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Goal Setting: A Scientific Guide to Setting and Achieving Goals

Goal setting is everywhere in our world. We set goals for our careers, our health, and our lives in general. It seems modern society is always encouraging us to think about the next milestone. However, what we don't think about enough is the science and strategy of how to accomplish your goals. That's what this guide is here to do.

Whether you're setting personal goals or professional goals, this guide will explain everything you need to know. You can click the links below to jump to a particular section or simply scroll down to read everything. At the end of this page, you'll find a complete list of all the articles I have written on goal setting.

I. What is Goal Setting?

- What is Goal Setting?
- Rudders and Oars

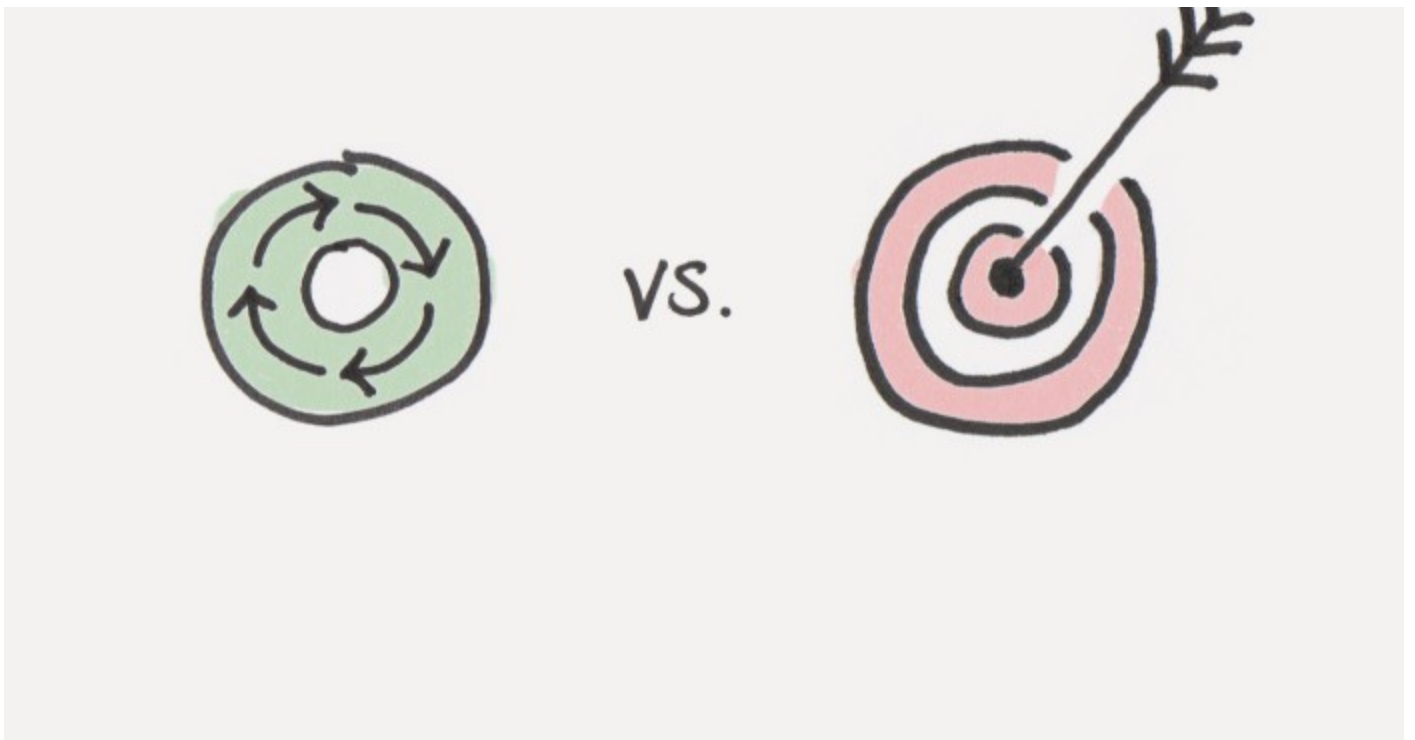
II. How to Set Goals You'll Actually Follow

II. HOW TO SET GOALS YOU ACTUALLY FOLLOW

- Ruthlessly Eliminate Your Goals
- Stack Your Goals
- Set an Upper Bound

III. How to Achieve Your Goals Consistently

- How to Align Your Environment With Your Goals
- How to Measure Your Goals
- Where to Go From Here



I. What is Goal Setting?

Experts define goal setting as the act of selecting a target or objective you wish to achieve. Fair enough. That definition makes sense, but I think there is a much more useful way to think about setting goals.

