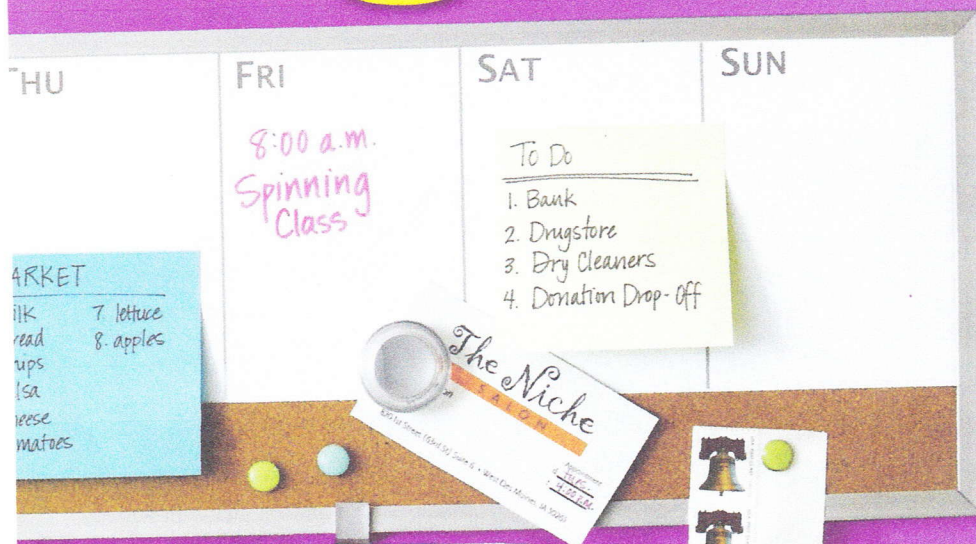


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how to organize anything

Four simple steps are all it takes to conquer clutter—really!

Written by Mara Boo

FROM KITCHEN COUNTERS to the coat closet, getting organized is easier than you think. Just follow this process: Empty, sort, shop, and reassemble. It works for any space in the house, adapts to even the busiest schedule, and is guaranteed to reduce stress.





Starting an organization project is like repainting a piece of furniture. It's tempting to rush to the finish line to apply the pretty new color, but without some tedious prep work, the new paint will peel and flake. Likewise, if you shop for organizational gear before you deal with your clutter, you'll be implementing products that aren't designed to solve the real problem.

The real first step to cutting clutter is to set a realistic

tip: When you discover something you've forgotten you own, discard it. If you've already managed to do without it, you must not need it. If you have trouble letting go, remind yourself you can always buy another one if you truly need it—but 99 percent of the time, you won't.

organizing goal based on the amount of time you have. Even 15 minutes is enough to accomplish something worthwhile. "It's easy to get overwhelmed by a big organizing project," says professional organizer Linda Goldman of Highland Park, Illinois. "That's why you have to take it one step at a time." Organizing for lasting results is a process. It might

take multiple bite-size sessions before you reach your ultimate goal of a neat, organized room.

Once you have a task in mind, clear space on a nearby dining table, bed, or floor to examine your belongings. Have sturdy trash bags or boxes ready, each labeled according to action: donate, recycle, sell, keep, or discard. Utah professional organizer Marilyn Bohn also suggests a "be-bin" to corral items that "be-long" elsewhere in the house until you have time to return them to their proper homes.

Step 1: Empty

Whatever you are organizing, empty it completely to gain a full understanding of what you own. "This is true for all storage spaces—kitchen cabinets, medicine cabinets, even refrigerators," says Sharon Lowenheim, a New York City organizer. "What isn't seen is forgotten. So it's important to get everything out in the open."

But that doesn't mean you have to empty your entire bedroom all at once. Tackle the closet first. Or if time is limited, just organize your shoes.

Step 2: Sort

Quick decision-making is key to letting go of clutter. As you evaluate each item, ask: Do I like this? Do I use it? Do I have a place to keep it? "If your instant reaction is you'll never wear that blouse, then immediately put it in your donate bin and move on," Bohn says. "Don't hold it long enough to remember you bought a pair of shoes to go with it." Lowenheim suggests thinking

tip: Setting criteria for what you're going to keep makes sorting easier. Own six pink lipsticks? Decide to keep only those that are less than two years old or only those you wear most often, and toss the rest.

of your life from this moment forward as a trip for which you need to pack. "What items do you need to bring along on this particular journey?" she says. "You don't need to pack everything you've ever accumulated. Are there items that were part of an earlier journey and don't apply to the upcoming trip?"

Or group items into categories as you empty shelves and drawers, Goldman suggests. "It's much easier to decide to let go of bud vases if you realize you own 10 of them," she says.

Step 3: Shop

Too many people shop for containers first, figuring that will make it easy for them to get organized," Lowenheim says. "But it's rarely true. All they end up with is more clutter because their empty containers are taking up space." Instead, decide what you're keeping, measure it, and determine where it's going to be stored. Then go shopping for right-size pieces. Better yet, "gather empty containers as you sort your belongings and bring them to one spot in your house," Goldman says. "'Shop' from this area first before heading to the stores."

Step 4: Reassemble

"Store things where you use them," Lowenheim says. You can also position yourself in front of the drawer, cabinet, or closet you are organizing and reach your arms out in all directions. Any area at eye level you can easily reach is prime real estate. That's where things you use every day should go." Place items used weekly in slightly less convenient storage areas. Put rarely used articles such as holiday decorations in the least accessible locations—ones that require you to get a step stool or bend to reach them.

GOOD-BYE, CLUTTER

It can be easier to part with serviceable items you no longer need or want if you know someone else can put them to good use. Check out these ways to donate, recycle, or sell your unwanted belongings.

To donate:

- **Project Smile** collects stuffed animals for emergency responders to give to frightened children in the aftermath of fires, accidents, or natural disasters. projectsmile.org
- **Soles4Souls** provides shoes to people in need worldwide. Enter your ZIP code to find a collection site near you. soles4souls.org
- **Local daycare centers** and group homes for troubled youth often appreciate gently used toys, books, magazines, games, and even older-model computers.

To recycle:

- **Dispose My Meds** lets you search by ZIP code for local pharmacies with take-back programs to help keep potentially harmful pharmaceutical waste and personal-care chemicals out of the environment. disposemymeds.org
- **Recycle My Cell Phone** accepts old cell phones by mail and recycles or refurbishes them to prevent toxic metals from getting into landfills. recyclemycellphone.org
- **Earth911.com** helps you locate recycling centers near your home for batteries, electronics, and more. earth911.com

To sell:

- **Replacements, Ltd.** buys china, crystal, and silver—from soup bowls to nut dishes in more than 360,000 tableware patterns. replacements.com
- **Media Exchange 123** buys CDs, DVDs, Blu-ray discs, and video games. Simply enter the UPC number of the item you'd like to sell to find out how much they'll pay. mx123.com
- **Gazelle** buys a wide array of electronic equipment such as Blu-ray players, camcorders, laptops, and e-readers. gazelle.com