

THE RENAISSANCE MAN'S GUIDE

To Doing
Everything



BY
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Ren•ais•sance Man

(noun) a present-day man who has acquired profound knowledge or proficiency in a wide range of fields.

The Renaissance Man

The historical Renaissance Man considered the human capacity for development to be virtually limitless and continually sought to develop the full range of capabilities as much as possible.

The few who embraced this mindset, from Galileo and Da Vinci to Pascal and Newton experienced world-changing achievements we still celebrate today.

Today, with the advent of the information age, many people consider the renaissance man to be extinct, snuffed out by the sheer amount of activities and available information. Now, the smart move is to play it safe and try to do only one or two things. Anything else is impossible.

If you're reading this, you'll know I'm a big fan of doing what other people consider "impossible."

This guide, **The Renaissance Man's Guide To Doing Everything** will help you challenge the belief, that you only should try to do one or two things. The truth is the opposite. If you're up for the challenge and willing to put in the work, you can become a renaissance man and do everything.

If you're not quite ready for that, it's totally okay. You don't need to read this guide. I won't be mad. I hope you have a great life.

But, If you're up for the challenge, willing to do the work and want to do everything, this is for you. I hope it helps you on your way to do the impossible and become a Renaissance Man.

The Challenge of the Renaissance Man

Being a renaissance man is difficult. There's so much to do and so much to be good at that there's a seemingly endless amount of activities to do. I know. Take a look at things [on my impossible list](#). This is a list of a lot of the things I want to do with my life. There are a lot already and I'm adding to the list all the time.

The list of activities is pretty ambitious. Running an Ironman. Learning four languages. Visiting every continent in the world.

Some of the things are service oriented and some are athletic oriented. Some are focused on business, some on travel, and some are just downright random. But they all have one thing in common: they're impossible (or at least pretty difficult to do). It's definitely not going to be easy and it gets even harder when some of the tasks aren't related and you have to shift between them. But such is the life of a renaissance man.

Three Types of To-dos

Keeping things as simple as possible is the main aspect you'll have to master as you plan out your path as a Renaissance man. Planning is key. When you're a renaissance man, you'll have a large number of activities that all require you to do another large number of activities. When you add all those activities up, they can seem overwhelming. The easiest way to corral all of these is to plan and break down the tasks.

I like to keep tasks small and simple. When tasks start to get too big, they also start to lose meaning. I find that almost everything I need to do falls into one of three categories:

- 1 Things I can do RIGHT NOW**
(right this second)
- 2 Things I can do SOON**
(1 week - 1 month out)
- 3 Things I can do IN THE NEAR FUTURE**
(1 month - 6 months out)

To make it easy, we'll take this example and break it down into the three categories: things I can do right now, soon, and in the near future.

Things I can do RIGHT NOW

- Get a French Book and start learning the basics
- Actively solicit clients and work on current client projects for my business venture
- Keep my expenses low, and keep putting away money
- Write something every day on my impossible manifesto
- Continue building my network
- Begin planning a strategy for the nonprofit

Every one of these things I can do today with resources I currently have. They require nothing more of me other than my current skill set, resources, and determination to just do it.

Things I can do SOON

- Find someone to speak French with on a consistent basis
- Read up on Benny's language hacking techniques
- Build out my business website, content and available services
- Start a blog supplementing my business site
- Look up specific flight information and begin trip itinerary planning

These are all things that are going to take a little more planning, research and time, but they're still able to be done relatively soon and again, don't require much more than me just sitting down and making it happen.

Things I can do in the NEAR FUTURE

- Refine French grammar and begin reading books in French
- Create a landing page for the release and promotion of the manifesto
- Buy the plane ticket and go on these trips
- Continue finding clients and working on current clients
- Plan and create a nonprofit strategy

These are all things I can do relatively soon, once I get one or two things done that I can do right now. They're on my radar and I know they're coming up, but I don't need to worry about them just yet.