What is Goal Setting?

Most goal setting exercises start with an overpaid consultant standing by a whiteboard and asking something like, “What does success look like to you? In very specific terms, what do you want to achieve?”

If we are serious about achieving our goals, however, we should start with a much different question. Rather than considering what kind of success we want, we should ask, “What kind of pain do I want?”

This is a strategy I learned from my friend and author, Mark Manson (<https://markmanson.net/question>). What Mark has realized is that having a goal is the easy part. Who wouldn't want to write a best-selling book or lose weight or earn more money? Everybody wants to achieve these goals.

The real challenge is not determining if you want the result, but if you are willing to accept the sacrifices required to achieve your goal. Do you want the lifestyle that comes with your quest? Do you want the boring and ugly process that comes before the exciting and glamorous outcome?

It's easy to sit around and think what we *could* do or what we'd *like* to do. It is an entirely different thing to accept the tradeoffs that come with our goals. Everybody wants a gold medal. Few people want to train like an Olympian.

This brings us to our first key insight. Goal setting is not only about choosing the rewards you want to enjoy, but also the costs you are willing to pay.

Rudders and Oars

Imagine a small row boat. Your goals are like the rudder on the boat. They set the direction and determine where you go. If you commit to one goal, then the rudder stays put and you continue moving forward. If you flip-flop between goals, then the rudder moves all around and it is easy to find yourself rowing in circles.

However, there is another part of the boat that is even more important than the rudder: The oars. If the rudder is your goal, then the oars are your process for achieving it. While the rudder determines your direction, it is the oars that

determine your progress.

This metaphor of the rudder and the oars helps clarify the difference between systems and goals (<https://jamesclear.com/goals-systems>). It is an important distinction that shows up everywhere in life.

- **If you're a coach**, your goal is to win a championship. Your system is what your team does at practice each day.
- **If you're a writer**, your goal is to write a book. Your system is the writing schedule that you follow each week.
- **If you're a runner**, your goal is to run a marathon. Your system is your training schedule for the month.
- **If you're an entrepreneur**, your goal is to build a million dollar business. Your system is your sales and marketing process.

Goals are useful for setting the direction. Systems are great for actually making progress. In fact, the primary benefit of having a goal is that it tells you what sort of system you need to put in place. However, the system itself is what actually achieved the results.

This brings us to our second key insight. Goals determine your direction. Systems determine your progress. You'll never get anywhere just by holding the rudder. You have to row.

Before we talk about how to get started, let's pause for just a second. If you're enjoying this article on goal setting, then you'll probably find my other writing on performance and human behavior useful. Each week, I share self-improvement

tips based on proven scientific research through my free email newsletter.

To join now, just enter your email address below and click “Get Updates!”

Don't see a signup form? Send me a message here (<https://jamesclear.com/join>) and I'll add you right away.

II. How to Set Goals You'll Actually Follow

Alright, now that we've discussed the tradeoffs and systems that come with goals, let's talk about how to set goals you'll actually follow.

There are three basic strategies I like to use when goal setting. Let's talk about each one now.

1. Ruthlessly Eliminate Your Goals

Psychologists have a concept they refer to as “goal competition.”

Goal competition says that one of the greatest barriers to achieving your goals is the other goals you have. In other words, your goals are competing with one another for your time and attention. Whenever you chase a new goal, you have to

pull focus and energy from your other pursuits. This is basically The Four Burners Theory (<https://jamesclear.com/four-burners-theory>) in action. When you turn one burner up, you have to turn others down.

