

# How to Set Goals That Lead to Success

One of the most important things we can do in pursuit of success is set clear, explicit goals about what we want to accomplish. Most of us have a bunch of vague goals, like “lose weight” or “write a novel”. We want “someday” to do x, y, and z, but without clear goals, we don’t seem to make any progress. We chug along, picking at our big life projects now and again, rarely coming any closer to finishing, and we feel horrible about ourselves. If you don’t set strong goals, you won’t achieve them.

Dustin M. Wax

There are a lot of reasons people don’t set clear goals. Most of them boil down to a fear of commitment – and of letting yourself down when you fail to live up to that commitment. Saying “I’m going to write a novel” sets you up for possible failure. What if you don’t have any ideas? What if some life crisis happens and you can’t finish? What if a better idea comes along?

And on and on. We have a million ways of talking ourselves out of committing to achievement. So we avoid the commitment. We keep our options open. We dally.

As anyone who’s ever been in a romantic relationship without commitment knows, this is a recipe for disaster. In fact, it’s a pretty good analogy, because your relationship with your goals is a lot like your relationship with your significant other. You have to work at it every day, and nurture it, and accept its quirks and even failures. And if you lack real commitment, sooner or later, one or the other of you will flake out.

**SMART goals are easier to achieve than dumb ones**

One reason goal-setting is so daunting is because we don’t know how to set good goals. We set vague, unspecified, open-ended goals – goals we hope to get around to “someday”, “eventually”, “when inspiration strikes”, “when I have more time”. These words and phrases need to be banished from your goal-setting vocabulary. What you need are crisp, clear, specific goals.

## SMART goals.

The idea of the SMART goal was conceived by a business psychologist named George Doran. SMART is an acronym, standing for goals that are:

- Specific,
- Measurable,
- Achievable,
- Relevant, and
- Time-bound.

Let’s look at these elements one by one.

**S – Specific** – Set goals with specific outcomes. Avoid loose language. Ex: “Lose 10 pounds.”

**M – Measurable** – Set concrete goals that you can keep track of – and keep track of them!

**A – Achievable** – Set realistic goals that you’re prepared to pursue. Losing 20 pounds this year is reasonable. 50 pounds is pushing it. 200 pounds in a year is almost impossible – and when you fail to meet it, you’ll feel bad about yourself.

**R – Relevant** – Set goals that matter to you, that will have a positive effect in your life.

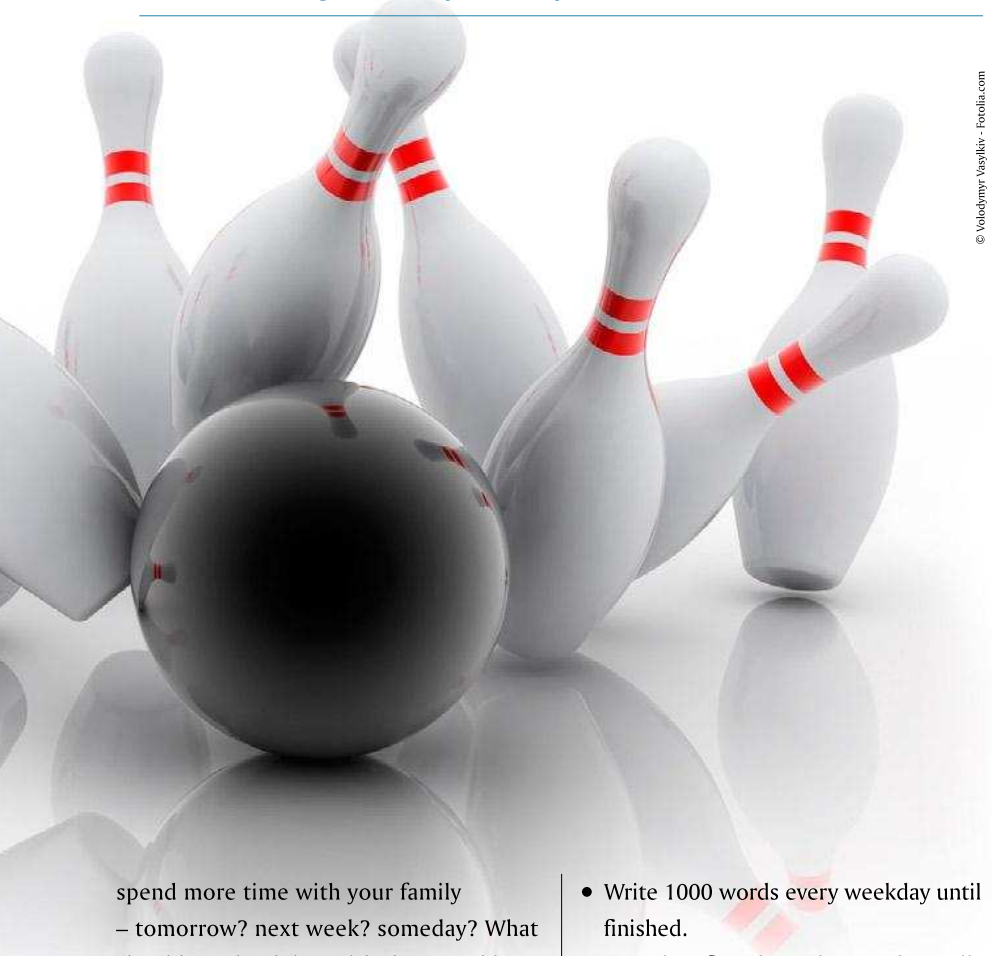
**T – Time-bound** – Give yourself a deadline to create a sense of urgency and keep you focused on the task at hand. Ex: “Follow my doctor’s diet and exercise three times a week to lose 10 pounds by March 31st.”

