

**FINISH
WHAT
YOU** Peter
Hollins
START

The Art of Following
Through, Taking Action,
Executing, & Self-Discipline

Finish What You Start:

The Art of Following Through, Taking Action, Executing, & Self-

Discipline

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Introduction

What exactly is finishing what you start and following through? You have may heard these phrases before, but what do they mean?

To me, they mean making your intentions reality. Too often, we'll say we'll do something, and we might even start it one lucky weekend. But at the first sign of hardship, fatigue, boredom, or busyness, we abandon it all too easily and it sits in our garage (mental, figurative, or literal) for the rest of eternity.

Finishing what you start and following through is breaking through that common loop and taking hold of your life.

My personal experience with finishing what I start has been checkered. One summer, I promised myself that I would carve a wooden canoe, about 12 inches long and 3 inches wide. Not too big, but a sufficient challenge for someone with no woodworking experience. The first week, I made a considerable dent in my wood block. The second week, my hands were sore and the new *Star Wars* movie was

out. The third week, I was too busy seeing *Star Wars* again and procrastinating. My wooden canoe wasn't meant to be.

But every time I walked through my garage to my car, the canoe was a damning reminder of my laziness and inability to follow through. It wore on me until I committed myself to finishing it a couple of summers later. You can probably guess what happened. The first week went great, the second week was moderate, and the third week I was already running on fumes.

I was fortunate to learn about temptation bundling some time shortly thereafter, which provided the boost for me to finish my canoe. Briefly, as temptation bundling will be a major theme later in the book, temptation bundling is when you combine an obligatory (and undesirable) task with an instantaneous reward. When you can bribe yourself into working hard, suddenly finishing what you start isn't a massive exercise in willpower—it's the pursuit of something pleasurable, if only by association.

The reward I bundled the canoe carving with was listening to my favorite albums—something we rarely have time for these days. When's the last time you listened to your favorite album from beginning to end without interruption?

Suddenly, a new world was opened to me; if I could make any unpleasant task just pleasant enough by pairing it with something I enjoyed, I could plow my way through just about anything. It was a small realization like this that led me to study the science of following through and executing, despite the human brain's instinctual resistance to doing so. How can we circumvent our worst instincts and get things done when we want, without the

specter of a deadline over our heads? How can we pay attention to our attention and do that what is most difficult—live with supreme discomfort?

I'd like to think I've come up with great systems for myself that can be widely applied for just about any context. There are many tactics in this book—I don't use all of them all of the time, but most of them will work for most people. As usual, I wrote this book for myself and am glad and proud to be able to share my findings. I hope they are helpful and help you accomplish exactly what you want. At least, I hope they force you to listen to your favorite albums from time to time—a win in itself!

Chapter 1. Stop Thinking, Just Execute

Esther has thought about it a million times. Stuck in a dead-end desk job for the last six years, she has fantasized about not having to deal with the monotony of paperwork, not having to report to a demanding boss, and not having to leave her two-year-old son at the daycare center every day.

And exactly how were such fantasies supposed to be realized when she had to earn a living to make ends meet for her family? She had the answer: she figured she'd start her own baking business right at home.

It was all just a fantasy, a thought she'd conjure to get her through difficult days at work. But one day, something felt different. For some reason, she finally decided—she's going for it. After all, baking was her one true passion. For years, she'd been baking cakes and cookies for her friends, who all said she should think of turning it into a business, so maybe it wasn't such a bad idea, right?

So began Esther's quest to open her baking business. She didn't quit her job just yet but filed for a two-week vacation leave to start testing the waters. *First*, she thought, *research*. She figured that she needed to get this business thing all figured out in her head first, before she took any further step forward. The more prepared and planned she was, the better. She intended to research everything there is to know about starting such a venture, from recipes to finance management. She also planned to survey her friends and the entire neighborhood to get a feel of the market needs. It was all starting to take shape in her head.

Unfortunately, whatever took shape in Esther's head stayed there and never found its way out.

The thought of having to learn everything about how to start and run a baking business from scratch overwhelmed Esther so much that she was paralyzed from taking any action in that direction. Taxes, business filings, leases? All she wanted to do was bake!