Now, there is good news. One of the fastest ways to make progress on your goals is to simply press pause on less important things and focus on one goal at a time (<https://jamesclear.com/master-one-thing>). Sometimes you just need to reorganize your priorities a little bit and suddenly progress comes much more quickly because you are now fully committed to a goal that was only getting moderate attention previously.

This is an important insight. Typically, when we fail to reach our goals, we think something was wrong with our goal or our approach. Experts tell us, “You need to think bigger! Pick a dream that is so big it will motivate you every day.” Or we tell ourselves, “If only I had more hours in the day!”

These excuses cloud the bigger issue. What often looks like a problem of goal *setting* is actually a problem of goal *selection*. What we really need is not bigger goals, but better focus. You need to choose one thing and ruthlessly eliminate everything else. In the words of Seth Godin, “You don't need more time, you just need to decide.”

Our lives are like rose bushes. As a rose bush grows, it creates more buds than it can sustain. If you talk to an experienced gardener, they will tell you that rose bushes need to be pruned to bring out the best in both their appearance and their performance. In other words, if you want a rose bush to thrive, then you need to cut away some of the good buds so the great ones can fully blossom.

Our goals are similar. They need to be consistently pruned and trimmed down. It's natural for new goals to come into our lives and to get excited about new opportunities—just like it's natural for a rose bush to add new buds. If we can muster the courage to prune away a few of our goals, then we create the space we need for the remaining goals to fully blossom. Full growth and optimal living require pruning.

I've written about a variety of strategies for getting your priorities in order and focusing on one thing at a time, including:

- The Ivy Lee Method (<https://jamesclear.com/ivy-lee>)
- Warren Buffett's 25-5 Rule (<https://jamesclear.com/buffett-focus>)
- The Eisenhower Box (<https://jamesclear.com/eisenhower-box>)
- The 20 Slot Rule (<https://jamesclear.com/buffett-slots>)
- The Myth of Multitasking (<https://jamesclear.com/multitasking-myth>)

Take a look at those strategies and try out one that resonates with you.

2. Stack Your Goals

Research has shown that you are 2x to 3x more likely to stick to your goals if you make a specific plan for when, where, and how you will perform the behavior. For example, in one study scientists asked people to fill out this sentence: “During the

next week, I will partake in at least 20 minutes of vigorous exercise on [DAY] at [TIME OF DAY] at/in [PLACE].”

Researchers found that people who filled out this sentence were 2x to 3x more likely to actually exercise (<https://jamesclear.com/implementation-intentions>) compared to a control group who did not make plans for their future behavior. Psychologists call these specific plans “implementation intentions” because they state when, where, and how you intend to implement a particular behavior. This finding has been repeated across hundreds of studies and has been found to increase the odds that people will start exercising, begin recycling, stick with studying, and even stop smoking.

One of my favorite ways to utilize this finding is with a strategy I call habit stacking (<https://jamesclear.com/habit-stacking>). To use habit stacking, just fill out this sentence:

After/Before [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT].

Here are some examples:

- **Meditation:** After I brew my morning coffee, I will meditate for one minute.
- **Pushups:** Before I take my morning shower, I will do 10 pushups.
- **Flossing:** After I set my toothbrush down, I will floss my teeth.
- **Gratitude:** Before I eat dinner, I will say one thing I am grateful for that day.
- **Networking:** After I return from my lunch break, I will send one email to someone I want to meet.

Habit stacking works well because you not only create a specific plan for when and where you will implement your goals, but also link your new goals to something you are already doing each day. You can read more on how to stack habits and set

triggers for your goals in my popular guide, *Transform Your Habits* (<https://jamesclear.com/habits>).

I find this to be a helpful way to bridge the gap between goals and systems. Our goals tell us what we want to achieve while our systems are the process we follow each day. Habit stacking and implementation intentions help us move from the goal in our heads to the specific process that will make it a reality.

