



# User's Guide to The Work-Smart Academic Planner

WRITE IT DOWN, GET IT DONE

**T**hank you for purchasing *The Work-Smart Academic Planner*. The revised version of this planner has been rearranged to provide coaches and students with more versatility in how they use the planner while maintaining the most useful features of the original planner. It is both a planner *and* a workbook for helping students identify executive skills strengths and challenges, set academic and executive skills goals, and evaluate performance. It also provides useful templates for common academic tasks that students are expected to perform.

To help you get the most out of the planner, we would like to offer some tips and recommendations.

First of all, we cannot stress enough that struggling students will need guidance in using this planner. High achievers (that is, students who are strong in goal-directed persistence) may be able to pick up the planner and work their way through it independently, and they would be likely to maintain daily and monthly plans to help them keep track of assignments—both nightly homework and longer term papers and projects. Although we hope that those students find their way to this planner, an equally important audience is students whose weak executive skills get in the way of optimal academic performance. Those students are unlikely to use this resource by themselves. They will need prompting, monitoring, encouragement, and coaching.

Why? Because this is all about habit formation, and in the early stages of acquiring new habits, practicing new skills consistently requires a significant investment of time and energy. Furthermore, many teenagers need to be persuaded that this investment will pay off in improved academic performance. We're not sure there is any shortcut that allows one to bypass the practice involved. That's where a teacher, coach, or tutor comes in—it's your job to make sure the teens you're working with engage in this practice on a daily basis, until the routine is so internalized that students continue with it on their own almost without thinking. That may take a while.

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The planner has a number of sections to it, each of which can be used separately if that suits your purpose. To help you navigate the materials and determine the best way to use the planner for the student(s) you have in mind, we recommend that you read through the planner to familiarize yourself with all the sections and the resources available.

The first three sections can serve as a standalone workbook for helping students learn more about themselves as learners and practice goal setting and self-evaluation. It also gives them tools and templates for handling academic tasks such as studying for tests and planning long-term projects. Here are some tips for using these sections:

- Parts I and II in particular (“Understanding Your Executive Skills Profile” and “Goal Setting”) lend themselves to being completed over the course of several sessions. If you choose to do this, each session should begin with a review of what was done at the previous session. You might start with an open-ended question (e.g., “So what do you remember we covered in the last session?”) to see what the student recalls (tapping into working memory).

- Students in the early stages of understanding executive skills often give themselves higher scores on the Executive Skills Questionnaire than a teacher or parent might. This usually means that they don’t have a full grasp of the skills and may be taking an optimistic (read *unrealistic*) view of themselves. We don’t recommend you challenge their ratings, but you may want to suggest that their ratings may change over time as the school year goes along and they learn more about themselves.

- In contrast, we often find that students endorse a large number of problems on the Executive Skills Problem Checklist. That’s why we have them go back and select the top three problems as a starting point toward tackling their weaknesses. If they check off quite a few problems falling in only a few executive skills categories, you may want to point this out to them and ask if they want to create a goal that addresses one of those weak areas, even if none of their top three problems falls in those executive skills domains.

- At the end of the Executive Skills Problem Checklist there’s a space for students to consider how they can use their executive skills strengths to help them achieve their goals. This should not be overlooked. Many students with executive skills challenges feel discouraged, so reminding them that they have strengths they can draw on may counteract that feeling. In addition, their strengths really can be used to help them work around or overcome weaknesses. If they are good at planning, for instance, they can be reminded that building a plan with a start time might help them combat their problems with task initiation. If they’re good at response inhibition, they can use this to avoid the temptations that compete with studying.

- Sometimes we find it helpful to have parents fill out the Executive Skills Problem Checklist for their son or daughter and then compare their ratings to those their child gave him- or herself. We’ve found that surprisingly often parents and kids agree on the top three problems—or they select very similar items. This gives the parent a role to play in the process (which is sometimes helpful as parents struggle to pull back from a micromanager role they may have played in the past), but it’s helpful to remind parents that the student gets to choose which skill or problem he or she wants to address first.

■ Part III includes strategies and templates to address the most common kinds of assignments and school-related tasks we ask kids to do. We've included several copies of the first three templates (and if you've purchased the planner, you'll get access to a web-page where you can download additional copies), because these are tasks that recur often and because students can refer back to templates they completed for earlier assignments to remind them how the process works and to give them models to work from. In one of your early sessions, you and the student might briefly look over all the strategies available in this portion just so the student knows they're there. As your work with students progresses, you can refer them to specific strategies that might address a problem they encounter.

This brings us to Part IV, the planner itself. Based on feedback we received from users of the first edition of this planner, we have made a number of changes. First, we've moved it to the back of the planner, so that it's out of the way if the planner is primarily being used as a workbook. Second, rather than asking students to note specific assignment directions, we've transformed this section into a set of to-do lists, combined with a way to keep track of deadlines. Most students have other ways of recording assignment instructions, such as using online school web portals, smartphone apps, laptop calendars, course syllabi provided by instructors, or smartphone photographs of the assignments listed on the classroom blackboard or whiteboard. Often the biggest challenge for students is just keeping track of everything they have to do and when each assignment is due.

