is strongest at the very start, when the page is blank and the work could still, in theory, be brilliant. People who are good at their jobs are especially prone to it, because they have a reputation, with others and with themselves, and every new piece of work puts it at risk. And the dread is often worst for the work you most want to do well. Steel's review fits this. Two of the strongest predictors of putting a task off were how unpleasant the task felt and how much the person doubted they could do it.

The next part is uncomfortable, and I'd ask you to read it without turning it into a stick. Starting late doesn't only postpone the measurement. It spoils the measurement, in a way that protects you. If the proposal was written in one night and gets turned down,

that says nothing about your ability. You know what you could have done with proper time. If it was written in one night and gets accepted, you look better still. Either way the real question never gets answered, which is how good you are when you give something everything. Psychologists call this self-handicapping, a term from Steven Berglas and Edward Jones in the 1970s. You arrange an obstacle in advance so that the result can't be read as a verdict.

It's a bit like a runner who always turns up injured. His times never count against him. They never count for him either.

Joseph Ferrari and Dianne Tice tested the idea on procrastinators in a laboratory study published in 2000. As the study is usually described, people were given time to practise before a maths test, with games in the room. When the test was presented as a measure of their ability, the chronic procrastinators practised less than other people and played more. When the identical task was presented as a bit of fun, the difference went away. I haven't been able to read the paper itself, so treat the detail with care. The pattern, though, is the one you've just recognised in your own day. It wasn't the maths they were avoiding. It was the measurement.

I don't think anyone does this on purpose. Nobody thinks "I'll start late so that my ability stays unmeasured". The swerve takes a second and feels like nothing more than a preference for tomorrow. The protection is a side effect that happens to be welcome, and welcome side effects get repeated.

You may be thinking that this isn't you, that you aren't afraid of failing and the task is simply tedious. It may be. Some work that matters is also boring, and the feeling you named in chapter 1 might truly have been boredom. But check it against the expenses form. You do plenty of boring things promptly. If the boring task that waits is always the one with your name on the front and a judgement at the end, boredom isn't the whole story. The same goes for confusion about where to begin. When a result doesn't matter, you're happy to begin in the wrong place and sort it out as you go.

What the late start protects is an idea, the idea of how good you'd be with proper time. It's a pleasant idea to own. The price of keeping it is that you never find out, and you improve more slowly than you could, because improving needs honest measurements to work from. Ten years on, the idea is the same size as it was, and the work hasn't had the second passes that would have made it better.

If the thing being avoided is judgement, then a method that works has to take judgement out of the first session. Trying harder doesn't do that, and neither does a schedule. A start that's supposed to be bad does, and that's where we're heading.

"I'll start when I'm ready"

You look at the week ahead and see that Thursday has nothing in it. Thursday, then. A clear day, a clear head and a proper run at it. This feels responsible, because it's a plan with a day attached. Thursday comes, a meeting lands in the morning, and by the time you sit down at two the clear day has become a ragged afternoon. That isn't what this work deserves, so you look for the next clear day.

Readiness comes in several versions. The clear day is one. The right mood is another, where you wait until you feel focused and a little inspired. Then there's more preparation. There's one more report to read, a better template to find, a desk to tidy, a new app for notes. Preparation is the most convincing of these, because it looks like work and sometimes is.

The belief behind all of them is a decent one. Work that matters seems to deserve your best hours, and giving it a scrappy twenty minutes between meetings feels like disrespect.

I think the belief has things the wrong way round, in three ways.

Mood follows starting more often than it leads. Interest in a piece of work mostly turns up once you're inside it and have a specific problem to chew on. I can't point you to a study for this, so check it against your own last night. The focus arrived after you'd begun. It wasn't there at five to eight.

The clarity you're waiting for is made by the work. Before there's a draft, you don't know what the proposal's problems are. You have a general fog, and you can't think your way through fog in the abstract, because there's nothing specific to think about yet.

Twenty minutes of bad drafting turns the fog into a short list. You don't have last year's figures. You don't know what the second aim is. The budget depends on a question only the finance office can answer. Those are answerable, and some of them take other people days to answer. That's a very practical reason to find them in week one.

And preparation needs a test. Real preparation answers a question the work has asked. You've started, you've hit a gap, and you go and fill it. Preparation done before the work has asked you anything is usually the swerve in respectable clothes.