When her vacation days started, she always found things to do other than what she had initially planned. She spent her days sleeping in, doting on her son, busying herself with "home projects," and catching up with her friends and neighbors—and not even to ask them for marketing input. She was too worried that if she started telling people about wanting to start a business they might think she was too ambitious for her level of talent, expect her to fail, or, worse, expect her to succeed. She couldn't deal with the idea of expectations hanging over her head.

Two weeks thus came and went, and all Esther managed to do was put the "vacation" in vacation leave.

As she headed back to work, the thought of running her own baking business kept on replaying in her head, still more a fantasy than a plan. She had a feeling she'd continue to think about it, several million times more.

What Is Following Through?

What do you suppose went wrong in Esther's situation? Did she lack focus? Self-discipline? Action? Persistence?

If you say she lacked all of the above, you're pointing to actually just one concept: following through.

Following through is related to focus, self-discipline, action, and persistence, but it is not synonymous to any of them. Rather, it is a composite of all of them—a bit like how those big Japanese anime robots come to be formed by the fusion of smaller individual robot parts. *Power Rangers*, or *Voltron*, to be specific. And much like how each smaller robot forms a different body part in the big robot, so too does each of these four elements—focus, self-discipline, action, and persistence—correspond to a body part that, when pieced with the others, forms the whole of following through.

The head: focus. Following through involves having focus. It's akin to the head because it is focus that keeps your head in the game and your eyes on the prize. Focus guides your thoughts in figuring out how to follow through and directs your actions toward achieving your vision. See, following through is not just about exerting effort; it's about exerting effort that's concentrated on a single goal. With focus,

no effort is wasted. What's followed is a single line of sight, so what's pursued is the single most direct way toward a goal.

Going back to Esther's situation, had she been focused on her dream of starting a business, she would've structured her free time better, scheduling activities in view of realizing that dream.

The spine: self-discipline. The spine of following through, self-discipline, is what enables you to get your head down and work when you need to, even if you don't want to. It's the ability to control yourself so that you retain focus on what needs to be done, despite the temptations and distractions you may encounter. This element is essential to following through because it's what gives you the power to regulate your own thoughts, feelings, and actions toward ends that are meaningful to you. Without self-discipline, you wouldn't be able to consistently exert effort on something until it's done, which is what following through is all about.

As the head is continuous with the spine, so is focus continuous with self-discipline. If you are focused on what you need to do, self-discipline will naturally follow. Likewise, if you are self-disciplined, it will be easier for you to focus on what needs to be done and avoid distractions. Self-discipline, like the spine, keeps you upright so you don't slump into a mess.

If Esther had enough self-discipline, she would've been able to resist using all her free time just for leisure. There's nothing wrong with catching up on some sleep or spending time with your loved ones, but if all your days are spent doing just those

and none of productive work, then balance is lost. Leisure is an important part of life, but if it's excessive and takes the place of reasonable productivity, then it becomes a vice.

The hands and feet: action. Action, the hands and feet of following through, means prioritizing execution and simple motion. This is what makes following through more than just having focus and self-discipline. Following through is an intention that's been translated into action. It is action that will move things in the real world and take you from Point A to Point B—that is, from where you are now to where the fulfillment of your goals lies. It is the visible aspect of following through, the one that's actually observed, measured, and evaluated against your goals. Action is thus crucial to the execution of your plans and the realization of your goals, for without it, plans remain abstract and goals remain dreams.

Had Esther acted on even just the first part of her plan, research, she would've at least inched her way toward realizing the dream business she had in mind.

The heart: persistence. Finally, at the heart of following through is persistence. Persistence is firmly sticking to something for a prolonged period of time, even as you encounter things that try to *unstick* you. It's the tenacity to adhere to a course of action even in the face of obstacles. It is not enough to just start; you need stick with it until it's done. Following through is about having enough heart to keep pushing even in the face of obstacles, distractions, and setbacks. Many of the goals worth aiming for in life call for not just a sprint but a marathon. If your heart is not fit enough to run the length of it, then you will find yourself stopping halfway through and giving up before you reach the finish line.

Did Esther have the persistence to see her dream through? It seems this question isn't even available to ask in Esther's case, as the question of persistence can only arise if one has in fact taken enough action to get to encounter several roadblocks over an extended period of time. Since Esther stopped before she even began, the question of persistence wasn't even in the equation for her.