To be fair, there are a couple other categories that to-dos usually fall into, but for my own personal reasons I don't bother to focus on them. You might be familiar with them:

Things I could have done YESTERDAY

This list is always longer than I would like, but there's nothing I can do about yesterday. It's better to move them to today's list, finish them, and move on rather than dwell on what I wasn't able to accomplish.

Things I can do in the DISTANT FUTURE

Some people really like this list, but I tend to avoid focusing on it too much. For example, I could focus on each of the individual activities that I'll want to do each of my trips, but I don't because minutia tends to slow me down. If I worried about each little detail, I'd never get around to taking the necessary steps I have to do right now (i.e. saving money, buying a ticket and getting off work). Those details are so far ahead and usually not significant enough to warrant time, focus and dedication...yet.

These details are important and need to be addressed at some point in the planning process, but the distant future is a little too far away and things change a little too frequently for me to worry about them now. Besides, sometimes the best trips are the ones where the details aren't always nailed down.

Don't focus on the distant future and don't worry about what didn't get done yesterday. Focus on what you can do right now, what you can do soon and what you can do in the near future. Once you've broken the tasks down into those three types of to-dos, you'll be much better prepared to start task shifting.

Task Shifting for the Renaissance Man

Remember, shifting between tasks is like shifting between gears in a manual car. Once you're used to it, there's no problem. You'll keep your momentum and you can go even faster. However, if you screw it up, you'll jack up your gearshift, make a lot of unpleasant noise and stall out your engine. So let's be sure not screw it up!

Shift Less

The quickest way to make shifting easier is to do less of it. Say I have three goals: A, B, and C.

- **Goal A** Get X number of hits to the Blog of Impossible Things
- **Goal B** Build a successful side business in my spare time
- **Goal C** Run a Half Ironman in 2011

Each goal has their own set of things that need to happen in order to accomplish it. Things that need to be done right now, things that need to be done soon, and things that need to be done in the near future.

Instead of focusing on the 27 different tasks that need to be done for each individual task, I block them together based on the timeline and goal I'm working towards. You can see a visualization of this on the following page.

This lets me see everything at once, but it also lets you see what tasks go together and what things have to be done now versus the things that have to be done later. It also lets me see which tasks need to be done to achieve each goal.

Block It Up, Man

Once I get this organized, I prefer to attack the tasks in blocks based on my goals. So for example, I'd start with task 1, 2 and 3. When I'm doing with that I'll do 4 and 5 and then move on to 6, 7, 8, and 9. This way even if I only get to task 7, I've still finished off the right now stages for Goal A and Goal B and can move on to the soon tasks for both of those goals.

I could do tasks 1 and 2 then skip to 4, and then skip to 7, 8 and 9, but if I did that, I'd still end up with things to do in the soon category from each goal, I'd see less progress overall and I wouldn't move forward as quickly.

Get it done, cross it off your list and then move on to the next phase of your project.

Right Now	Soon	Near Future	
Task 1	Task 10	Task 19	Goal A
Task 2	Task 11	Task 20	
Task 3	Task 12		
	Task 13	Task 21	Goal B
Task 4		Task 22	
Task 5	Task 14	Task 23	
	Task 15		Goal C
Task 6	Task 16	Task 24	
Task 7		Task 25	
Task 8	Task 17	Task 26	
Task 9	Task 18	Task 27	

Creating Less Friction

Answer the questions you know the answer to and then come back to the ones you skipped if you have time.

Every test I took from Kindergarten to College graduation, I got that test-taking advice. You know what? It works. I took the advice, applied it and aced a bunch of tests by doing just that (see, not everything they teach you in school is bad).

So what does that have to do with shifting between tasks? A lot.

Take that advice, but instead of referring to test taking, apply it to doing tasks. When switching between tasks do whatever causes less friction. In other words, do the things that are easy right away and come back to the harder ones later.

If switching to one task creates a lot of friction, do something else. That doesn't mean you forget about it entirely (you should definitely come back to it later), but don't be afraid to pass on something that causes a lot of friction and stalls any and all progress. You won't hear me say this often, but this is one of the times you should take the path of least resistance.