There's a serious objection here. "My ideas need time to develop. I'm not doing nothing. It's percolating." There's something in this, and the research is interesting. In 2009 Sio and Ormerod reviewed the experiments on what psychologists call incubation, where people set a problem aside and come back to it. Setting it aside did help, on average. But look at what made it help more. The benefit was larger when people had spent longer working on the problem before the break. My reading is that the mind goes on turning over a problem it has properly got hold of. If all you've done is read the brief and wince, it has nothing to turn over.

So the percolating argument turns out to be an argument for starting early. Make a rough attempt in week one, and your walks and showers for the next ten days have something to work with.

The person who starts on the last night gets no incubation at all. If a good idea would have arrived on day six, they never meet it.

I'd put it this way. Readiness isn't a condition for starting. It's something starting gives you.

One practical point follows. Work that matters doesn't need your best hours for its first session. It needs them later, for the second and third pass, when there's something on the page worth your best hours. The first session can be short, scrappy and squeezed in. Oddly, a poor slot suits it. Nobody expects greatness from twenty minutes before lunch, including you.

Longer than you think, and less awful

Two wrong estimates keep this habit going, and they point in opposite directions.

The first is about time. On Sunday you tell yourself the proposal is "a couple of solid days". Where does that figure come from? Roger Buehler, Dale Griffin and Michael Ross studied the question in the 1990s and gave us the phrase "planning fallacy". People in their studies underestimated how long their own tasks would take, and the tasks ranged from academic work to everyday jobs. Asked to think aloud while estimating, they mostly built a story of how the work would go, step by step. Their own record with similar tasks hardly came into it. When the past did come up, they explained it away as special circumstances. That time there was the office move. The time before, they had flu.

Two details are useful. The error applied to people's own tasks. Observers estimating for somebody else erred in the other direction and guessed too long, partly because they paid more attention to how such things had gone before. We're optimists about ourselves only. And in one of the studies the bias disappeared, when people were told to recall similar past tasks and connect them to the estimate.

For someone who starts late, this matters more than it does for anyone else. If you start early, a bad estimate costs you some slack. If your whole plan is to begin at the last point from which the job

can still be done, then the estimate is the plan. When it's optimistic, the overrun comes out of your sleep and the quality of the work.

So do what that study did. Think of the last three comparable pieces of work. Ignore what you planned for them. Ask how long they took, in hours, including the night. Most people who do this honestly find the number is bigger than "a couple of days", and that they've half known it all along.

The second estimate is about how bad the work will be. From outside, on a Sunday evening, the proposal feels like a wall. The dread is a forecast of how the work will feel, and I think it's a forecast made from the worst moment, the blank page with the judge awake. Twenty minutes inside the work, it's usually something much more ordinary. It's a series of small problems, some dull and a few interesting. You've noticed this on the last night, each time with surprise. If you've ever thought at one in the morning "why didn't I do this earlier, it's not even that bad", you've held the evidence in your hands. Then the memory that lasts is of dread and exhaustion. It gets filed under "proposals are awful", ready for next time.

Put the two together. You believe the work is worse than it is, so you don't want to begin. You believe it's shorter than it is, so you feel you don't have to. Each error makes waiting look reasonable.

You might say that you always make the deadline, so your estimate can't be far out. But you make it by cutting scope and sleep, which chapter 4 covered. Meeting the deadline shows that the deadline held. It says nothing about whether the estimate did.

Both errors are cured by the same thing, which is contact with the real job. Fifteen minutes inside it gives you a better sense of its size than any amount of thinking from outside, and a truer sense of how it feels. That brings us to the method.

Start it badly

Here is the instruction. On the day a piece of work that matters arrives, spend fifteen minutes making a bad version of the whole thing. If it arrived a while ago, do it today.

Each part of that is doing something, so I'll take them in turn.

Bad, on purpose. I don't mean rough, with a secret hope that it turns out good. I mean bad. Clumsy sentences, guesses where facts should go, and SOMETHING ABOUT COSTS HERE in capitals. The reason is in chapter 5. What you've been avoiding is judgement, and a version that's meant to be bad can't be judged a failure. If it's bad, you've succeeded. For once the judge has nothing to say, and you didn't need one o'clock in the morning to arrange it.