So there you have it—the individual parts focus, self-discipline, action, and persistence all combine to be the super-robot called following through and finishing what you start. It's gratifying and fulfilling to be able to pull together focus, self-discipline, action, and persistence within ourselves and get to watch our dreams be turned into reality as a result of it.

But if following through is so awesome, why don't we all just do it all the time? The short answer is because it's hard. The long answer (which also explains why it's hard) is detailed below.

Why Don't We Follow Through?

When it comes to thinking up what we want to do, what we need to do, or what other people need to do, we're usually experts. Our ideas run wild, the blueprints in our heads get magically written out with not much effort, and the mental picture of us living our dreams comes into sharp focus faster than we can say "cheese!"

But when it comes to actually getting off our butts and following through with action, we're usually not only amateurs but also unwilling participants. When it comes down to it, we often couldn't find the

focus, self-discipline, action, and persistence needed to get the job done.

Sometimes we go into the battle without our heads or our spines; other times we lack our hands and feet or our hearts. We think we could just call on these parts to get together when we need them to, but we arrive at the battleground only to discover that it's never as easy as we thought it would be.

The excitement and enthusiasm with which we thought out all our dreams and plans fizzle out as soon as we realize the amount of hard work we need to put in to turn those dreams into reality, to bring those plans into life. We don't follow through, and it's not for lack of ability or intelligence, no.

We don't follow through for two main reasons: we have an entire selection of (1) *inhibiting tactics* and/or (2) *psychological roadblocks* that hinder us from finishing what we start. We'll cover each of those in turn below.

Inhibiting Tactics

Inhibiting tactics refer to our schemes for misusing time and effort, with the end result of our being held back from following through. These are ways we sabotage ourselves, sometimes consciously. These tactics, which include (1) setting bad goals, (2) procrastination, (3) indulging in temptations and distractions, and (4) poor time management, inhibit us from maximizing the time and energy we have toward productive ends.

Setting bad goals. One way we handicap ourselves from following through is by setting bad goals, such as those that are too abstract or

downright impossible. Setting bad goals is like buying the wrong map for a road trip; it prevents us from following through because the directions are skewed and confusing. It eventually causes us to lose patience and will to keep on in our journey, which we often end up abandoning halfway through.

When our goals are too abstract, we find ourselves lost as to what needs to be done in order to reach them. For example, if we say our goal is to be healthier and yet don't even specify what we mean by "healthier," we're less likely to take steps toward accomplishing it. We want to follow through, but we don't know how.

When our goals are too high or unrealistic for any mortal to reach, we find ourselves looking up at an impossibly high ladder without rungs. The beauty of this is that no one would be able to accuse us of not trying hard enough to climb, because there are no rungs in the first place. We are absolved from the guilt of not following through. Take for instance a plant manager aiming to double manufacturing output despite real logistical limitations.

Since the goal is impossible to achieve anyway, whether he follows through or not wouldn't make a difference—and so he's saved from both the trouble of having to follow through and the guilt from not doing so.

Procrastination. This is one of the most widely used tactics in the book. We are somehow exceptionally talented at delaying work until we absolutely need to do it, until the very last minute. In fact, we're so

talented at delaying work that we could convince others (and even ourselves) that we're already working even when we're not.

One way we procrastinate is with endless planning. We plan all the details of our task, and once we're done planning, we decide that either the plan needs revising or the task itself needs to be scrapped. Then we plan for a new task, and so on—all the while conveniently unaware of the fact that all the planning we're doing is also a form of procrastination. Ultimately, it's something best referred to as *productive procrastination* because it feels like you're getting somewhere, but you're really just moving in place.

If we can get away with putting off a task at the moment, we tend to do so because it's easy, comfortable, and stress-free. This is how a lot of would've-been success stories get to be just that—would've been. A lifetime string of “laters” ends up being woven into the noose of “never.”