For example, if I'm working on Goal A, my blog, many of the tasks will involve writing. If I finish up the right now portion of my blog goals, and am on a roll writing, I might go right to the writing portion of Goal B, working on writing portions on my business site since I'm in a groove.

However, if I'm slogging through a blog post that's hard to write and I'm completely exhausted, I might take a break, go for a run, swim some laps or hit the gym to get me closer to goal C and take my mind off writing.

Remember, these aren't are mindless tasks. These are things that are actively moving me closer to my goals. I'm simply making better use of my time and actions by acting intentionally.

Keep it moving

One of the greatest Renaissance Men of all time, Sir Isaac Newton knew a lot about maintaining momentum from studying the universe. He actually described three universal laws of motion so simply you probably remember them from high school. The first one is really important for this conversation:

An object in motion tends to stay in motion. An object at rest tends to stay at rest.

The point here is to keep things moving and to keep doing things that get you to your final goals. Once you stop, it gets much harder to start back up again. You begin to stagnate and you'll start rationalizing your inaction, so keep moving!

Debriefing and Dealing with Failure

Even the best laid plans fail. Even with your to-do lists and well laid-out schedule, something will go wrong. You'll be juggling a million things, and you'll drop one, it will shatter and you will fail.

It will happen.

Failure isn't fun, but it's also unavoidable if you want to do something impossible.

Most people try to avoid failure as much as possible. As a result they end up doing very little and limit themselves to "safe bets" or things they're sure they can succeed at.

I was this way for a while.

I used to only settle for what was "possible", but I decided I didn't like the possible mentality. Instead of attempting impossible things, this mentality gives you permission to settle for "good enough" and keeps you from trying anything new or remarkable.

The problem with trying to predict the outcome of something before you even do it, is all you are doing is just guessing.

Maybe it's an educated guess, but it's still a guess, and it's probably wrong. You only really know the outcome of something once you've really done it and achieved a real outcome.

Do a lot of things, screw some up and fail. It's okay, but you have to debrief. Failure isn't fun, but if you can learn something by debriefing what you just did, you can salvage a positive experience from the situation.

Debriefing doesn't have to be difficult. It can be something as simple as asking yourself a few simple questions about the variety of things you just did. Here's some to get you started.

- Which did you enjoy it?
- Which did you find yourself wanting to do more?
- Did you learn anything?
- Which ones energized you?
- Which ones drained you?
- Which ones are you interested in getting better at?
(more important than you think)
- Which ones are you good at it?
(not as important as you think)

Getting Good

You'll notice only the last question was concerned with how good you were at something. That's because you'll be terrible at most things the first time around. There are very few things you'll be a natural at. It takes time. But there has to be an initial attraction. Ira Glass calls this your "taste."

All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste and...you get into this thing, and there's like a 'gap.' What you're making isn't so good, okay?.... It's trying to be good but...it's just not that great. But your TASTE! Your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is good enough to tell you that what you're making is a disappointment to you, that it's crappy. A lot of people never get past that phase—and the thing I want to say to you, out of my heart, is that, most of everyone I know who does interesting, creative work, they went through [this] for years...

– Ira Glass

When I started the Blog of Impossible Things, I wasn't very good at writing. Just read some of the early posts. Almost 100 posts later, I'm a little better at it but it takes time. That's how it works.

The first triathlon I did, I pedaled away furiously on my mountain bike*. I was terrible, but it was a challenge and I loved it.

I'm still not a natural at triathlons, but my second and third races went better because it's something I wanted to get better at. You might not be a born natural at whatever you're doing, but it's really not that important. It's more important that you care enough about it that you're willing get better at it.

