

31 WORDS TO

Create an Organized Life

Simple Strategies and Expert Advice to
Win the Battle against Chaos and Clutter



*A Simple Guide to
Creating Habits
that Last*

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MAGER

Contain

Finding a Home for Everything You Own

One of my favorite greeting cards is by illustrator Mary Engelbreit. It shows a little boy hugging his adorable black-and-white puppy. Beneath the artwork, Engelbreit's simple message underscores the sentiment: "Everybody needs their own Spot." The same is true in organizing. Everything you have, everything you're ever going to buy, needs its own spot, its own distinct home. My fantasy is that Engelbreit's art studio is beautifully ordered with colorful containers, jars, and hat boxes everywhere.

I know for a fact that Marilyn Radzat, another successful artist, really does put everything in its own spot. Her wildly creative ocean-front studio is a delight to behold. As a renowned sculptor and doll artist whose costumed pieces sell in galleries around the country, she has an endless array of tools and materials. Everything she uses, from colored sea glass and exotic mosaics to antique fabrics and hand-made beads have their own special homes. Ceramic mugs and vases hold paintbrushes, scissors, and sculpting tools; beautiful

bowls individually display shells, jewels, stones, and one-of-a-kind buttons. Everything is ordered and accessible. “The container is not just a means to an end,” says Radzat. “The container and what’s inside work together synergistically. My containers are contexts that add to what I’m containing and become sources of inspiration. The rhinestones I place in a blue glass bowl become more. The container enhances what I’m storing.”

June Saruwatari, cohost of TLC’s *Home Made Simple*, concurs: “‘Containerizing’ is about honoring the way you live your life.” Choosing the containers can become a way to express your creativity, she adds: “It’s what makes your life a work of art.”

But don’t go on a buying spree yet. Once you’ve sorted and categorized, assess what size containers you’ll need. It’s too easy to spend hundreds of dollars on elegant hat boxes and antique suitcases, only to bring them home and discover they’re not the right size.

“In the beginning, until you understand how important organizing is to the quality of your life,” suggests Saruwatari, “begin with shoeboxes and boxes, just so you can see how easy life can be and how it can flow.” Then you can start exploring containers. “Buy something that makes you feel alive and speaks to you.” It’s a great opportunity, she says, “to discover who you are, what you like, what colors, images, and textures really inspire you.”

But choosing containers isn’t just about aesthetics, says Lee Silber, author of *Organizing from the Right Side of the Brain*. It’s also about your natural thinking style. For right-brainers, containers that allow you to see what’s inside is

critical, he says. So if you're right-brained (that is, if you tend to be creative, sensitive, visual, intuitive, or emotional) choose see-through plastic boxes, glass jars, nets, hooks, bulletin boards, wine racks, or milk crates. Or at least label everything clearly. "Label-makers can be fun," adds Silber.

The idea of containing can be expanded to include specific zones in your house. For example, you might designate the hallway closet for sports equipment, jackets, and umbrellas only; the living room for reading, movies, and music only; and the home office for all electronic gadgets, and computer paraphernalia. With this kind of system, when a DVD lands on the dining table or a soccer ball rolls into the bathroom, you'll know just where to return it.

And remember that the most frequently used stuff should always be the easiest to access. Whether you're organizing your office supply closet or your fridge, decide what you reach for most often and make sure those items are right up front.

Bottom line, emphasizes Silber: "Not knowing where to put something is enough to make you quit." In other words, if you keep picking something up and putting it back down in the wrong places—like catalogues, unopened mail, loose coins, or sunglasses that end up cluttering your dining table or kitchen counters—it's not because you're an abysmal organizational failure or because you were born messy! It's simply because you haven't taken the time to assign those items their own special homes. The whole notion of assigning everything its own place can actually be fun. Just imagine how happy your car keys would feel if they could take a nap in their own ceramic bowl on your kitchen counter; imagine how giddy

those tennis balls would feel if they could bounce home into their own bucket in your hall closet. By assigning everything its own spot, you end up feeling so much better . . . and so will all your stuff. Turns out Dorothy and Toto were absolutely right in saying, “There’s no place like home.”



EXERCISE

Once you’ve categorized from the “Sort” chapter’s exercise, evaluate how many containers you’ll need and what sizes work best. Start by buying containers for one small area at a time so you can see what does and doesn’t work for you. Decide whether you want to see what’s inside the container or not. Then make an appointment to go container shopping. Bring a friend. Think outside the box, literally. If it appeals to your aesthetics and thinking style, use bulletin boards as homes for loose papers or milk crates for files. Buy nets or laundry baskets to hold stuffed animals and toys; baskets and bowls for make-up and toiletries; colorful hooks for hanging things in closets; or large see-through plastic boxes and heavy-duty shelving for garages or basements. Above all, create “homes” that meet your unique needs, style, and personality.