The whole thing. Don't write a polished first paragraph. Write a bad version of all of it, start to finish, at whatever level of detail fifteen minutes allows. For a proposal, that might be every heading with one ugly sentence under each. For a talk, it's the six things you might say, in the order you might say them. For a spreadsheet model, it's the tabs and columns with invented numbers in them. For a portfolio, it's a list of eight pieces with a line on why each is there. Covering the whole thing shows you the size and shape of the job, which is the information you've been missing. It also stops you hiding in the one section you find easy.

The real thing. The bad start happens in the document itself, the one that will eventually be sent. Reading doesn't count. A plan of when you'll work doesn't count. Notes about what the proposal

might cover don't count either. Those can come afterwards. The test is simple. When the fifteen minutes are up, is there more of the actual work in existence than there was?

Fifteen minutes, with a timer. It's short enough that you can't reasonably claim you haven't the time, and short enough that the swerve has little to push against. Dreading twelve days of work is easy. Dreading a quarter of an hour of deliberately poor typing is hard. When the timer goes, you can stop, and I mean that. If you want to carry on, carry on. But the deal you make with yourself has to be honest, or you won't believe it next time.

On the day it arrives. That's when the work is least frightening. No guilt has built up, nobody expects anything yet, and a bad version on day one looks like keenness. Every day of delay adds to what the first session has to overcome.

There's one more step. Before you close the document, write a line at the top saying what the next thing to do is, and make it specific. "Ask finance for last year's figures." "Write the second aim properly." Chapter 12 explains why that line is worth more than it looks.

A decorator's first coat looks dreadful. It's patchy and the old colour shows through. No decorator is troubled by this, because a first coat isn't for looking at. It's there so the second coat has something to go on.

Why would fifteen bad minutes change anything? This part is my reasoning, built on the earlier chapters.

It gives you on day one what the last night gives you. The judge is quiet because bad is the goal. The job is small because the timer made it small. The choice is gone because the rule says today. You get all of that without the fear.

It turns dread into a list. The gaps now have names, and a named gap is something you can send an email about.

It starts the clock on everything that takes time without taking effort. That covers the questions other people need days to answer, the incubation from chapter 6, and the chance to show someone a draft.

And it changes what the work is. Before, the task was to write the proposal, which meant making something from nothing in front of a judge. Now the task is to improve a bad proposal, which is editing. Most people find fixing a bad page far easier than filling a blank one. Your complaints about the bad version will be specific, and a specific complaint is halfway to an instruction.

I should be plain about the status of all this. The parts are supported by the research in the earlier chapters. The package, fifteen bad minutes on day one, hasn't been tested in a trial that I know of. It's my recommendation, and the evidence that counts will be your own.

Some objections come up reliably. The first is that a bad draft is wasted work, because you'll only throw it away. You'll throw some of it away. Count what you've been spending instead, though. Twelve days of dread and a night of lost sleep are a higher price

than fifteen minutes of sentences you later delete. And less gets thrown away than you'd expect. The structure tends to survive even when no sentence does.

The second is embarrassment. Nobody sees it. If it still bothers you, type DRAFT ZERO at the top.

The third is quieter. What if the bad version shows that you've got nothing to say? Then you've learned it with eleven days left and not eleven hours, while there's still time to read, ask or rethink. That question is the fear from chapter 5 talking, and I'd bet on the opposite result. People who've been thinking about a subject for weeks usually find more on the page than they expected.

If you have anything waiting, try this once before you read on. Reading about it won't tell you much, and one go will.

"If I start early, it'll eat my life"

The late start has one real virtue, which is that it caps the job. The proposal took one night because there was one night. Begin two weeks early and it could take two weeks, every evening, fiddled with endlessly. In 1955 C. Northcote Parkinson opened an essay in *The Economist* with the line that work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion. He was joking about the civil service and it isn't a research finding, but everyone recognises it. If you lean towards perfectionism, you have special reason to fear it. For you the deadline does more than get you started. It's the only thing that ever makes you stop.

I take this seriously. If the alternative to the last night really were a fortnight of open-ended fiddling, the last night would be the better choice.

But look at what the deadline was doing for you. It limited the hours, it forced a decision about how big the job would be, and it told you when to stop. Those are three separate decisions, and you can make all three yourself, in advance, in daylight.

