Wunderlist For Writers

How To Use The To-Do List Software For All Of Your Writing Projects

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Preface

Wunderlist was first released in 2011, as a cloud-based task management programme that could be accessed via a web browser or through dedicated apps for Windows, Apple and Linux computers. Since then, the company behind it, 6Wunderkinder, based in Berlin, has created versions for iOS (iPhone and iPad), Android, Kindle Fire, Chromebook and Windows phones and tablets. In July 2014, Wunderlist 3 was launched which enabled real-time syncing between devices.

What this all means is that it's now possible to access all of your to-do lists stored on Wunderlist wherever you are, whatever device you happen to have to hand. And it doesn't matter if you're not connected to the Internet at any particular time. Your device will simply synchronise its data with your online account the next time it can connect to the World Wide Web.

So, when I'm out getting some fresh air and stretching my legs after being hunched up over the keyboard all morning and I suddenly realise there's something I need to do on a project, but all I have with me is my mobile phone, I can still add the task via the app on the device as I think about it … even if there's no mobile phone/Internet signal. When I get back to my desk my smartphone connects with my account, synchronises the data, and the new task appears on my main desktop app. It's useful being able to add something to a list straightaway, rather than having to remember it for when I get back to my desk. (For writers, freeing our minds of things to do gives us the space to dream up new ideas.)

Wunderlist enables us to sort our tasks into projects, give them due dates, add notes, add files, and it also keeps a note of when the task was completed.
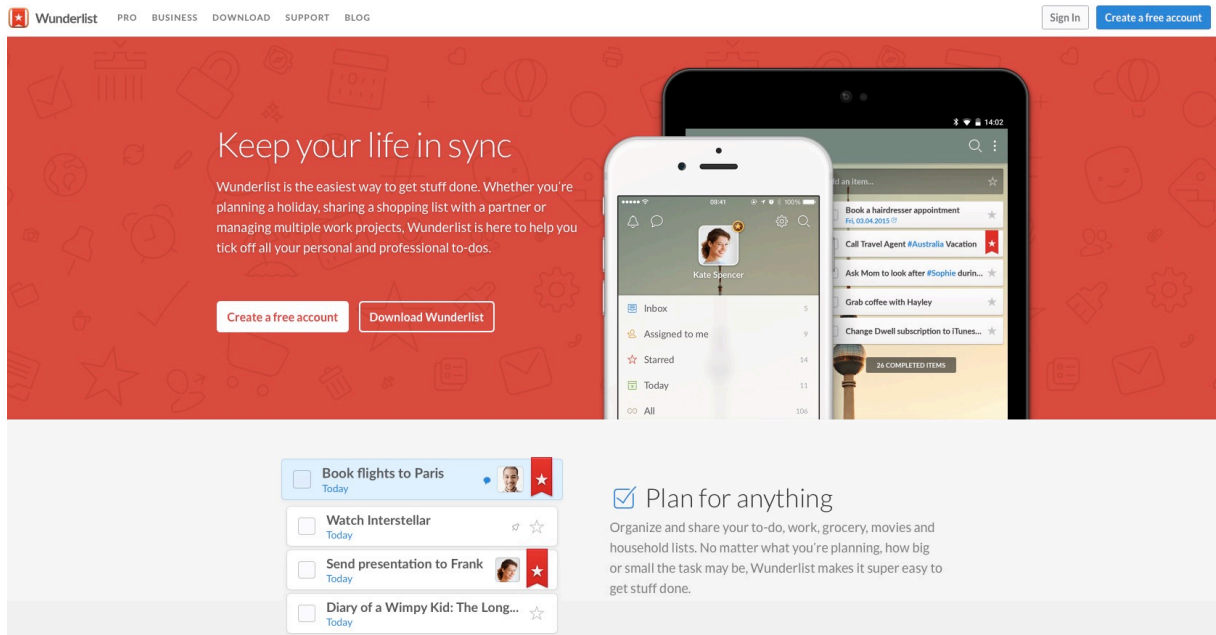
Best of all, Wunderlist is free. (There are paid versions, but they're more suited to smaller businesses that have staff, where it may be necessary to assign tasks to other team members. The whole point of being a writer is so we can sit in our isolated garret, on our own all day, worrying about what we've written, isn't it?)

I'm an Apple user, which means I've used screenshots from my web browser version and desktop version throughout this book. However, there's little difference between the Apple, Windows and Internet browser desktop versions of the app. The smartphone/tablet versions operate slightly differently, because the way we interact with these devices is different (i.e via the touch screen, as opposed to a keyboard) and their screen estate is smaller.

If you're not sure how to do something on the app version of the device you're using, check out Wunderlist's excellent **Getting Started** guide on its Support Pages (https://support.wunderlist.com) which explains how to do most things on all of the different operating systems and devices.

The first thing to do is go to Wunderlist's website at www.wunderlist.com, create an account, and download the relevant app for your desktop/laptop. You might also want to download the appropriate smartphone/tablet apps for your other devices.

Creating an account is easy. All you need is an email address and a password.

Once you've done that, you're ready to become an organised writer.

