



The Bullet Journal Method

Track the Past, Order the Present, Design the Future

By Ryder Carroll

15-minute read

Synopsis

The Bullet Journal Method (2018) by Ryder Carroll breaks down bullet journaling: the planning and productivity system your most organized friend is *definitely* already using. Use bullet journaling to clarify, prioritize, schedule, and reflect on your tasks and goals. You'll never miss an appointment or lose track of a great idea again.

Who is it for?

- People who write to-do lists but never seem to finish them
- Productivity pros keen to try the system that's revolutionized personal planning
- Dreamers who want to turn vague plans into a reality

About the author

The digital designer and entrepreneur Ryder Carroll has been an avid journaler since he was a teenager struggling with an attention disorder. Over decades, Carroll refined his note-taking system into the bullet journal method. Since sharing his method with the world, Carroll has been highly sought after as a speaker and personal productivity expert.

What's in it for me? Plan to perfection!

When is a planner more than a planner? When it's a to-do list, calendar, journal, and mindfulness meditation tool all in one. In short, when it's a bullet journal. The bullet journal offers a surprisingly simple method for tracking experiences, collating tasks, and organizing information.

Best of all? Bullet journaling isn't just about optimizing productivity. Use your bullet journal to track goals and reflect on experiences. Learn to interrogate how you spend your time. You won't just keep track of what you do; you'll habitually reflect on why you're doing it.

Feeling inspired to start your own bullet journal? These blinks will show you how.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- how to decipher the code of “rapid logging;”
- what time-management strategies will set you up for success; and
- how you can turn your daydreams into tangible goals.

Edit your tasks before you commit them to the page.

Skim through the bullet journal hashtag on Instagram, and you'll find over six million posts. That's six million-plus images of crisp white notebook pages embellished with beautiful handwriting, intriguing symbols, and elaborate color-coding.

These images may leave you itching to pick up a pen and paper. Resist the urge! The goal isn't to mindlessly fill up pages. Your *bujo*, as bullet journals are often called, should be reserved only for what's truly important to you.

The key message is: Edit your tasks before you commit them to the page.

Your bullet journal isn't a regular notebook to be filled with random jottings that you never revisit. Used properly, a bujo is a tool to help you find your focus. And let's face it, these days true focus can be hard to come by. Life is filled with distractions, like that pile of urgent emails in your inbox. And it's saturated with choices, too, like the shows sitting in your Netflix queue.

Bullet journaling shouldn't add to your stress. Instead, it should help you focus on what's actually important so you can accomplish your authentic goals.

That's why the bujo process doesn't start with journaling. It begins with a *mental inventory* designed to declutter your brain. Here's how to do it:

Take a loose sheet of paper and divide it into three columns. In the first column, list all the things you're currently doing, both at work and in your personal life.

In the second column, list all the things you should be doing. In the third, list all the things you want to be doing.

This exercise might take a long time, and you might need more than one piece of paper. That's fine! Keep going until your mind is emptied.

You'll be left with a map of how you spend your days. In other words, you'll see a snapshot of your time and the choices you've made about how you spend that time. Are they the choices you want to be making? Look at each task and ask yourself, is this task important to me? Is it necessary? If the answer is “no,” cross it off your inventory. It's not going in your bujo.

Before you've even cracked your notebook open, you've learned one of bujo's key lessons: what you leave out of your bullet journal is just as important as what you put in.

You can do a lot with simple tools and the bullet journal method.

Now, you're ready to begin bullet journaling. Let's go through a list of things you'll need, starting with the most obvious: A notebook. You can choose any type of notebook you like – from a simple composition notebook to a leather-bound journal. Your notebook can have plain paper or lined pages.

Sometimes bujo novices wonder: why a notebook? Why can't journaling be done in an app or on a laptop? Easy. Because wifi is distracting, and bullet journaling is about paring down distractions, remember?

The second thing you'll need is something to write with, like a pen or pencil. Yes, you'll be writing by hand. It's old-school, for sure, but it also helps with flow and minimizes distractions.

Then you need – well, nothing. That's it.

The key message is: You can do a lot with simple tools and the bullet journal method.

Now that you've got a handle on your tools, what can you do with them? Let's take a quick look at the components of bullet journaling. Bullet journals aren't ordered into rigid sections, but instead, use adaptable modules known as *collections*. Everything inside your bullet journal is a type of collection. The core collections include the index, daily log, monthly log, and future log.