Decide the size. Before the second session, ask what this piece of work needs to be. Some things need to be excellent, many need to be good, and some only need to exist. A rough test is to ask what happens if it's merely adequate. If the answer is "nothing much", decide now that it's a four-hour job, and then do a four-hour job. The rushed version was always a small version. The only change is that you've picked what goes in it, with a clear head, instead of discovering at one in the morning what fell off.

Decide the hours. Give the work a budget, taken from the honest estimate in chapter 7. It might be twelve hours across the fortnight. Put them in the diary as sessions with an end time, and stop at the end time. Stopping on time is what teaches you that starting is safe. If any session might swallow the evening, you'd be right to avoid sessions.

Decide when it's done. Set your own finish a couple of days before the real one, and make it real by promising the draft to somebody. It could be a colleague who'll read it on Wednesday, or a friend you've told. A date that exists only in your head is easy to move, as you know. One that sits in someone else's diary is much harder to shift. I can't offer you a trial showing that this works, and the notes explain why a well-known one is missing. It's my reasoning, and it uses something you already know about yourself. You turn up for other people.

Then there's the perfectionist's objection, that you can't hand in something that's merely good. There's a whole book's worth to say about that, and for now I'll make one observation. You already hand in work that's merely good. A first draft written overnight can't be anything else. Starting early doesn't lower your standards. It's the only arrangement under which your standards ever get applied, because it's the only one with a second pass in it.

There's a gain here that's easy to miss. With a bad version done and sessions in the diary, the evenings between sessions are properly free. Chapter 4 described how an unstarted job follows you around. A job that's been started, with its next step written down and its

next session booked, mostly leaves you alone. The habit was costing you leisure as well as quality, and this is how you get the leisure back.

"I've always been like this"

You probably have a story you tell about yourself, and it may be a good one. The dissertation written in the final four days. The pitch finished in the back of a taxi. You tell it well and people laugh, and there's pride in it, some of it deserved. It takes nerve and ability to pull those off. "I'm a last-minute person" is a comfortable thing to be, and it has a bit of swagger. The alternative looks like the colleague with the colour-coded planner, and you don't want to be them.

When it isn't a funny story, it's a grim one. "I'm hopeless. I did this at school, I did it at university, and I'll be doing it at seventy."

Both versions make the same claim, which is that this is a trait and it's built in.

A trait would show up everywhere, and chapter 5 showed that this doesn't. You're prompt with the slides and the expenses. You were probably prompt this week with something for a person you didn't want to let down. What you have is a particular response to a particular trigger, work that measures you. My guess is that you learned it early and that the relief in chapter 2 has rewarded it thousands of times since. At school it may have worked very well. A bright child can do homework on the bus and get good marks, and the lesson that child takes away is that the last minute is enough. The work got bigger over the years, and the method never came up for review.

I won't pretend temperament plays no part. Steel's review found procrastination tied to impulsiveness and distractibility, and people differ in those from early on. Some people find this harder than others, and you may be one of them. But a tendency isn't a fate. If you have the tendency, you need a method. It doesn't follow that no method will work.

The grim version needs separate attention, because it feels like honesty, and even like a first step towards change. Being hard on yourself seems the least you can do. The evidence runs the other way. Fuschia Sirois looked at four groups of people, three of students and one of adults from the wider community. Those who procrastinated more were less kind to themselves and more stressed, and the harshness appeared to account for part of the stress. Those were snapshots, so they can't show which causes which.

A second study followed people over time. Michael Wohl, Timothy Pychyl and Shannon Bennett tracked 134 first-year students across two rounds of exams. The students who forgave themselves for putting off revision before the first round felt less bad in the weeks between. They also put off less before the second round.

That fits the mechanism in chapter 2. The swerve is an escape from a bad feeling. If every thought of the proposal now arrives with "and you're pathetic for not having started", there's more bad feeling attached to it and more reason to swerve. Self-criticism feels like pressure to do better. In practice it feeds the thing it's attacking.

The obvious worry is that if you let yourself off, you'll never change. But forgiving isn't approving. You can think the late start was a mistake, want to do it differently, and skip the sentence of contempt. You'd manage that for a colleague without effort. "You left it late, it was a rough week, so what's the plan for the next one?" That tone gets better work out of people than contempt does, and you're one of the people.