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Introduction

I like having lots of different writing projects on the go at any one time. There are two reasons for this:

1. I have loads of ideas and enjoy the variety of writing in different genres and for different markets,

2. Sometimes it's not always possible to move forward on one project because you're waiting for someone else to get back to you (interviewee, editor, publisher). Having lots of projects on the go means there's always something to work on. There should never be a moment for me to sit at my desk and think, "So, what am I going to do now?"

As the author of *The Positively Productive Writer* (ISBN: 9781846948510) I'm a firm believer in staying motivated. If I'm working on one project and I get stuck, I can always move across to another one. When writing is your main source of income you need to maximise your writing time. Therefore, knowing where you are, and what you need to do next, at any one moment on any of your writing projects is key.

For me, variety makes my day more interesting. I might spend a couple of hours working on a big project, such as a non-fiction book, or a novel. Then I might switch to writing a letter, or two, for a readers' letters page in a magazine, and then later I might crack on with an article, or short story.

Whatever the project is, whether it's a 50-word readers' letter or a 120,000-word novel, the only way to get it finished is to keep adding to it. To keep moving forward. Particularly first drafts. We all know that first drafts can be the most challenging, psychologically. That's when we hit most of the motivational buffers. *This is naff! Whatever made me think I could pull this off? This idea just isn't working.*

Once we've got that first draft finished, then we can really start working on it. As Anne Lamott says in her excellent book *Bird by Bird*:

… shitty first drafts. All good writers write them.

Getting that shitty first draft written is therefore vital. Rewriting is where the magic happens. So if you've already planned a series of opportunities for reviewing and rewriting your text then, psychologically, it's easier to accept that the first draft *can* be a shitty one. It takes the pressure off.

Several of my writing students moan about the fact that they're not in the right frame of mind to write. The Muse has not visited them today. That's because they're putting too much pressure on themselves to write *perfect* prose, first time, every time they sit down. In my experience, that self-imposed negative pressure kills creativity.

Once you accept that it's okay to write complete rubbish, and that no one else will ever see your shitty first draft, writing becomes easier. Try it!

With Freedom, Comes Planning

Of course, once you've given yourself the freedom to write whatever comes, whether it's perfect prose or mind-numbingly boring drivel, you then need to factor in some time to review it. Editing takes time. Which means if you have a deadline (perhaps a competition deadline, if not an editorial one) then you need to allow time for some revision and editing before that deadline. It's time to create some sort of plan.

Now, when I say *plan* I don't mean you have to create a detailed 75-page synopsis of *every* writing project you have. For me, it depends upon the type of project I'm working on. If I'm writing an article I'll bullet-point the key ideas I want to include in the piece and re-arrange them into the order that I feel works best. If I'm writing a short story I'll think of the key scenes I need to recount the tale from start to finish. But for bigger projects, such as novels and non-fiction books, I like to plan what's going to happen in each chapter. When it comes to novel writing, I've found my outlines have grown. Whereas before I would sketch out what needed to happen in each chapter, now I break this down to scene level.

And this is where Wunderlist comes in for me. It helps with that time-planning process. It records all of my projects and their associated deadlines, both for commissioned pieces, and for non-commissioned pieces. (This book was not commissioned, but I still set myself a deadline as to when I wanted the first draft completed by.) And within each project is a set of steps I need to take (my to-dos) and when I want to achieve them by.

So I don't sit down to write a novel. Nor do I sit down to write Chapter One. No. I sit down to write the first scene. And when I've written the entire first draft of a project I have other to-dos requiring me to edit that project … several times. And each time I tick something off, I know I'm getting closer to my goal of completing a writing project.

Milestone Markers

I use Wunderlist to set my key milestone markers. Milestones are like stepping stones. In *The Positively Productive Writer* I discuss how a writing project is like going on a long car journey. We know where we're starting from and we know our destination. For me, milestones are the motorway service station stops along the way. They're the key moments when we stop and look at the map and see how far we've come, and how much further there's still to go. Psychologically they're important because they show us that we're *travelling*; we're moving closer towards our goal.

Over the years, I've tried many different software programmes that monitor projects and lists. Productivity is big business, especially when it comes to computer software. It can also be

extremely complicated. Yes, some productivity software may enable chief executives to run multi-national companies, profiling any pinch-points in resource allocation, highlighting slipping buffer zones and … see, I know you're yawning already.

Writers don't need complicated list-managing software. Indeed, all we really need is pen and paper: items we should be carrying around with us all of the time anyway. But, as I know from experience, it's not always easy finding the *right* list to jot something down when a thought occurs to you. And then, after a while, I realise I need to do something else between steps two and three, so I draw an arrow and write in the margin *do this before moving onto to next point*. And once I've done this two or three times, I can't read my own writing, so I end up rewriting the list on a fresh sheet of paper. Which takes time. Another problem is that re-writing lists *feels* like writing, even though it isn't. Not really. (It's not writing that is moving a project forward, is it?)

So after many years of false starts, with different productivity software, I've settled on a system that works well for me: Wunderlist.