Here are tips for using Part IV:

■ If students are using this portion of the planner, we recommend they write down what the marking period goal is at the beginning of each week (just as a reminder to keep it fresh). They should then write down everything they can think of that needs to be accomplished that week. We sometimes persuade students of the value of this exercise by describing it as "off-loading." If it's down on paper, the brain doesn't have to hold onto it (where it has a greater chance of getting lost). This section serves as the *weekly* to-do list.

■ As the week progresses, students should list what tasks have to be done each day in the Daily Tasks section. Mostly, this means jotting down which subjects have homework due tomorrow, but students should also include any activities they have to do related to long-term assignments or studying for tests.

■ The Daily Reminders section is another way of prompting students to think about things they have to remember to do that day. It may include something pulled down from the weekly tasks section, or it may be something that comes up over the course of the day that they don't want to forget, such as an instruction by a parent given early in the morning (e.g., "Don't forget you're babysitting your little brother after school!").

■ The Monthly Planner may feel like an afterthought or a redundancy, but it's an important part of the process. Unfortunately, it means writing some assignments in two places because long-term assignments or tests should be noted in both the Daily/Weekly Planner and the Monthly Planner on their due date. As part of your daily coaching sessions, you should prompt students to check the Monthly Planner just to remind themselves of what's coming up. If students have trouble breaking down long-term assignments into subtasks,

the Monthly Planner could be used for this purpose (perhaps in conjunction with the Long-Term-Project Planning Form included in Part III of the planner).

- Students should get in the habit of checking off all tasks as soon as they're accomplished. This includes tasks written in the monthly, weekly, and daily sections. This may sound annoying, but many students take a great deal of satisfaction in crossing things off their lists. Plus, it's a way to keep track of what's left to be done. We also recommend two notations for assignments that need to be handed in: checking something off to indicate the task is finished, and then drawing a line through the task when it's actually handed in. If remembering to hand in assignments is a problem for the students you work with, then a prompt can be built into your coaching sessions to remind them to note that the work has not only been completed, but has been handed in to the teacher.

### Guidance for Working with Middle School Students

Executive skills take 25 years to reach full maturation. It's important to remember that by middle school students are, at best, about halfway there. In particular, later developing skills such as planning, time management, metacognition, and goal-directed persistence are in the very early stages of developing (at least as far as any of these skills apply to academic tasks). This planner provides structure for introducing these skills, but if you're working with this age group, it may be helpful to assume that the students you're working with may be quite limited in these skills and will need to be coached (and coaxed) to work on them. Some additional tips for this age group:

- Don't dwell on long-term goal setting. At this age, time horizons are quite short, and most students have at best a vague idea of what they want to do after high school. It's still a useful discussion to have, but we don't recommend pushing students toward specific long-term goals if they're not ready for that. The focus should be on marking period goals and making daily plans.

- The good news about middle school kids is that they're often more willing to take direction from adults. If you're a teacher and you're using this planner with your classes, you can require students to keep the planner up-to-date as one of your course requirements. As a way to build metacognitive skills, you could ask students to assess themselves as to how well they met this course requirement. At the end of the year, you may want to ask kids for feedback regarding planner use, and be sure to ask them how it could be improved to better meet their needs, as this, too, encourages metacognition. And feel free to pass their suggestions along to us, as we may be able to incorporate their ideas into future revisions.

- If you're a coach and not employed by the school districts your students attend, you may find it helpful to explain to your students' teachers that you are using an Academic Planner to help build executive skills. Ask for their cooperation. Making sure students have time to write down assignments at the end of the class is a classroom accommodation that most teachers are willing to do if they understand its importance.

### Troubleshooting

Interventions most commonly fail for a few basic reasons: (1) they're too complicated; (2) they take too much time; (3) they're too ambitious; or (4) over time people drop the ball and let them lapse.

The easiest solution to all of these problems is to scale back. Together with the student you're working with, identify one small step students might take on a daily basis. Could they identify a daily goal that wouldn't take more than 10 minutes to do? If so, have them make a plan—when in the day they will spend those 10 minutes, what cues they will use to remind them, what they can say to themselves to encourage them to stick with their plan, and what small reward they could give themselves for their daily successes. With a cushion of small but genuine successes, students gain confidence in themselves and are often willing to take on more goals and bigger challenges. This planner can still serve as a vehicle for recording goals and monitoring progress, but you may have to set aside some of the other uses the planner was designed for.

If you haven't picked this up already in what we've written, getting students to use this planner requires frequent contacts. Weekly sessions generally don't work. Daily sessions are ideal, but if that's not realistic, then daily contact through electronic media (for example, texting) should be considered. Contacts can be faded over time as students internalize the skills they're practicing, but the fading should occur slowly.

We hope you and your students find this planner helpful. Please visit our website ([www.smartbutscatteredkids.com](http://www.smartbutscatteredkids.com)) for additional resources.

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