As for the swagger, you don't have to become the colleague with the planner. Nothing here needs a change of personality. It's one fifteen-minute action on day one and a few booked sessions. You can keep the nerve and the speed, which are real skills, and the early sessions will use them. You might miss the drama a little. I'd guess you'll miss it less than you expect, around the second Thursday night you spend asleep.

Next time you catch yourself saying "I've always been like this", try the more accurate sentence. "I've always done this with work that measures me, and until now I didn't know why."

Work that nobody is waiting for

Take, as an example, a man who fits kitchens for a firm and wants to work for himself. He's good, and customers ask for him by name. To go it alone he needs a few things. He needs photographs of his best jobs, a simple website, a conversation with an accountant and a worked-out set of prices. None of it is hard. He's been meaning to do it for four years. In those four years he has never been late on a job for the firm, because there's always a customer waiting. For this, nobody is.

This is where the habit does its most expensive damage, and it does it quietly. Work with a deadline gets done, late and rushed. Work with no deadline doesn't get done at all, and the cost never arrives on a particular day. There's no Thursday night and no crisis, and nobody is disappointed. There's a slowly fading intention, and one day a birthday with a nought in it.

These are often the projects that matter most to you. The qualification, the portfolio, the application, the book, the move. They matter more than any proposal, which makes the judgement bigger and the swerve stronger. If you try and it's no good, that isn't one piece of work marked down. It can feel like a verdict on the life you hoped for. Against that, "I'll get to it when things calm down" is a very attractive sentence. It keeps the hope intact and asks nothing of you.

Things don't calm down. You already know that.

Everything in chapter 8 applies here with more force. The bad start matters more, because the first step is the one thing your current system will never produce unaided. So it's fifteen minutes tonight on a bad version of the whole thing. For the kitchen fitter, that's a page with four headings, photographs, website, accountant and prices, and one rough line under each. It isn't impressive. It exists, though, after four years of nothing, and it took a quarter of an hour.

After that, work like this needs three things the world isn't going to supply.

It needs appointments. That means standing time in the week, small and fixed, such as Tuesday and Thursday from seven till eight. Small and regular beats the occasional heroic weekend, for the reason in chapter 6. The work stays warm between sessions and your mind keeps turning it over.

It needs a person. Somebody should know what you're doing and expect to hear about it. I don't mean a taskmaster. A friend who gets a two-line update on Sundays will do, or someone with a project of their own, so that you report to each other. What they supply is what the office supplies, the mild social fact of being expected.

And it needs stages that someone sees. This kind of work has no natural deadlines, so you make some. Six photographs sent to your sister by the end of the month. A first page shown to the friend by the fifteenth. Each stage is a small deadline with a real person at the end of it, and you already know you respond well to those.

You might feel this is artificial, and that if you really wanted the thing you'd simply do it. I'd turn that round. You really wanted to keep your job, and you still needed deadlines to do the work. Wanting was never the missing piece. Very few people produce big self-directed work on desire alone. Those who seem to have usually got a structure you can't see from outside, such as an editor, a business partner, a class, or a spouse who asks.

There's one more honest possibility. The bad start may show you that you don't want the project after all. You spend fifteen minutes on the business plan and feel flat, and it dawns on you that the idea was nicer as an idea. That's worth knowing. It's a better outcome than carrying the thing around for another four years as something you ought to be doing. Let it go deliberately, and enjoy the room it leaves.

With no deadline, doing nothing still produces a decision. The answer is no, and it's delivered so slowly that you never notice being told.

The decision

Everything so far has been explanation. This chapter is the practical one. It's short on theory, because you have the theory now.

The decision is about how you treat work that matters from here on. It isn't a vow never to leave anything late again, and chapter 13 is about what to do when you have. It comes in six parts.

Start it badly on the day it arrives. Fifteen minutes, a timer, and a bad version of the whole thing in the real document. If the day it arrives is impossible, do it the next morning. For anything already waiting, today counts as the day it arrived.

Leave yourself a next step. Before you close the document, write one specific line saying what comes next. This is more than tidiness. In the Masicampo and Baumeister studies from chapter 4, the intrusive thoughts from an unfinished goal stopped when people made a specific plan for it. The people who were freed from the intrusions were the ones whose plans were earnest enough that they later carried them out. A written next step with a booked time is that kind of plan. It's what lets you close the laptop and have your evening.

