

Haiku Productivity: The Fine Art of Limiting Yourself to the Essential

I've been wanting to write this post for a little while now, about an experiment I've been doing. For a few months, I've been purposely binding myself.

Not as a way to hamstring myself, but as **a way to make me focus on fewer, but more important things**. As a way to allow myself to do more in less time.



Photo by [Hyougushi](#)

I'm sure you've heard of the [Pareto principle](#), known also as the 80/20 rule. While I don't think that the percentages of that rule are exact, the principle is true: you should focus on the few things that get you the most benefit.

But while that's nice in principle, in practice it's hardly ever done. Why? Because we have too much thrown at us at once, and we're too busy juggling everything coming at us to take a minute and evaluate what's essential, what gets the most benefit for the least amount of effort, and what we should really focus on.

There's no systematic way to focus on the essential stuff, and eliminate the rest.

Until now. I've developed a system I call **Haiku Productivity**, based on some good ideas by others (and I won't be able to name them all, but know that I am indebted). The key to Haiku Productivity is to limit yourself to an arbitrary but small number of things, forcing yourself to focus on the important stuff and eliminate all else.

Haiku: Limited but powerful

To understand this simple concept, think about the form of [the haiku](#) (the common version, at least): it's poetry in 17 syllables, with 3 lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables (I know there are variations and this is only a rough definition, but that's not important to this article). The point is that the form of the haiku is extremely limited, to a small number of lines and syllables.

What this does is forces the poet to focus on only those words that mean the most to the poem. While other forms of poetry can go on for pages, haiku are short and compact. As a result, haiku can be some of the most powerful poems in any language.

With such a limited form, you cannot just use any amount of words you want to express a concept. You have to focus on one small but essential concept, and as a result you accomplish a lot with a few syllables. That's what Haiku Productivity is.

Limited but Productive

So how does this apply to productivity? Well, if you think this will allow you to accomplish twice as many tasks,

you're wrong. You'll accomplish fewer tasks. But you will most likely be more effective, because you will have to choose only the essential tasks — the ones that will give you the most benefit for your limited time.

What are the other benefits of Haiku Productivity, besides increased effectiveness? Besides forcing you to focus on essential tasks that have a large Return on Investment (ROI), it forces you to eliminate the non-essential tasks. No other system forces you to do that. It forces you to make the best use of your time. It forces you to limit the time you spend on things, which means you have more time for other things that are important to you, and you are able to focus on what you want to focus on, instead of everything coming at you.

It simplifies your life and makes you less stressed out.

Haiku Productivity: Place Limits on Everything

For those who enjoyed [Zen To Done](#) (ZTD), this is an extension of those concepts.

The rule of Haiku Productivity is: **put limits on everything you do.**

That's it. One rule. What are the things you do? It's different for everyone, but common ones might be: email, RSS feeds, goals, time wasters, tasks.

What limits should you set? It's different for everyone. And it's arbitrary (there are no logical limits for anything — it's necessarily arbitrary) but based on your own experience and experimentation.

Here are the limits I've set for myself that seem to work — but remember that they will be different for you. And also note that while there's a nice order to these, that's mostly coincidence (I put them in a nice order), and there is no need to keep an order like this.

1 Goal: The number of goals I'm allowed to have at any one time. I can only really focus on one goal at a time ... any more than that and I lose focus and energy.

2 times to process email: If I only allow myself to check email twice a day, I cannot let email control my life. It makes me much more efficient. When I process email, I process to empty. Now, there are other times during the day when I have to send email, such as emailing a post to one of my editors. At that time, I might respond quickly to one or two emails, but I don't process my email during that time.

3 MITs: I choose three Most Important Tasks for each day, and focus completely on these. Any more than that and I might not get them all done.

4 batch tasks: Aside from MITs, I also give myself 4 smaller tasks that I try to batch all at once. This usually takes me 30-60 minutes at the end of the day.

5 sentence emails: I got this idea from [Mike Davidson](#), whose article came at a perfect time as I was limiting other things in my life, and was also trying to keep my emails short at that time. His 5-sentence rule (no email can be longer than 5 sentences) fit in perfectly with everything else I tried to do, and I've adopted it. It forces you to write only what's essential. I broke the rule at first, but I've been pretty good lately. This rule also limits the amount of time you spend replying to email, and makes processing a breeze.

6 RSS posts: I've been adjusting this as I've experimented, but I've settled on reading 6 posts per day. The method: I open my Google Reader in list view, scan through the headlines, and choose just 6 to read, opening them in new tabs. I then "Mark All as Read" and go and read my 6 posts in further detail. It has made RSS reading super fast.

7 minutes of wasted time: This is just for fun, but when I've done a task, I reward myself with 7 minutes of being able to do anything I want. That means I can read a humor site, or go and read comments on this blog, or look through Delicious or Digg or a forum, or whatever I want. For only 7 minutes. Then I get back to work. This allows me to have a little fun sprinkled throughout my day, but limits it. I set a timer. Totally works.

10 RSS feeds: While I've talked about reducing my RSS feeds before, I got the idea of only having 10 feeds from a friend, [Ann](#), who bested my 16 feeds (at the time) with only 10 of her own. I thought that was a great idea, and now I only allow myself to subscribe to 10 feeds. That means I have to choose the 10 that give me the absolute best info for the time I spend reading them.

100 things: Actually, I haven't done this, but it was one of the inspirations for this post, so I had to list it. It's also something I'd like to try out in the near future. I don't think it'll be that difficult for me, as I doubt I have much more than 100 things. But anyway, the gist is that blogger Dave Bruno decided to do a [100 thing challenge](#), where he keeps only 100 personal items (not counting books, and not counting non-personal items such as dishes, cleaning supplies, etc.). Read the [entire series](#). 100 things is, of course, an arbitrary limit, but again, that's the idea: set a goal and try to limit yourself to it.

Again, your limits and the things you limit will vary depending on your situation. I am in no way suggesting that you adopt these limits. But by restricting yourself to a small number of things, you force yourself to focus only on the essential.

It'll make a world of difference. Give it a try, and let me know what you think.

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