



User's Guide to the Work-Smart Academic Planner

WRITE IT DOWN, GET IT DONE

Thank you for purchasing *The Work-Smart Academic Planner*. We think you will find it provides much more for students in the way of supports and management systems than the typical academic planner. 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 the amount of effort and consistency required to practice new skills 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.

The planner has a number of sections to it, and it may appear a bit daunting, even to

an adult. 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 the following:

- Read through the planner to familiarize yourself with all the sections and the resources available. Depending on the student you're working with, you may want to introduce elements gradually—or even skip sections because they are not relevant or because the student you're working with is not ready for some components. 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 (for example, “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 recommend that you don't challenge their ratings, but you may want to suggest that as the school year goes along they may learn more about themselves and their ratings may change over time.

- 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 skill 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 skill domains.

- 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 micro-manager 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.

- As you move on to the Daily Planner section (Part III), you have some choices to make. The first choice is to decide how the dates will be entered in the planner, as this planner is undated in its current form. You could choose to fill in the planner yourself to make sure the dates are accurate rather than asking the student to perform a task he or she is likely to see as tedious. Or you could supervise as the student fills in the dates. If you choose this approach, we recommend that you complete the planner one marking period at a time rather than all at once. If you are using the planner with groups of students, have them work in pairs to make sure they're getting the dates correct.

- Be aware that there will be a few months in this planner that, depending on what

year the planner is being used, include an extra week. Students should skip the extra week and go on to the next month.

- Decide with your student how he or she will use the Daily Planner section. There are many different ways to note assignments. For instance, some teachers post all homework online so it's not necessary for the student to write down much other than the subject he or she has homework in. Others hand out weekly syllabi that students can refer to. If the homework assignments are written on the blackboard, students may prefer to take a picture of the assignment with their smartphones. They could then make a notation (for example, "pic") in the Daily Planner to remind them that they have taken a picture.

- Each subject line in the Daily Planner asks the student several questions about the homework assignment (for example, when he or she will start it, whether he or she has all the materials needed, how long it will take, who he or she can contact for help). These questions link to specific executive skills and may not be relevant for the student you're working with. Together you and your student should look at the questions and decide which ones can be ignored and which are important to think about as the student is writing down the homework assignment. You may want to refer back to items checked in the Executive Skills Problem Checklist to see whether the questions posed match problems the student has already reported. In the beginning, even though you think it would be useful, some students may balk at answering these questions because they see it as too much work or not helpful. Don't push them. As time goes on, if they run into trouble, you may be able to help them see that cueing themselves by asking specific questions may enable them to avoid trouble.

- At the top of each page in the Daily Planner, students identify the long-term goals they're working on. This space should be filled at the beginning of each week as a way to remind students what they're working toward. The Daily Reflection portion at the bottom of each day can be used to have the student reflect on how his or her actions that day were or were not consistent with the long-term goals. If it's easier, students could rate each day on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 ("I totally lost track of my long-term goal") to 5 ("I was completely on target"). Even simpler, a ✓+, ✓, or ✓- system might be used.

- You will see that we kept the weekends a little looser. Trying to get kids to plan their weekends as precisely as they plan school nights may lead them to feel boxed in or over-regimented, unpleasant feelings they are likely to try to avoid. Besides, learning to plan within a looser time frame is an important skill to develop, too—it's more like what will be expected of them in college, so it's a good skill to practice now.

- 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 Planner and the Monthly Planner on the 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 IV of the planner).

■ This brings us to Part IV. This section of the planner 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 webpage 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.

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 (smartbutscatteredkids.com) for additional resources.

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