The *index* lives at the beginning of your notebook, and it will save you from ever losing that winning idea or forgetting that crucial appointment. It's an at-a-glance table of everything your bullet journal contains.

Your *logs* are where you record key events and information. Your *daily log* is the repository for all those notes, reminders, and stray bits of information that you collect over the course of a day. Your *monthly log* is an up-to-date overview of your month, showing

what's been done and what still needs to happen. Your *future log* is the place where you park all the tasks and ideas you won't get around to this month, but you don't want to forget.

While the index and these three logs are the core collections of your bujo, you can add different, personalized collections wherever you like. Collections can help you organize information around a specific theme or track your progress on a particular goal. The group of collections that you're actively working on is known as your *stack*.

So, how do you actually record things in your journal? Using *rapid logging*, a system of notes and symbols that lets you capture your thoughts at a pace much faster than typical longhand writing. Let's dig into that next.

Rapid logging lets you log tasks and events quickly.

Think quick! When's your boss's birthday? Have you sent that email to your accountant? What movie did you see on date night two weeks ago?

Even with a sharp memory, it's hard to recall every experience and piece of information you take in over a day, let alone the details of what happened last month or what needs to happen next Tuesday. Rapid logging can help with that.

The key message is: Rapid logging lets you log tasks and events quickly.

Before you start logging, assign your page a topic, with a header at the top of that page. The more detailed and systematic your topic, the better – this is true for almost every aspect of bujo! So, instead of "Job Interview," try "September 7, Interview, Marketing Director Position." Assign a page number, too. That's important for your index.

Whether it's in your monthly log, daily log, future log, or a special collection, the content you log will fall into three categories. *Tasks* or things you need to do. *Events* or what's happened. And *Notes* or important information. Your job interview log might include events like "met with HR representative," tasks like "send HR rep thank-you email," and notes like, "job requires travel."

To log these, use the distinctive bullets bujo is so well known for, called *signifiers*. Each category has its own signifier. A task is denoted with a solid bullet. Completed a task? Cross over the bullet with an "x." To reschedule tasks inside the month, use the bullet as a base for a right-facing arrow. To move a task to your future log, convert your bullet into a left-facing arrow. Use an asterisk to denote urgency.

Events are marked by an empty bullet: a small unfilled circle. Record events as neutrally as possible, whether they're good, like a promotion, or bad, like car trouble.

Why should you include events as well as tasks? Jotting down the day's events will, over time, give you a clear picture of key habits and trends.

Notes are represented with a dash. What should you note? Anything that captures your attention! Mark a particularly inspiring note with an exclamation point.

It's often useful to use tasks or events as anchors in your bujo and to expand on these anchors using notes. Elaborate on an event like "Performance review with boss" with notes like "try and collaborate more with other departments."

Bullet journaling embraces chaos with a flexible modular system.

OK, OK. Bullet journaling sounds great, but you've been burned before. You've tried other organizational strategies. Nothing's worked. You have yet to find a system that imposes order on *your* particular brand of chaos.

Why should bujo be any different?

Good question! Because bujo doesn't *try* to bring order to chaos.

The key message is: Bullet journaling embraces chaos with a flexible modular system.

A regular diary allocates the same amount of space for each day. A bujo embraces the fact that every day is different. So, how does it work?

The *daily log* is where you note the day's tasks and capture its experiences. Jot down a page number and the date, and you're good to go! Don't allocate space for your daily log in advance. Some days your log will run to a few pages. Other days you'll have less to log.

The *monthly log* is your month-at-a-glance, and it typically takes up a double-page spread. The left-hand page is your calendar page. On the outer edge of this page, list the date for every day in the month, followed by the first letter of the weekday – so, M for Monday. Leave space to write down events and add in signifiers to denote upcoming tasks or note memorable experiences next to each date as you go through the month. The right-hand page is your tasks page, where you list the things you need or want to do that month.

Want to note a task that falls outside the current month? That's where the *future log* comes in. This is where you queue all your upcoming tasks. At the start of each new month, scan your future log, and add the next tasks you want to tackle to your new monthly log.

Tracking a goal or establishing a habit? That's where *custom collections* come in. These are special logs devoted to a specific topic. Fertility planning, your freelance side hustle, a meditation practice – anything you like!

