



The system that reshaped my productivity: why I built “Actions and Notes” and what it taught me

People get strangely emotional about task management. Some swear by pristine digital systems with color-coded tags and automations that resemble Rube Goldberg machines. Others cling to the simplicity of pen and paper, proudly insisting that nothing beats the tactile satisfaction of crossing something off.

If you’ve ever fallen down this rabbit hole, you know the truth: the best system is the one you actually use. And the moment your system stops working for you, it doesn’t fade gracefully. It collapses dramatically like an overhyped soufflé.

During the pandemic, when days blurred together and the noise-to-signal ratio skyrocketed, I found myself constantly juggling projects, decisions, and follow-ups. I needed a system that could help me quiet the mental chaos without forcing me into rigid digital workflows. I wanted something lightweight, flexible, and fast. Something I could use for deep thinking as well as prioritization. And, frankly, something I could use even on the days when my motivation levels were somewhere between “meh” and “let’s just try again tomorrow.”

So I created something new. I called it *Actions and Notes*.

What started as a quick personal experiment turned into a system that carried me for years. It wasn't perfect, and it eventually reached its limits, but it taught me more about how people actually execute work than any digital platform ever has.

Today, I'm sharing it openly for anyone to use, adapt, and improve.

Why people struggle with task systems

Before jumping into the system itself, it's worth acknowledging why so many productivity tools fail us. At their core, task systems all try to solve two competing needs: planning and doing. The planning side loves organization, structure, categorization, and dashboards. The doing side wants speed, simplicity, clarity, and zero friction.

Digital tools excel at planning and categorizing, but they often turn "quick notes" into five-click workflows. Paper tools are fantastic for focus and momentum, but they rarely scale once you need collaboration, delegation, or shared visibility.

Most people oscillate between the two worlds without ever fully committing to either. That tension is exactly what gave birth to Actions and Notes.

How Actions and Notes was born

Early in the pandemic, I found myself drowning in Zoom calls, teams conversations, and a growing backlog of "I'll get to it later" items. My digital tools were overflowing, but I couldn't generate the focus I needed to make meaningful progress. Everything felt equally urgent, and therefore nothing really was. (A theme I wrote about back in 2014 in "If everything is critical, nothing is.")

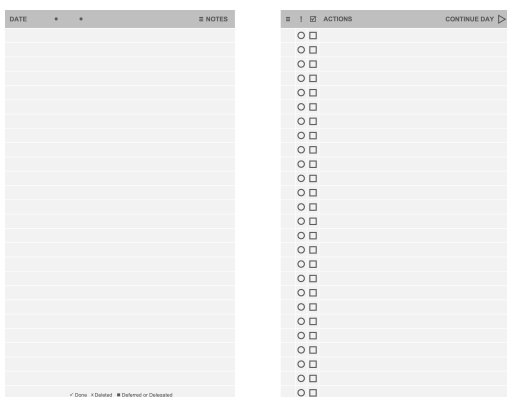
I opened a blank notebook, drew a line down the middle of the page, and started capturing two things:

Actions on the right*: the things I needed to do.

Notes on the left*: the thinking, the context, the reasoning, and the conversations behind the actions.

**and yes, I realize I probably should have called it “Notes and Actions,” but that’s besides the point.*

It sounds ridiculously simple, but something clicked. I wasn’t just making lists anymore. I was linking decisions to actions. I was keeping the why next to the what. And best of all, I was writing things out by hand every day – multiple times per day – and that made it stick; and quite frankly, incentivized me to get it off my list so i wouldn’t have to rewrite it every day.



Actions are written in short, punchy lines. Each line gets a checkbox for completion, a marker for urgency, and a simple notation connecting it to details in the Notes section. You can mark tasks as done, deferred, delegated, or deleted. You can track due dates right next to the line. You can highlight critical tasks with a darkened circle so they leap off the page.

Notes capture the reasoning, context, and thinking that supports the actions. Meetings, decisions, ideas, and clarifications all go here. You can reference a note directly from an action using whatever symbols or shorthand you prefer.

The magic here is that you don't lose the storyline behind your decisions. When you come back to a task three days later and ask yourself, "Wait, why did I want to do this again?", the answer is right there.