Temptations and distractions. The road of following through would be easy enough to tread, without delay, if it were like a hallway with blank walls on either side. If you didn't have a choice, you might very well put your head down and work, work, work. But no. This road is lined with all sorts of shiny trinkets, glittering detour signs, and inviting rest stops. Temptations and distractions come aplenty these days, with something as simple as a red notification alert on our phone screens flooding our brains with feel-good chemicals that, in turn, keep us glued to our phones even longer.

Take for example a marketing officer tasked to develop a campaign to promote a new product. She is well aware of the research she needs to do, the reports she needs to write, the presentations she needs to start prepping. But instead of following through and retaining focus so she gets things done faster, her hours are riddled by Snapchat conversations, YouTube binges, and endless Instagram scrolls. Eventually, the research may get done, the reports may get written, and the presentations may be prepped, but such are not likely to reflect her true potential.

But of course, we cannot rid the world of temptations and distractions. After all, they're not the main problem. The main problem is that we lack the know-how to properly deal with them. While they may come aplenty on either side of the road, there are two ways we can still manage the situation through (1) strategic avoidance and (2) healthy, moderate use.

First, we may implement strategies to avoid temptations and distractions. For example, if we're distracted by frequent notifications from social media, we may schedule blocks of time during which we're logged out from our social media accounts while we focus on our work.

Second, we may deal with temptations and distractions in a healthy and productive way. We don't need to deprive ourselves of tempting and enjoyable leisure activities for the rest of our lives just so we could follow through on our goals. In fact, we're not supposed to.

Giving ourselves a well-deserved break by indulging in activities we find enjoyable would help recharge us so we could function better. The key is in having the discipline enough to indulge on those activities in a healthy way. For instance, we may periodically reward ourselves with a 10-minute break, during which we log back in and check on our social media accounts, after we accomplish a set amount of work.

Poor time management. “So much to do, and not enough time to do it.” How many times have you heard these words spoken by a colleague, a family member, or the person looking back at you in the mirror?

And how many times could you see that it's not time they lacked, but the ability to use their time productively? We all have the same amount of time in the day.

Time management is the practice of using time in a way that maximizes productivity and efficiency. Good time management involves not only the ability to schedule tasks, but also the insight and good judgment to recognize which tasks are best done when. Moreover, it requires having the self-discipline to do tasks as initially planned and the focus to organize resources accordingly. With good time management, a schedule is cleverly organized and then promptly followed, so tasks get done as planned.

On the other hand, bad time management involves a lack of planning, organization, focus, and self-discipline. We forget, overlook, or miscalculate tasks in terms of how much time they'd require for completion, leading to a domino effect that messes up the rest of our plans. We fail to foresee and provide for the resources we need for the activities we've planned, leading to delays and cancellations. We fail to prioritize our activities, instead choosing to spend our time doing nonessential tasks, leading to unsuccessful endeavors (plus maybe a scolding glare from our boss).

Life in the 21st century is challenging our ability to maintain work-life balance like no other time before. With technology allowing more work hours as well as more entertainment options than ever, we no longer seem to find 24 hours enough to fit in everything we need and want to do in a day. With such demands and lifestyles, poor time management has become the norm, and good time management is a superpower only the enlightened have seemed to master.

And if we can't even manage our time when it comes to our day-to-day tasks, how could we expect to find time to follow through on our bigger life plans?

Psychological Roadblocks

Psychological roadblocks refer to the internal, often unconscious mechanisms in our psyches that act as barriers to following through. Among these mechanisms are (1) laziness and lack of discipline, (2) fear of judgment, rejection, and failure, (3) perfectionism out of insecurity, and (4) lack of self-awareness. These psychological roadblocks operate internally to inhibit external action, thus preventing us from following through.

Laziness and lack of discipline. The reason we don't follow through can sometimes be as simple as being too lazy and lacking the discipline to do so. Our laziness hinders us from getting off the couch and working on the important tasks that will get us closer to our goals. Our lack of discipline sees us squandering our time to distractions and temptations. We may get our calendars planned out, our to-do lists ready, and everything else we need prepared, but somehow we lack the willpower and discipline within us to just start, just do, and just keep pushing. We see the sacrifice, however small, we would have to make, and we decide that it's not worth it.

Willpower is the energy that activates our bodies, while discipline is the focus that directs that energy so that we're constantly moving toward our goals. If we don't find a way to turn our willpower and discipline on, our