

Write it Down, Execute

Practical advice

Lt. Col. John Geracitano

*U.S. Army Student Detachment,
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill*

As Austin Kleon says, “All advice is autobiographical.” What follows is a principle that has worked for me. Since you are reading this, we likely share some of the same doubts and high expectations at the beginning of our Army careers.

My initial expectations shifted fast. Early on in my career, I declined a Ranger School slot I had earned in the Armor Basic Officer Leader Course; an opportunity I had coveted for years. I did it because my forthcoming commander told me it was the right move. It was a hard decision, but the correct one. This was my first real lesson in heeding a senior leader’s advice and putting the unit’s needs over personal priorities. My left shoulder is still bare today, but I have no regrets. The experience I had leading Soldiers and cutting my teeth in the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment could never be replicated by any course.

During my first week as a platoon leader, I attended Fort Hood, Texas’s end-of-week officer call. The III Corps commander would open with remarks, and then we’d spend the next few hours roasting each other. The commander at that time, (Retired) Lt. Gen. Ricky Lynch, offered career advice that has stayed with me ever since. He told us, “Write down everything your boss tells you to do, then do it.” So simple. From that moment forward, every time I’d forget to action a task, his words came back to haunt me. “Why didn’t I just write it down?” I would ask myself.

Reality will never align with your expectations, professionally or personally. As you begin your career, I offer the same advice branched into two perspectives – and both involve a pen.

First, write down everything that your boss tells you to do.

“A short pencil is better than a long memory.” When you are in receive mode, write everything down as fast as you can. This is not about optics. It is about execution. I carry a full-size three-subject notebook instead of a smaller pocket variant. It enables me to write at length, connect ideas across pages, and the notebook lasts for months. Every entry starts with a topic or meeting title, the date, and the key people present. When a question surfaces weeks later about what was decided in the leader huddle, the answer is right there. You need something that you can write on at any time. The easy part is writing it down.

Next, you must execute. Inherent in this is under-

standing how to prioritize tasks based on the needs of the unit and other factors (e.g., time).

Second write down everything that you think (or know) you should do.

This is the harder discipline.

No one assigns it. No one follows up on it. It lives entirely in your head until you put it on paper. This category is broader than a task list. It encompasses your fitness goals, self-development, the relationship you’ve been meaning to invest in, and the idea that surfaced during a run and disappeared by the time you reached the motor pool. If you don’t capture these things immediately, vanish.

To accomplish this, each Sunday I complete a single sheet of paper divided into categories covering the week ahead: Personal tasks, Fitness, Work tasks, Daily Streaks, and a Miscellaneous column for overflow. I review the calendar, carry over unfinished tasks, and set my intentions. The sheet gets messy by Friday. That’s fine. The point is to always know what needs to get done across every area of your life, so you’re never left wondering what to work on next. More importantly, nothing is neglected for too long without being addressed. Lastly, at the end of each day, I map the next day’s schedule on an index card and prioritize the top tasks. It fits inside my pocket and keeps me focused. No app required.

Am I perfect at this? No. Do I complete this one-page sheet religiously on Sundays? No. And that is fine with me. I have built the habit and consistency to develop this into a process and adapt to whatever workflow is needed for that time. Try whatever system, tools, and timeline works for you. But most importantly, just start.

The years melt away. Orders for your next assignment will arrive before you know it, and your next chapter will begin whether you plan for it or not. The leaders who thrive are not the ones who had it all figured out on day one. They are the ones who tracked what their boss needed and who held themselves accountable to what they knew they should be doing: personally, professionally, and everything in between.

Lt. Col. John Geracitano is a signal officer and LTG (R) Dubik Writing Fellow who is currently serving as a doctoral candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