How do you keep track of all these collections? Through the *index*, which lives at the front of your notebook. Plan to devote four pages to your index. Use your index to list your collections as you add them to the notebook, along with their page numbers. For collections that are interspersed throughout your notebook, simply list *all* the pages where they live. For example, “Meal Planning: pg. 18-24; 67-69.” Don’t worry if you run out of index pages. Simply continue your index on the next free page, making a note of that page at the end of the old index.

Migrating tasks and events is key to finding your focus.

There’s something deeply satisfying about crossing tasks off your to-do list. But while checking off to-do’s can make us *feel* like we’re being productive, this approach might actually hamper our long-term productivity.

See, when we’re robotically completing one task and moving onto the next, we can lose sight of the big picture. We don’t recognize trends or habits in our approach to these tasks, let alone stop to question how completing these tasks helps us fulfill our long-term goals.

Luckily, the bullet journal is far more than a to-do list. Big-picture reflection is baked into the system, thanks to *monthly migration*, the process of sifting through and evaluating everything you’ve logged for the month.

The key message is: Migrating tasks and events is key to finding your focus.

So how does the monthly migration work? At the end of each month, set up your log for the next month. Start by scanning through your stack, or the collections you’re currently using. You’ll probably find some unfinished tasks. There’s no shame in that! Now, consider each one. Is this task still vital or meaningful? If yes, migrate it to your new monthly log, a custom collection, or your future log. Perhaps the task no longer feels necessary. Great! You can simply cross it out.

Plan to do another migration at the end of your year of bullet journaling. This time, migrate from your old notebook to a new one. Your yearly migration is an opportunity for mindful reflection. When you look through your stack of collections after one year of journaling, you’ll get a snapshot of how you spent your time and energy in the previous 12 months.

Here’s where you’ll need to make some hard decisions. How does the “life snapshot” from your old bullet journal compare to the life you want? Have you spent too much time and energy on things that don’t give your life meaning? Think carefully about what tasks, habits, and experiences you want to try to bring with you into this fresh year – and which you’d prefer to leave behind.

When master martial artist Bruce Lee shared his formula for success, he advised: “Hack away the unessential.” With every migration, you’re following Lee’s advice by leaving behind what no longer serves you and getting closer to the core of what’s important.

Clarify and prioritize your goals to make them a reality.

Your bullet journal can help you achieve your goals. And goals are good! Setting and working toward a concrete goal can fill your life with purpose and meaning. Pursuing a goal can push you out of your comfort zone, opening you up to new experiences and perspectives.

But when our goals aren’t meaningful, we’re way less likely to achieve them.

So, how can we set sustainable, meaningful goals? And, equally important, how can we achieve those goals?

The key message is: Clarify and prioritize your goals to make them a reality.

Use your bullet journal to organize and clarify your goals by creating a *goal collection*. This is a page or two where you list your goals, no matter how big or small. Simply writing down your goals will help you transform them from vague desires and daydreams into concrete objectives.

Next, create a timeline for achieving them. Here’s a simple trick you can try: the *5-4-3-2-1 method*. Go through your goals collection and identify goals you’d like to achieve in the next five years. Then, find goals you’d like to achieve in the next four months. Repeat the process for the next three weeks, two days, and finally, for the next one hour.

You might have a lot of goals at this point. So, it’s time to prioritize. Look through your 5-4-3-2-1 list and interrogate each goal one by one. Does this goal really resonate with you? Will achieving this goal be worth the time, effort, and resources you’ll need to complete it? Ideally, you should identify one personal and one professional goal in each of your timeframes. That’s ten goals in total.

Now, just because you’ve set your priorities doesn’t mean you have to stick to them at all costs. Particularly when it comes to long-term goals, it’s crucial to check in with yourself periodically and re-evaluate whether those goals still hold meaning.

One fun way to do this is a *goal sprint*: a method used to break a big-picture goal down into smaller components. Let’s say it’s your goal to become a published author. Your sprint could be to write the first three chapters of a novel. By doing this, you’ll get to test whether your heart’s *really* in it and get a taste for the amount of work involved in reaching this goal.

Train yourself to be present through time-management strategies.

The universe is governed by certain spatio-temporal laws that can't be bent or broken. One such law? There are only 24 hours in a day. There's nothing you can do to change this simple objective fact.