Book the next session before you leave this one. Give it a day, a start time and an end time. Then put it in a when-then sentence, a form that has done well across a large body of research on following through. "When I sit down with my coffee on Tuesday

morning, then I open the proposal and do the line at the top." The point of the form is that the decision gets made in advance. On Tuesday there's nothing left to negotiate.

Decide the size and the hours. This is from chapter 9. Does this one need to be excellent, good, or simply done? Estimate from your record and not your hopes, as in chapter 7. Put the hours in the diary.

Promise an early version to someone. Pick a date two or three days before the real one, and give it to a real person.

Make the first five minutes of every session bad. The swerve doesn't retire after the first session. It can turn up at the start of each one, especially after a gap, and especially when the next section is the hard one. The same move works at small scale. Begin each session by writing a bad version of the next bit for five minutes.

You will still feel the swerve. The plan doesn't remove the feeling. It changes what you do in the ten seconds that follow. When it comes, notice it, and name it if you can, as you did in chapter 1. Then remind yourself what's being asked of you, which is five bad minutes. The proposal and excellence can wait. The feeling is a forecast about a big judged task, and that isn't the task in front of you. Then start the timer. You don't have to win an argument with the feeling or wait for it to pass. It can come along. My expectation is that it fades once you're a few minutes in, but it doesn't have to fade for you to type.

An urge to swerve isn't a command. It doesn't mean the method has stopped working or that something is wrong with you. It's an old habit firing, one that has been rewarded for years. Expect it to keep turning up for a good while, more weakly as your own evidence builds. I can't promise it goes away entirely.

A few things to expect in the first weeks. The first bad start will feel slightly silly. The second session is often harder than the first, because now there's a bad draft to face, and the judge wakes up and reads it. Remember what that draft is for. Your job in session two is to fix the worst thing in it. You don't need to be dismayed by it. Expect a strange feeling around day five as well, when you're ahead and the old system tells you it's safe to stop until the panic. Keep the booked sessions anyway. And expect finishing early to feel odd, almost like cheating. It isn't.

Start with one piece of work. Leave the rest of your life as it is for now. Use the piece you thought of while you were reading this.

When you've left it late anyway

It will happen. There'll be a heavy month, or a job you dreaded more than most, or a bad start that never got its second session. You'll look up and it's Wednesday night, and the old situation is back. This chapter is for that night and for the week after.

On the night, skip the trial. "I've read a whole book about this and I've still done it" is a tempting thought and a useless one. It adds bad feeling to a task you're already avoiding because of bad feeling, and chapter 10 explained where that leads. Remember the Wohl study. The students who forgave themselves for the first round of putting off were the ones who did less of it in the second.

The method still works with nine hours left. Do fifteen bad minutes on the whole thing, even now. It matters more now, because late-night panic tends to pour its effort into the first section and leave the ending as a stub. Get a bad version of everything, then improve the parts in order of importance. Decide the size out loud. What does this need to be by five o'clock tomorrow?

If it truly can't be done, say so early. Asking for an extension on Wednesday morning is an ordinary professional act. Asking at ten to five on Friday is a different thing. Most people put off asking for the same reason they put off the work, and it goes the same way.

Afterwards, once it's handed in and you've slept, spend ten minutes finding where it went wrong. Treat that as a practical question and not a moral one. There's usually a first point of failure, and it's usually small. You never did the day-one start because the brief

arrived on a Friday afternoon. Or you did it and wrote no next step, so the document went cold. Or you booked sessions and gave them away to other people's meetings. Find that point and patch it. One lapse doesn't show that the method has failed, or that you have. It shows you where your particular weak joint is.

I'd advise against counting streaks. "Six projects in a row started early" is pleasant until the seventh, and then the broken streak becomes a reason to feel you're back at the beginning. You aren't. Every early start you made still happened, and what you learned from each is still true.

For some readers the honest conclusion, after a fair try, will be that this isn't shifting. If the method proves hard for you, that doesn't mean you misunderstood it or didn't want it enough. It may mean something else is involved, and there's help for it. I'd talk to a GP in any of these cases.

- Your mood has been low for weeks, and you've lost interest and motivation across most of your life and not only at work. The NHS lists these among the symptoms of depression.
- You've always found it hard to organise your time and finish tasks, you're easily distracted and often lose things, and it happens everywhere, going back to childhood. The NHS lists these as signs of ADHD in adults and says the symptoms usually start before the age of 12. It also warns that waiting times for assessment can be long, which is a reason to start the conversation soon.
- Worry takes up a large part of most days.