* You can see video proof of this here - <http://vimeo.com/13449030>

Do Less

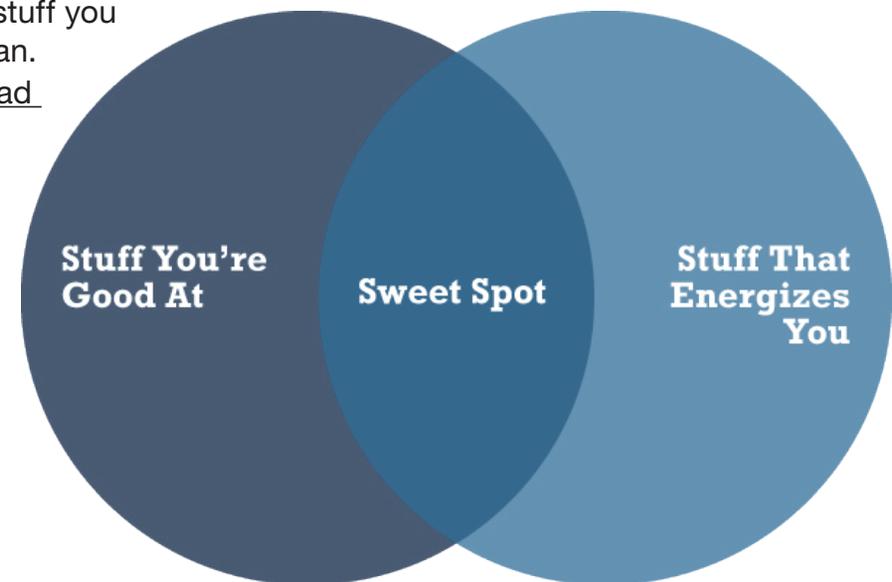
Real renaissance men know what they're good at. Understand what you're bad at and do less of it. If you're not good at something, or you hate it, don't do it. Quit doing it altogether if you can, or delegate it if it still has to be done.

If this has to do with your business, there are lots of good resources on outsourcing work or finding virtual assistants to do the stuff that needs to be done, but isn't necessary for you to do.

If it's some other activity, chances are you can quit it without any consequences. If you're not sure, stop doing it for a few days and see what happens.

Find the overlap between the stuff you're good at and the stuff you enjoy (I call it my sweet spot). Do as much of that as you can. Do less of the other stuff. There's no need to bang your head against the wall. It's not worth it.

If you're a visual person, you can use the diagram here to find your sweet spot.



Just because you can, doesn't mean you should

There's a difference between not being able to do something and choosing not to do it. I always used to say I "can't" design. As it turns out, I have a pretty good eye for design and can creatively direct people, I just never mastered the tools of it. So I tried it and realized I can do a decent job when I really need to. However, I haven't spent the time to completely master the tools and honestly I'm not sure I want to.

While I can design, my time is much more valuable when I'm doing other things *that I'm good at* and ***that only I can do*** (writing, networking, planning and strategizing). So instead of saying I can't design and leaving it at that, **I've actually tried it, done it and know I can do it.** *But* I also know my time is better spent doing other things besides photoshop and because of that, I choose not to focus on it.

Focus on what you're good at, and what energizes you, and do that. Stop doing the other stuff. Cut it out and make more room for stuff you enjoy and stuff you're good at, stuff that helps you keep your momentum.

The modern day Renaissance Man faces a much different world than his earlier predecessors. There's more information to know, more skills to learn and more of everything in general.

It's not impossible to do several things at once and do them well. It's not easy, but you can simplify things by breaking them down into to-do lists and scheduling them out into time blocks, it's much more manageable. But even with those techniques, the real trick is making sure you're doing the right things.

Maybe you've already found your sweet spot and you're knocking it out of the park. Great job. Keep it up.

If you're not there yet and you want to try 1, 2 or 10 different things, go ahead and try them! A Renaissance Man doesn't let the fear of not reaching complete mastery hold him back from finding out first hand. He knows that the true value doesn't always lie in achieving complete mastery of a skill, but in the effort he puts forth in the attempt.

NEXT STEPS

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Do Something

There's an abundance of information in the world. The world doesn't need more information, it needs more action. The best thing you can do is to tell your own story. Do something worth writing about. Do something impossible.

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THANK YOU

If you're reading this, thank you. I appreciate both your time and attention.

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It's kind of fun to do the impossible.

- Walt Disney