

The Revised Autofocus System

<http://www.markforster.net/blog/2009/7/28/the-revised-autofocus-system.html>

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This is a major revision of the Autofocus System which greatly increases its effectiveness.

You are recommended to read these instructions through once in order to get an overview and then to follow the step-by-step “Getting Started” section at the end.

Outline

Autofocus consists of one long list of everything you have to do. As new things come up you add them to the end of the list. There are three modes by which you work through the list. These are *Reverse Mode*, *Forward Mode* and *Review Mode*.

Reverse Mode

As the name implies, in this mode you are working from the end of the list backwards. The end of the list is where newly entered tasks are to be found. Reverse Mode is intended particularly for taking action on the more urgent tasks which appear on your list, though it is by no means restricted exclusively to urgent tasks. You always start the day in Reverse Mode.

Forward Mode

In this mode you are working from the beginning of the list forwards. This is primarily intended for taking action on less urgent tasks which have not been dealt with by Reverse Mode, though it is not restricted exclusively to non-urgent tasks.

Review Mode

At the beginning of each day a few of the tasks which have been on the list longest are put on notice for review. If no action is taken on them during the course of that day, then they are highlighted for review and no longer count as part of the active list. They may only be put back on the list once they have been reviewed.

Detailed instructions

Reverse Mode

You always start each new day in Reverse Mode.

Starting from the last task on the list, you read each task until you come to one that you feel is ready to be done. You work on this task for as long as you feel like, and then delete the task from the list.

If you have not finished the task, then re-enter it at the end of the list. If a task is a recurring one (e.g. email), then you should also re-enter it at the end of the list.

Once you have done this, repeat the process starting again from the last task on the list.

N.B. You always return to the end of the list after finishing work on a task.

Forward Mode

Include the task “Change to Forward Mode” on your list.

From Reverse Mode, you switch to Forward Mode when you come to this task and it feels ready to be done.

In Forward Mode you work in a quite different way from Reverse Mode.

In Forward Mode, you move forward through the list on a page-by-page basis. Go to the first page on which there are any unactioned items. Read through all the unactioned items on the page once without taking action on any of them. Then read through them again and take action on any that feel ready to be done.

Keep circling round the same page until no more tasks feel ready to be done. Then move on to the next page and do the same again.

The signal to move back to Reverse Mode is when you come to a page and don't do any of the tasks on it. This rule does not apply to the last page of the list - the one on which you are currently entering tasks.

When you return to Reverse Mode, re-enter the “Change to Forward Mode” task on the list.

Notes:

- 1) Whenever you come back to Forward Mode from Reverse Mode, you start again from the first unactioned item.
- 2) If you cannot do any tasks on a page because of your location (i.e. it's physically impossible to do them), then you can skip the page and continue in Forward Mode.
- 3) If you are still in Forward Mode when you reach the last page of the list, once you have finished working on that page start again from the beginning of the list (i.e. the first unactioned item).

Review Mode

At the beginning of each day, the first contiguous block of unactioned tasks is put on notice for review (this may be one or more tasks). To signal this a line is drawn below them.

Any of these tasks remaining unactioned at the beginning of the next day are put on review. The recommended way of doing this is to highlight them.

These tasks are now treated as deleted, and they may not be re-entered on the list until they have been reviewed. This is done by putting “Change to Review Mode” as a recurring task on the list.

In Review Mode you may re-enter any or all of the highlighted tasks onto the list (see below for guidelines). Highlighted items which have been re-entered should be crossed out so that you know not to include them in subsequent reviews. You should also cross a task out if you decide not to review it again.

Once the review is complete, re-enter the “Change to Review Mode” task on the list, and go back to whichever mode you were in previously.

Guidelines for Review Mode

Please take the rule seriously not to re-enter these tasks before they have been reviewed. Putting tasks on notice for review is one of the most powerful parts of the Autofocus system, and not doing it properly will affect the workings of the whole system.

When in Review Mode you should consider carefully why each task was put on review, whether it really needs to be done at all, whether the time is ripe for it to be done, whether it distracts from your main goals, and any other relevant factors. When you do re-enter a reviewed item, it is often a good idea to break it down or re-phrase it in some way.

Getting Started

1. To start with all you need is a pen and a notebook with ruled lines. Later you will need a highlighter. Please note that it is strongly recommended that you work the system on paper initially, even if you intend to switch to electronic implementation later.
2. Write a list of things you have to do in your notebook - one task per line. There is no need to make this list comprehensive to start with. As you think of things or they come up, just add them to the list.
3. Include “Change to Forward Mode” as one of the tasks.
4. Re-read the *Detailed Instructions for Reverse Mode* again. Make sure you understand them.
5. Start working the list in Reverse Mode.

6. When you decide the “Change to Forward Mode” task is ready to be actioned, then re-read the *Detailed Instructions* for *Forward Mode* again, make sure you fully understand them and start working the list in Forward Mode according to the instructions.
7. Continue working through the list, switching between Forward and Reverse Mode according to the rules. Don’t worry about how often you do this - it will vary a lot according to your circumstances.
8. At the beginning of the following day, re-read the *Detailed Instructions* for *Review Mode* and put tasks on notice for review as described in the instructions.
9. Start working the list in Reverse Mode (you always start the day in Reverse Mode).
10. Sometime in the course of the day, re-read the entire instructions.

Sample Page

For an example of one of my own unedited Autofocus pages:

21/7

- 21 Papers
- 21 Enail
- 21 Voice mail
- 21 Tidy Desk
- 22 ~~Camera 21/4~~
- 22 ~~Portuguese 14~~
- 21 Spanish 6
- 21 Cut Hedge
- 22 How Low
- 22 Write Up
- 22 Journal 10 +
- 22 Sort Books
- 21 Reading
- 22 PPC i Player
- 21 "Double Indemnity"
- 21 Lovefilm DVDs
- 21 Empty WPP
- 21 Empty Shredder
- 22 Camera Manual
- 21 Connect
- 22 Voice mail
- 21 Charge Camera Batteries
- Article for "Expat"
- 22 Tidy Desk
- 21 Bath
- 22 Twitter
- 21 Facebook
- 22 Blog
- 21 Comments
- 21 Comment Blog re school AF1/AF2 switch?
- 21 "Side Road Revived"
- "Vertigo"
- "Les Vertueuses Sertineales"
- Flies

Notes to the sample page:

1) The date is written in the extreme left-hand margin next to the first item for that day. In this case it is 21/7 (which for Americans would be 7/21).

2) The day number only is written to the left of deleted tasks. I write these as a batch at the beginning of each day. Hence you will see that there is one deleted task (Article for “Eaglet”) which has no number against it. That’s because it was done during the current day.

3) Deleted items are crossed out with a single straight line. When I start on an item I put a dot next to it in the margin (you can see where several of them were). This helps me to commit to the task, and also find my place. When I have finished action on the task I draw the line from the dot.

4) Contiguous deleted items are joined with a vertical line. This makes it very quick to identify where unactioned tasks are located on the page.

5) You can see that on two occasions there are lines going right across the page. These are the lines which mark off tasks which have been placed on notice for review. There was only one item on notice today and that was the previously mentioned Article for “Eaglet”.

Of course there is no need to put in the dates if you are not interested in keeping statistics.

Note that I don’t put any tags, priority signs or category marks on the tasks, so the page remains quite clean in appearance.