- The putting off is threatening your job, your degree or your finances, whatever the cause.

In England you can refer yourself to NHS talking therapies for anxiety and depression without seeing a GP first. If you ever have thoughts of harming yourself, that needs urgent help the same day, through NHS 111 or your GP, or 999 in an emergency.

Procrastination itself responds to treatment as well. In 2015 Rozental and colleagues in Sweden ran a trial with 150 people who had serious trouble with it. Those given an internet course based on cognitive behavioural therapy improved more than those left on a waiting list, whether or not a therapist guided them through it. The effects were moderate. Somewhere between a quarter and two fifths of the people treated improved to a degree the researchers counted as clinically meaningful. So it's no miracle, but it's real. If a book doesn't do it, a therapist who knows this kind of work has something to offer.

Two smaller suggestions. If you're a student, your university is likely to have study advisers and a counselling service, and this problem won't be new to them. If you're employed, a plain conversation with your manager about interim dates costs less than you fear. I'd expect most managers to prefer a rough draft on Tuesday to a surprise on Friday.

Sunday evening again

It's Sunday evening. The proposal is due a week on Friday at five o'clock. You've had the brief for three weeks. Here's how those weeks might have gone, as an example and not a promise.

The brief came in on a Monday. That afternoon you spent fifteen minutes on a version so bad you'd have been mortified if anyone had seen it. It had seven headings. Under "Budget" it said NO IDEA, ASK FINANCE. So on Tuesday you asked finance, and the figures took them eight days. Under the old system that delay would have sunk you, and you wouldn't have known it was coming until the last night.

There were four sessions of an hour and a half, and one that you skipped and rebooked. On day six an idea about the second aim arrived on the walk to the station, from nowhere, except that it wasn't from nowhere. On Wednesday a colleague read the draft and told you the third section lost her. She was right, and there was time to fix it.

So now it's Sunday evening and the thing is nearly done. You aren't a different person. You felt the swerve at the start of most sessions, and once, in the second week, it won for three days. The work isn't perfect, but it's better than last time in ways you can point to, because this time it got a second pass, a reader and a night's sleep.

The bigger difference is the evenings, and this one is an example. The proposal isn't in the room.

I can't promise it goes like that. Some pieces of work will still get away from you, and some weeks the old habit will be stronger than the new one. What I'm confident of is smaller. The delay was never about laziness. It was about not wanting to be measured, and a start that's meant to be bad lets you begin without being measured.

One action, then. You've had a piece of work in mind since chapter 1. Set a timer for fifteen minutes. Open the real document, or create it, and write a bad version of the whole thing. Put one line at the top saying what comes next. Then close it, and have your evening.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor or therapist who knows your situation.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes the method in chapter 8, the three decisions in chapter 9, the advice in chapter 11 and the closing chapter. The NHS pages were read in September 2026. They're written for England, and services differ elsewhere.

Before you start. The signs of depression and of ADHD in adults are from the NHS pages "Symptoms, depression in adults" and "ADHD in adults".

Chapter 2. Sirois and Pychyl, "Procrastination and the priority of short-term mood regulation: consequences for future self", *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 7, 2013, pages 115 to 127. I read the authors' accepted manuscript in full. It's a review and an argument, not an experiment. Tice, Bratslavsky and Baumeister, "Emotional distress regulation takes precedence over impulse control: if you feel bad, do it!", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 80, 2001, pages 53 to 67. The third of its three experiments concerned procrastination. My description comes from the published summary and from Sirois and Pychyl's account of it. Tice and Baumeister, "Longitudinal study of procrastination,

performance, stress, and health: the costs and benefits of dawdling", *Psychological Science* 8, 1997, pages 454 to 458. Two studies of students, with stress and illness reported by the students themselves. The point that delay adds guilt to the original feeling is in Sirois and Pychyl. The test for telling a plan from the habit is mine.