File

Putting Paperwork Where It Belongs

Sheila owned a beautiful, antique secretary desk where she kept everything that needed to be filed—magazines with interesting articles, unopened mail, paid and unpaid bills, recipes, receipts, copies of documents, appliance instructions, warranty booklets, medical and insurance paperwork, and more. Every few days, she'd pick something up, look at it, not really know what to do with it or where to put it, then toss it back in the pile. Whenever she felt inspired to file, she would scoop up a batch of papers from the desk and take them upstairs to the overcrowded file cabinet in her guest room. Most of the folders were frayed and dog-eared, with scribbled, unclear headings, and she couldn't find the files she needed. (Not that she could have fit anything in them, anyway.) Frustrated, she'd end up bringing the paperwork back to the secretary desk, vowing to file it another day.

Sound familiar? If your filing system is a wreck (or simply nonexistent), don't despair. Once you understand the basic idea behind filing, the rest can be easy and even fun.

The first step is recognizing what makes a good system. “Organize your files the way you actually use them,” says June Saruwatari. “A good filing system is one that everybody understands and that doesn’t have to be recreated every year. And you don’t have to file more than once a month if you spend the time and energy to set up a good system that works for you.”

Evaluate why your current filing system isn’t working for you. Is the file cabinet too crowded, inaccessible, or far away? Is your system too complex? Are the files torn up and illegible? Have you kept every piece of paper since the beginning of time? If it would help you evaluate more clearly, make a list of everything you don’t like about your filing system—or talk it out with a friend.

Once you get a sense of what’s not working, it’s time to decide which filing system feels best: a traditional system, based on filing in alphabetical order or by subject matter; or a numerical system, such as those used by larger organizations like libraries and medical centers. Barry Izsak of the National Association of Professional Organizers, loves the Paper Tiger numerical filing system (www.papertiger.com). He explains that this software program is like, “an Internet search engine for your files, like Googling for your file cabinet.” The program serves as a master index of your numbered files with a descriptive list of what’s inside each file (which you decide). No need to fret about categorizing or alphabetizing—you can have two hundred or two thousand files if you like. When you search for something, you simply type some key words—such as, “love letter from high school sweetheart”—and the software instantly tells you it’s hiding in file number seven.

You don't have to remember where anything goes because the computerized index remembers. Fans of this system swear by it. (You can, of course, create a noncomputerized numerical filing system by numbering your files and writing your own master index with a description of what's in each file.)

But if tigers and numbers make you sweat, no worries. Alphabets and subjects work—just follow these basic principles. Choose a few broad categories, says June Saruwatari, like Money, Household, Medical, and Career—too many categories can become confusing. Within each category, create subcategories and organize them in alphabetical order (for instance, put Bank Statements, Investments, and Tax Info into the Money category). Use either hanging or expandable files; get sturdy file folders that don't sag or slip inside the main file; and always label everything very clearly (using big block letters, a label from a label maker, or labels printed from your computer). If you decide to group files by subject, you can have fun with colors, grouping the financial files in green, household in pink, and so on; this can make them more aesthetically pleasing, while also helping you spot files quickly and easily.

What to do with all that paper that keeps flowing into your life, once you've filed your existing papers? Create an in-box (which could be a basket or file tray). What goes in that in-box? According to Saruwatari, "Everything that needs to be reviewed, sorted, and decided upon." She recommends waiting to go through your mail "until you're ready to sit down and file it or put it in its proper place." And when you know something is ready to be filed, either file it then or there, or put it in a "to file" tray; every month (or whenever

the tray gets full) set a timer and take ten or twenty minutes to slip those papers into existing files. She also suggests creating an “action” file or box to hold paperwork that must be acted on very soon, i.e., bills and important letters.

What exactly needs to be filed away? Ultimately that’s a personal decision. Obviously you want to file papers related to legal and tax issues. We also file papers that have personal significance, like our child’s completed homework, letters from old friends, current instruction manuals, decorating ideas, and so on. Instead of saving magazines to read later, tear out the articles you’re interested in and file them in a folder that you check (and purge) every month. Pay attention to what does not need to be filed—old paid bills, drafts of completed projects, duplicates and triplicates of papers, manuals from equipment long gone, ancient hospital correspondence, expired memberships, and so on. When in doubt, toss it out! Ask yourself, what’s the worst thing that can happen if I throw it away?

If paper does start piling up and you’re feeling stressed, remember what author Lee Silber says: There aren’t any paper police waiting to arrest us for not filing. And filing happens to be a left-brain function. That’s why many creative, right-brain folks prefer having their stuff where they can see it, says Silber. They love his “Pile, Don’t File” system. Neaten up the piles on your desk, he says, “Then wrap a large piece of paper around each grouping to create a spine. . . . Label each area of your pile and with a quick glance get a clue as to what’s in the stack.” You can even divide your desk into quadrants, he adds, and place papers appropriately.