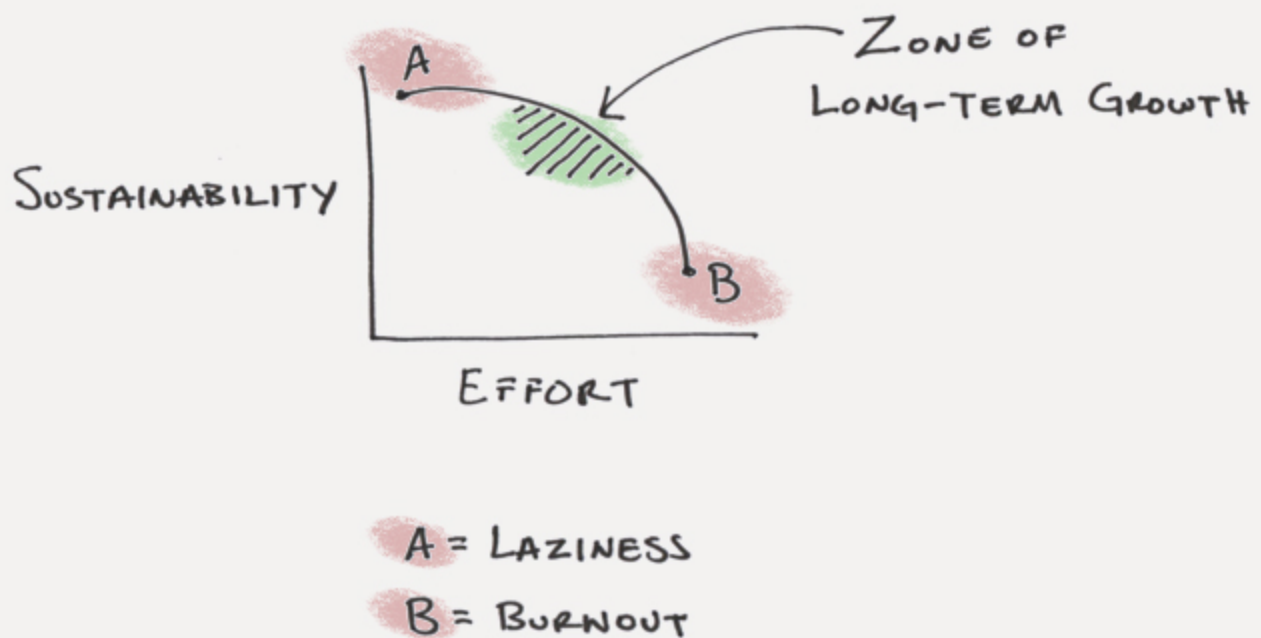
3. Set an Upper Bound

Whenever we set goals, we almost always focus on the lower bound. That is, we think about the minimum threshold we want to hit. The implicit assumption is, “Hey, if you can do more than the minimum, go for it.”

- An individual might say, “I want to lose *at least* 5 pounds this month.”
- An entrepreneur might say, “I want to make *at least* 10 sales calls today.”
- An artist might say, “I want to write *at least* 500 words today.”
- A basketball player might say, “I want to make *at least* 50 free throws today.”

But what would it look like if we added an upper bound to our goals and behaviors?

- “I want to lose at least 5 pounds this month, but *not more* than 10.”
 - “I want to make at least 10 sales calls today, but *not more* than 20.”
 - “I want to write at least 500 words today, but *not more* than 1,500.”
 - “I want to make at least 50 free throws today, but *not more* than 100.”
-



In many areas of life, there is a magical zone of long-term growth (<https://jamesclear.com/upper-bound>). You want to push hard enough to make progress, but not so much that it is unsustainable. This is where setting an upper limit can be useful. Upper limits make it easier for you to sustain your progress and continue showing up.

This is especially critical in the beginning. Whenever you set a new goal and begin working toward it, the single most important thing is showing up. In the beginning, showing up is even more important than succeeding

(<https://jamesclear.com/start-succeed>) because if you don't build the habit of showing up, then you'll never have anything to improve in the future.