The continuation triangle

At the bottom of each daily page is a small triangle that indicates your day isn't ending yet. Once you hit it, you flip to the next page and keep going. No overwriting, no forcing everything onto one page, no artificial limit to your thinking. Some days needed one page. Others needed five.

The point is flow, not containment.

At the end of each day – or the beginning of the next day – you rewrite your list of outstanding actions to the next day. How's that for motivation to get things done?

The back section

This is where the system gets its staying power.

The back contains two dedicated sections:

Deferred tasks

Anything you don't want to lose but can't tackle now gets captured here along with due dates. It's a safety net that prevents "someday" items from floating into the void.

Delegated tasks

If you hand something off, you track the owner and follow-up date in this section. It's shockingly effective at eliminating the "I know I asked someone to do this... but who?" problem.

Both sections mirror the structure of the main page so everything stays familiar.

Where the system excels

Actions and Notes shines in individual work. If your days are filled with thinking, writing, problem-solving, planning, or synthesizing, the combination of contextual notes and tightly scoped action items is incredibly powerful.

It helps you see your work as a narrative, not a checklist. It helps you understand why tasks matter. It helps you stay honest about what's actually important. It pulls you out of reactive mode and back into thoughtful execution.

And because it's analog, it forces focus. No pings, no pop-ups, no browser tabs whispering your name.

For a long time, it was the best system I'd ever used.

Where it breaks down

But like many handcrafted systems, it hit its limits as soon as collaboration entered the picture.

The moment I needed to coordinate work across teams, share tasks, automate workflows, or integrate with tools like Google Workspace and Slack, the analog foundation simply wasn't enough. Delegated tasks could be tracked on paper, but not synchronized. Project dependencies couldn't be visualized. Cross-functional execution required shared boards, integrations, and notifications.

My work eventually outgrew the system.

Today, I rely heavily on Todoist for personal action item management along with integrations into my broader Google Workspace. Tasks flow automatically from meetings, emails, and shared documents. Collaboration happens in real time. Nothing gets lost.

But – and this is important – I still miss the clarity and intentionality that Actions and Notes created. The ritual and romance of a handwritten system isn't lost on me, especially for a guy who loves a good pen and revels in thick paper stock.

Plus, digital tools are efficient, but they rarely make me think the way a blank page does.

Why I'm sharing this system now

Even though I don't use it daily anymore, I continue to believe the system has tremendous value for individuals who want a clear, flexible, and cognitively friendly way to manage their day. If you're a student, solo operator, deep thinker, strategist, designer, or anyone who needs to combine ideas and actions in one place, it can be a game-changer.

So I'm making the template freely available. Use it, tweak it, remix it, ignore parts of it, or build your own version. Productivity systems are deeply personal, and the best ones evolve with you.

If Actions and Notes helps even one person create a little more clarity in their day, that's more than

enough.

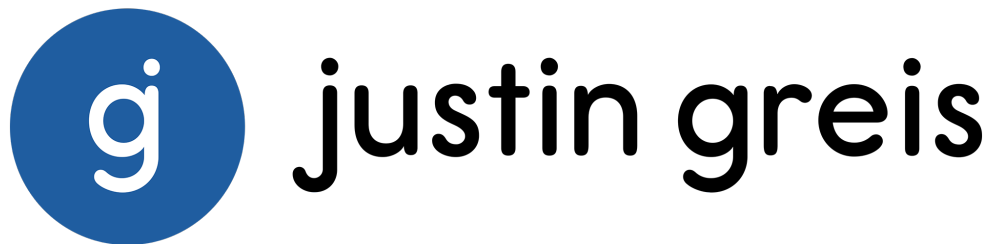
Want to build your own version?

If you're curious to try it out, you can download a PDF version of the template here:

[Download Template](#)

If you would like an editable copy to play around with, simply contact me and subscribe using the form below and I will send it your way.

It includes everything you need to print a front and back-printed copy in MS PowerPoint along with guidance for how to use each part effectively. The system is simple by design. The elegance comes from how you adapt it to your own habits and rhythms.



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(nice to meet you)

I post weekly **professional insights** and **personal stories** from my life as a management consultant, a dad, and an eternal optimist.



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