EXERCISE

Evaluate your filing system. Does it work for you? Start by purging five older files that you'll never need to access again. Throw out duplicates, ancient receipts, and so on. Replace ragged folders with new ones and label them clearly. Don't have a filing system? Decide which type feels intuitively right and set it up. Finally, create an action center, including an in-box, a "take action" tray, and a "to file" tray.

Recycle

Sharing, Repurposing, and Reusing Resources

Jackie loved recycling. In addition to carting newspapers, cans, and bottles to her neighborhood recycling center, she also recycled clothes by shopping at thrift stores and rummage sales and then donating clothes back to those organizations. Once, at a church rummage sale, she hit the jackpot with a Neiman Marcus dress that still had the original price tag on it: \$1,600. She paid only five dollars for it! But nearly a year later, while she was decluttering her closet, she discovered that dress stuck in the back. She had never worn it because it never fit comfortably. When her daughter's school announced their annual fundraiser auction, Jackie decided to donate that Neiman Marcus dress. To her delight, it sold for \$675. "Not only does recycling help the earth," she told friends, "but it can end up supporting schools, too!"

Consider this statistic from the National Association of Professional Organizers: We wear 20 percent of the clothes we own only 80 percent of the time—the rest hangs there just in case. So why not recycle some of those unused items by pass-

ing them on to someone who can really enjoy them? If it's too much of a bother to recycle clothes, furniture, paper, plastic, cans, and glass, ponder the disturbing fact that the waste generated by the United States would actually fill a convoy of ten-ton garbage trucks lined up halfway to the moon. Recycling whenever we can, whether it's carrying newspapers to the recycling center or donating clothes and household items to charities, is an easy, wonderful way to feel good, help others, support the environment, and keep your space clutter free.

There are literally hundreds of organizations, church groups, shelters, and charities that would leap at the chance to lighten your load. If donating clothes is something you enjoy doing, then make an actual space for donations in your house. "If your intention is to truly recycle," says June Saruwatari, "and you love the whole notion of giving and receiving, then create a permanent bin in your closet called "give-away." Creating the physical space sets the intention into action." This way, each time you encounter an item that you no longer use or need, you can put it right into the bin and then, once a week or once a month, give it all away.

It's easy to donate books and magazines to libraries, schools, hospitals, and nursing homes. Many charities such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters, or the National Kidney Foundation will gladly pick up items from your home and leave you a receipt (you fill in the worth of the items) that can be deducted from your taxes. Many animal shelters would be grateful for donations of old towels and sheets. Recycling anything in decent condition—whether it's household goods, dishes, knickknacks, clothes, shoes, toys, tools, small furniture

or appliances—is a great way to keep your home constantly fresh and orderly.

Buying and selling used items on sites like www.craigslist.com is another form of recycling. For families, another great idea is joining a toy cooperative, which is basically a toy library. Instead of adding to your kid's clutter by buying expensive new toys, you can take your child to borrow toys from the co-op each week. Parents spend less, toys get recycled, and everyone wins. If there aren't any co-ops in your areas, start your own. Many churches or community centers are willing to donate a room where you can keep the toys. The co-op idea could work for books, CDs, DVDs, and magazines as well. Gather a bunch of friends, put your co-op items in plastic containers, and open the co-op on certain days (manned by volunteers); this way, everyone will have neater, more spacious homes. There are also plenty of places to recycle or trade items online, such as sites like www.ReSpinIt.com, which allows the trading of used DVDs.

Recycling gifts, especially for children, is another way to keep clutter to a minimum. One child's least favorite teddy bear or train set can be another kid's newfound treasure. Check with some of the families in your social circle and see if they want to start recycling gifts with you and your children instead of buying new gifts.

You can also recycle odd objects in your house by giving them new uses, suggests Lee Silber. Vases can hold paint brushes, sentimental knickknacks can become bookends, soap dishes can hold paper clips, an interesting nonfunctional musical instrument can make a great wall decoration. If you really want to hold on to it, come up with creative ways to recycle it.



Invite three or more friends to a trading party. Have each person bring at least three items they no longer need, such as clothes, jewelry, books, housewares, and duplicate electronic equipment. Put all the items on the table. If you want, you can all just jump in and start claiming items (if two people fall in love with the same thing, play a childhood game, like Rock Paper Scissors, to decide who gets it). Or you can draw numbers to select an order, and then have one person at a time choose an item from the table. Once someone has all the things they want, they can pass when their turn comes around. Have a donate bin for any leftovers, and donate them to charity.