III. How to Achieve Your Goals Consistently

Effective goal setting requires consideration of the system that surrounds you. Too often, we set the right goals inside the wrong system. If you're fighting your system each day to make progress, then it's going to be really hard to make consistent progress.

There are all kinds of hidden forces that make our goals easier or harder to achieve. You need to align your environment with your ambitions if you wish to make progress for the long-run. Let's discuss some practical strategies for doing just that.

How to Align Your Environment With Your Goals

Although most of us have the freedom to make a wide range of choices at any given moment, we often make decisions based on the environment we find ourselves in. For example, if I wanted to do so, I could drink a beer as I write this guide. However, I am currently sitting at my desk with a glass of water next to me. There are no beers in sight. Although I possess the capability to get up, walk to my car, drive to the store, and buy a beer, I probably won't because I am surrounded by easier alternatives. In this case, taking a sip of water is the default decision, the easy decision.

Similarly, many of the decisions we make in our professional and personal lives are shaped by the options that surround us.

- If you sleep with your phone next to your bed, then checking social media and email as soon as you wake up is likely to be the default decision.
- If you walk into your living room and your couches and chairs all face the

television, then watching television is likely to be the default decision.

- If you keep alcohol in your kitchen, then drinking consistently is more likely to be the default decision.

Of course, defaults can be positive as well.

- If you keep a dumbbell next to your desk at work, then pumping out some quick curls is more likely to be the default decision.
- If you keep a water bottle with you throughout the day, then drinking water rather than soda is more likely to be the default decision.
- If you place floss in a visible location (like next to your toothbrush), then flossing is more likely to be the default decision.

Scientists refer to the impact that environmental defaults can have on our decision making as choice architecture (<https://jamesclear.com/choice-architecture>). This has an important impact when it comes to achieving goals. Whether or not you achieve your goals in the long-term has a lot to do with what types of influences surround you in the short-term. It's very hard to stick with positive habits in a negative environment.

Here are a few strategies I have found useful when trying to design better default decisions into my life:

Simplicity. It is hard to focus on the signal when you're constantly surrounded by noise. It is more difficult to eat healthy when your kitchen is filled with junk food. It is more difficult to focus on reading a blog post when you have 10 tabs

open in your browser. It is more difficult to accomplish your most important task when you fall into the myth of multitasking (<https://jamesclear.com/multitasking-myth>). When in doubt, eliminate options.

Visual Cues. In the supermarket, placing items on shelves at eye level makes them more visual and more likely to be purchased. Outside of the supermarket, you can use visual cues like the Paper Clip Method (<https://jamesclear.com/paper-clips>) or the Seinfeld Strategy (<https://jamesclear.com/stop-procrastinating-seinfeld-strategy>) to create an environment that visually nudges your actions in the right direction.

Opt-Out vs. Opt-In. There is a famous organ donation study (<https://jamesclear.com/environment-design-organ-donation>) that revealed how multiple European countries skyrocketed their organ donation rates: they required citizens to opt-out of donating rather than opt-in to donating. You can do something similar in your life by opting your future self into better habits ahead of time. For example, you could schedule your yoga session for next week while you are feeling motivated today. When your workout rolls around, you have to justify opting-out rather than motivating yourself to opt-in.

How to Measure Your Goals

Another key to making long-term progress on your goals is measurement. The human mind loves to receive feedback. One of the most motivating things we can experience is evidence of our progress. This is why measurement is so critical for effective goal setting. By measuring your results, you get insight on whether or not you are making progress.

The things we measure are the things we improve. It is only through numbers and clear tracking that we have any idea if we are getting better or worse. Here are a few of the measurable goals I've implemented:

- When I measured how many pushups I did (<https://jamesclear.com/small-habits>), I got stronger.
- When I tracked my reading habit of 20 pages per day (<https://jamesclear.com/read-more>), I read more books.
- When I recorded my values (<https://jamesclear.com/2014-integrity-report>), I began living with more integrity.

The trick is to realize that counting, measuring, and tracking is not about the result. Measure to discover, to find out, to understand. Measure to see if you are showing up. Measure to see if you're actually spending time on the things that are important to you.