But bujo can make you *feel* like you're defying the laws of time. Time may be a finite resource, but our experience of time is relative. When we're unfocused, simple tasks can take hours to complete. When we're on autopilot, hours can slip by in what feels like minutes. But when we're fully present, we can accomplish great things in a short amount of time.

The key message is: Train yourself to be present through time-management strategies.

Are there certain tasks that you dread? It's easy to drag your feet over tedious to-do items. Before you know it, you've scrolled mindlessly online for five hours, all to avoid sending a five-minute email. Fight your procrastination with *time-boxing*. Don't just write down a task; allot a chunk of time or a *time box* in which to complete it. Try to keep that time box short, too. You'll be amazed how quickly you can find your focus when you only have 30 minutes to get something done. Break down larger tasks, like filing taxes, into smaller components, like gathering receipts or compiling expenses, and allot a short time box to each.

Another simple yet effective time-management strategy is *scheduling*. The order in which you tackle your tasks can seriously impact your success rate. Be honest: do you deal with the day's most demanding or unappealing tasks first? Or do you create a false sense of productivity by front-loading your to-do list with easy and enjoyable tasks?

Don't schedule your hardest task last. Your attention and motivation will be frayed by the time you tackle it – if you tackle it at all. Getting difficult jobs out of the way early and saving the fun stuff for afterward will make the rest of your day feel more manageable and more enjoyable.

Don't just think about *what* you need to do. Make it a practice to consider when you need to do it and how long you should do it for. You'll soon feel like you've found extra hours in the day.

There are no limits to your bullet journal's potential.

You're nearly finished with the blinks to *The Bullet Journal Method*. You've learned about collections, like your index and logs, and how to migrate important tasks. And you've picked up strategies, from goal sprints to time-boxing, to ensure that your to-do list turns into a to-done list. In short, you've nailed the basics of bujo!

But why stop at basic? Now it's time for the fun part: experimenting with hacks, add-ons, and extra-credit activities that will take your bujo practice to the next level.

The key message is: There are no limits to your bullet journal's potential.

Here are a few nifty ways you could consider customizing your bullet journal.

Your monthly and yearly migrations are a great opportunity to pause and reflect on your goals and take stock of the progress you're making toward them. But if there's something specific you're working toward, daily *habit tracking* can help keep you on target.

Let's say you're trying to save money, so you've decided to bring a packed lunch to work. Add a column to your monthly log with an intuitive header, like "L" for lunch. Make a checkmark in the column each time you bring your own lunch. You'll be able to see how well you're meeting your goal. You'll also be able to cross-check with other events to see how they impact on your goal. For example, you might notice that days when you stay late at the office are followed by days where you're not motivated to pack your own lunch.

A bujo isn't a traditional journal where you unpack your thoughts and feelings. But it can be! It's easy to incorporate *long-form journaling* into your bujo practice. As you fill out your daily log, you may find there are some notes you'd like to think about further. Simply convert the dash symbol used before a note into a plus-sign symbol, signaling that this is a note you'd like to come back to and reflect on. When you have time – perhaps once a week – dig out those plus-sign notes and spend some time journaling about them.

These are just two of the ways you can customize your bullet journal. Hungry for more? Get involved in the bujo community through social media platforms like Instagram and Pinterest. There, you'll find countless bujo fans sharing the inspiring ways they've personalized their own journals, through gratitude logs, custom calendars, and more.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Using a bullet journal is a simple, streamlined, yet highly effective way to track your life and organize your time. What's more, the bujo philosophy builds in moments of mindful reflection, designed to make sure your productivity is meaningful, not mindless.

Actionable advice:

Keep at it!

Some people take to bullet journaling immediately. Others find it hard to form a bujo habit, and feel their

enthusiasm wane after a few days of journaling. Try not to give up until you've journalled for one month. Many bujo users report that their first monthly migration was the moment the method really clicked for them.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with The Bullet Journal Method as the subject line and share your thoughts!

What to read next: *The Happy Mind*, by Kevin Horsley, Louis Fourie

After listening to our blinks for *The Bullet Journal Method*, you might be ready to grab a notebook and pen and start your bujo practice at once! Then again, you might be hungry to learn more about techniques that, like bujo, help you on the path to a more productive and fulfilling life. If that's the case, then try the blinks to *The Happy Mind* by Kevin Horsley and Louis Fourie. They'll walk you through the mistakes you may well be making in your search for happiness and teach you how to cultivate an authentically fulfilled life.