A bad goal – but the kind we are most comfortable committing to – is something like “Spend more time with family.”

That’s a dumb goal – more time than what? How will you know if you’re spending more time with your family? How much more? When should you



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spend more time with your family – tomorrow? next week? someday? What should you be doing with them, and how often?

A SMART goal would be. “Get involved with Jimmy’s soccer team and attend two practices every week from now until the end of the season” or “Spend an hour every day reading to the kids” or just “Take my partner out this Friday night for some alone time.” You know when to start – “now” – and you can easily track your progress – just write it down in your calendar and do it, or put a mark on the calendar every time you read to the kids.

Here’s another dumb goal: “write a novel”. It’s too big, too unspecific – it doesn’t suggest any action. Every day, you’ll say to yourself, “Oh, right. I really oughtta write that novel!” and then go back to surfing the Internet, watching TV, or playing Wii.

Instead, set a series of SMART goals:

- Write an outline by February 1st.

- Write 1000 words every weekday until finished.
- Complete first three chapters by April 15th.

That might not be granular enough – maybe you’re not prepared to even write the outline (it’s not achievable). Maybe you need to:

- Check out 3 books on how to write a novel and read them by February 10th.
- Brainstorm character names by February 28th.
- Join a writing group and attend every month.

Of course, I’ve taken for granted that spending time with your family or writing a novel are relevant to you, and if you’ve chosen them as goals, they probably are. But you always have to think about whether a goal is relevant, and how it’s relevant, or you won’t have the necessary motivation to complete the goal. It’s boring researching competitor’s books in order to write a book proposal – but if you’re burning to tell your story to the

world, then doing the legwork becomes incredibly relevant.

Make sure you have some way of keeping track of your goals. For recurring goals like “write 1000 words a day” or “exercise 15 minutes every morning”, I like the idea of keeping a white board handy and recording daily accomplishments as you finish. But a notebook, diary, computer file, or anything else will work fine. Maybe you can start a “goal diary” – a nice-looking notebook that you can write goals in, one per page, and track progress in as needed.

Whatever you decide to use to track your goals, make sure you keep on top of it. Accountability, even just to yourself, is key – both so you can feel good about your project (especially in the middle of a big project that seems like it will never end) and so you can identify hangups and other problems that are keeping you from accomplishing your goals.

If you’re like me, you have big things in mind for 2009. Set out on the right foot by making SMART goals that put you on track for success from the beginning!



## About Dustin Wax

Dustin M. Wax is a freelance writer based in Las Vegas, NV. He is the editor of Stepcase Lifhack (Lifhack.org) and contributes to



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