Here are some of my favorite techniques for setting measurable goals:

- The Paper Clip Strategy (<https://jamesclear.com/paper-clips>)
- Measure Backward, Not Forward (<https://jamesclear.com/measure-backward>)
- The Seinfeld Strategy (<https://jamesclear.com/stop-procrastinating-seinfeld-strategy>)

Give them a try and see which one you prefer.

Where to Go From Here

I hope you found this guide on goal setting useful. If you're looking for more ideas on how to set and achieve goals, feel free to browse the full list of articles below.

All Goal Setting Articles

This is a complete list of articles I have written on goal setting. Enjoy!

- The Paradox of Behavior Change (<https://jamesclear.com/behavior-change-paradox>)
- The Goldilocks Rule: How to Stay Motivated in Life and Business (<https://jamesclear.com/goldilocks-rule>)
- The Akrasia Effect: Why We Don't Follow Through on What We Set Out to Do and What to Do About It (<https://jamesclear.com/akrasia>)
- The Proven, Reasonable and Totally Unsexy Secret to Success (<https://jamesclear.com/habit-creep>)
- The 15-Minute Routine Anthony Trollope Used to Write 40+ Books (<https://jamesclear.com/anthony-trollope>)
- Fast Growth is Overrated (<https://jamesclear.com/yuri-wardanyan>)
- Pat Riley on the Remarkable Power of Getting 1% Better (<https://jamesclear.com/career-best-effort>)
- How to Stick With Good Habits Every Day by Using the “Paper Clip Strategy” (<https://jamesclear.com/paper-clips>)
- The 2 Types of Growth: Which One of These Growth Curves Are You Following? (<https://jamesclear.com/growth-curves>)
- The Goal is Not the Point (<https://jamesclear.com/treasure-hunt>)
- How Experts Practice Better Than the Rest (<https://jamesclear.com/deliberate-practice-strategy>)

- Do Things You Can Sustain (<https://jamesclear.com/upper-bound>)
 - What to Do When You Have Too Many Ideas and Not Enough Time (<https://jamesclear.com/pruning>)
 - How to Change Your Beliefs and Stick to Your Goals for Good (<https://jamesclear.com/identity-votes>)
 - I'm Using These 3 Simple Steps to Actually Stick with Good Habits (<https://jamesclear.com/small-habits>)
 - I Watched an Artist Create Stained Glass And Learned An Important Lesson About Life (<https://jamesclear.com/inside-cuts>)
 - This Coach Improved Every Tiny Thing by 1 Percent and Here's What Happened (<https://jamesclear.com/marginal-gains>)
 - Forget About Setting Goals. Focus on This Instead. (<https://jamesclear.com/goals-systems>)
 - How to Stop Procrastinating on Your Goals by Using the "Seinfeld Strategy" (<https://jamesclear.com/stop-procrastinating-seinfeld-strategy>)
 - How to Stop Procrastinating by Using the "2-Minute Rule" (<https://jamesclear.com/how-to-stop-procrastinating>)
 - How to Achieve Your Goals Easily (<https://jamesclear.com/schedule-goals>)
 - The Magic of Committing to a Specific Goal (<https://jamesclear.com/magic-of-committing>)
 - Identity-Based Habits: How to Actually Stick to Your Goals This Year (<https://jamesclear.com/identity-based-habits>)
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FOOTNOTES

1. Thanks to Scott Adams for his Wall Street Journal article

(<https://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304626104579121813075903866>), which influenced my ideas on systems and goals.



Thanks for reading. You helped save a life.

Whenever you buy one of [my books \(https://jamesclear.com/books\)](https://jamesclear.com/books), join the [Habits Academy \(https://habitsacademy.com\)](https://habitsacademy.com), or otherwise contribute to my work, 5 percent of the profits are donated to the Against Malaria Foundation (AMF).

With each donation, AMF distributes nets to protect children, pregnant mothers, and families from mosquitos carrying malaria. It is one of the most cost-effective ways to extend life and fulfills my bigger mission to spread healthy habits and help others realize their full potential.

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