Chapter 3. Steel, "The nature of procrastination: a meta-analytic and theoretical review of quintessential self-regulatory failure", *Psychological Bulletin* 133, 2007, pages 65 to 94. The remark that the thrill-seeking account is unfounded is from Sirois and Pychyl, who cite Simpson and Pychyl 2009 and Steel 2010. I haven't read those two papers. Chu and Choi, "Rethinking procrastination: positive effects of 'active' procrastination behavior on attitudes and performance", *Journal of Social Psychology* 145, 2005, pages 245 to 264. The list of four things the last night supplies is my own analysis, and so is the test built from Chu and Choi's description.

Chapter 4. Masicampo and Baumeister, "Consider it done! Plan making can eliminate the cognitive effects of unfulfilled goals", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, 2011, pages 667 to 683. These were laboratory studies with goals that the researchers brought to mind. Applying them to a proposal that waits for a fortnight is my step. Johansson and seven colleagues, "Associations between procrastination and subsequent health outcomes among university students in Sweden", *JAMA Network Open* 6, 2023, e2249346. Of the 3,525 students, 73 per cent answered at nine months. Everything was reported by the students themselves, and the study is observational. The rest of the chapter is my argument.

Chapter 5. Berglas and Jones, "Drug choice as a self-handicapping strategy in response to noncontingent success", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36, 1978, pages 405 to 417. In that original study the effect appeared in the men and not in the women. Ferrari and Tice, "Procrastination as a self-handicap for men and women: a task-avoidance strategy in a laboratory setting", *Journal of Research in Personality* 34, 2000, pages 73 to 83. I could get neither this paper nor its published summary, and my description follows the way other writers report it. I've given no figures for that reason. The predictors are from Steel 2007. The idea that work which matters is a measurement, and that the swerve avoids being measured, is my reading of this literature.

Chapter 6. Sio and Ormerod, "Does incubation enhance problem solving? A meta-analytic review", *Psychological Bulletin* 135, 2009, pages 94 to 120. The experiments used puzzles and creative thinking tasks that took minutes, not proposals that take weeks. The authors warn that the conditions for using incubation in practice need care. Carrying their finding over to a fortnight's work is my inference. The claims about mood and clarity following a start are mine.

Chapter 7. Buehler, Griffin and Ross, "Exploring the 'planning fallacy': why people underestimate their task completion times", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, 1994, pages 366 to 381. Five studies, mostly with students. The account of why dread overestimates how bad the work will feel is mine, and I know of no study of it in this setting.

Chapter 9. Parkinson, "Parkinson's law", The Economist, November 1955. Readers who know this subject may expect to find Ariely and Wertenbroch, "Procrastination, deadlines, and performance: self-control by precommitment", Psychological Science 13, 2002. It was the standard source on deadlines people set for themselves. The journal retracted it in September 2026, and both PubMed and Crossref now mark it as retracted. I've left it out, so the advice on promised dates rests on reasoning alone.

Chapter 10. Sirois, "Procrastination and stress: exploring the role of self-compassion", Self and Identity 13, 2014, pages 128 to 145. I read the accepted manuscript. The four samples were 145, 339 and 190 undergraduates and 94 adults, all measured at a single point in time. Wohl, Pychyl and Bennett, "I forgive myself, now I can study: how self-forgiveness for procrastinating can reduce future procrastination", Personality and Individual Differences 48, 2010, pages 803 to 808. I couldn't get the paper. My account follows Christian Jarrett's report of it for the British Psychological Society's Research Digest, 4 May 2010. The participants were first-year students, and forgiveness was measured, not taught, so the study can't show that learning to forgive yourself would have the same effect. The account of where the habit was learned is a guess and is worded as one.

Chapter 12. Masicampo and Baumeister 2011, as above. Plans in "when, then" form are from Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", Advances in Experimental Social

Psychology 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The six parts haven't been tested together. The description of how an urge to swerve behaves is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 13. The symptoms, the age of onset, the warning about waiting times and the self-referral route are from the NHS pages "Symptoms, depression in adults", "ADHD in adults" and "Talking therapies". The advice on urgent help is from the NHS page "Where to get urgent help for mental health". Rozental, Forsell, Svensson, Andersson and Carlbring, "Internet-based cognitive-behavior therapy for procrastination: a randomized controlled trial", Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology 83, 2015, pages 808 to 824. Clinically significant change was reached by 31 to 40 per cent with guidance and 24 to 36 per cent without, depending on the measure. The comparison was with a waiting list, which is an easy comparison to beat. The advice against counting streaks is mine.