Wunderlist for Writers will show you how *I* use the software to manage all of my different writing projects. If you've never used list-managing software, I think *Wunderlist* is one of the easiest programmes to use. If you already use a different piece of productivity software, you may find the way I use Wunderlist works just as well for your software programme of choice. But if you haven't already, I'd recommend giving Wunderlist a try. You've nothing to lose.

At the end of the day, list-managing software should help us get more writing done. Because writing is what makes us writers.

Chapter 1 - Creating Your First List

The first time you download and open Wunderlist, or log into your account using an online browser, you are faced with an empty screen, albeit one filled with a pretty picture.
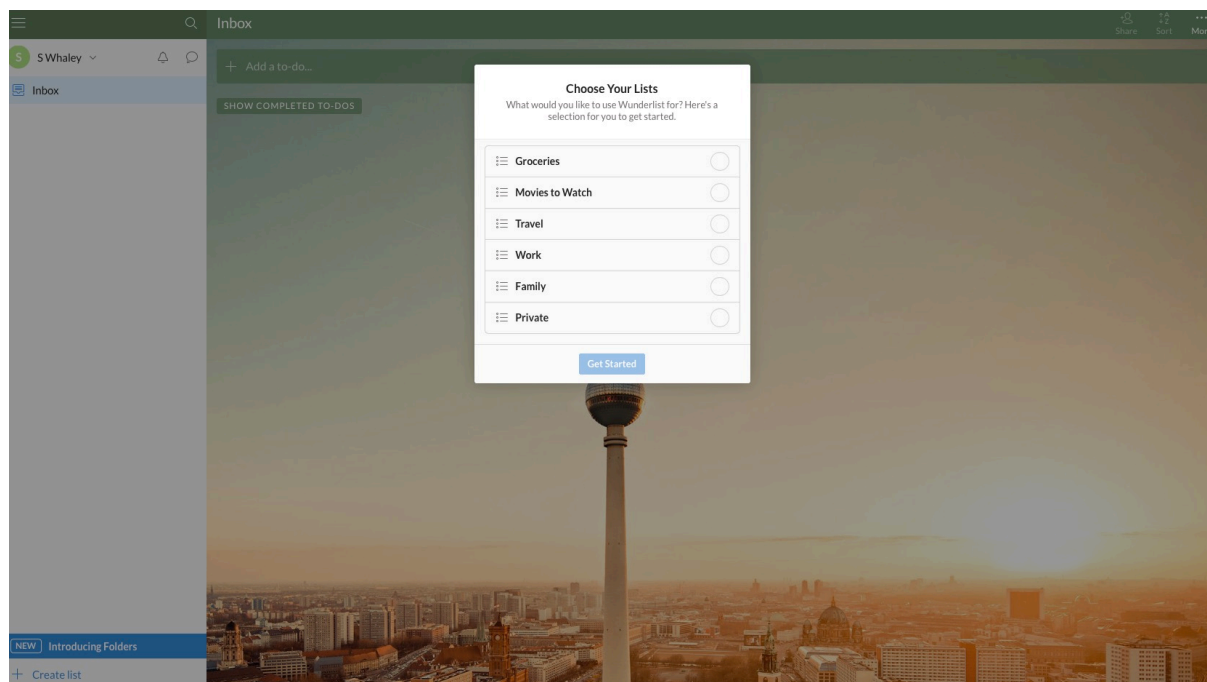
Don't worry too much about the picture at the moment. You can change it, as we'll see at the end of this book. You'll also see that Wunderlist offers a selection of lists to help get you started. (You may need to select one to get started, so pick anything, it doesn't really matter.)

All of your lists appear on the left hand side of the screen, under your name. The first list is called **Inbox**, and then any other lists you create will show up under here. The main part of the screen is where all of your to-dos will be displayed for each particular list, or project.

Think of the **Inbox** like your email inbox. This is where everything can go to start off with, until you can decide where it best sits. This can be a great dumping ground for everything that you need to do. Whenever you think of something that needs doing, just enter it into your **Inbox** to get it out of your brain, so that you can carry on with whatever it is you are doing.

In fact, productivity guru David Allen (author of *Getting Things Done - ISBN: 9780749922641*) recommends that, when you make the decision to be more organised, the first step you should take is an information dump. This is where you just list everything that you need to do. Empty your brain. Don't worry about structure, or whether any items are connected, just get them out of your head and into your **Inbox**.

This is your first list. *Feed the cat, write next novel, query pitch with editor, learn to fly* … it doesn't matter what it is, just get it down and out of your head.

The thinking behind this information dump is that your brain is not some huge filing cabinet. You shouldn't be storing all of this information in your head. Once it's down on paper (or preferably on Wunderlist, as that's what this book is about), your brain is then left to do what comes naturally: *think*. And let's face it, as writers, that's what we want our brains to do. Think, and be creative. This is why being a little more organised can help us become more productive writers.

To start getting all of these to-dos out of your head, simply click in the box where you see *Add a to-do* and type something. Then press RETURN. As soon as you press RETURN the item is created as a to-do, and the space above is ready for you to enter a new to-do.
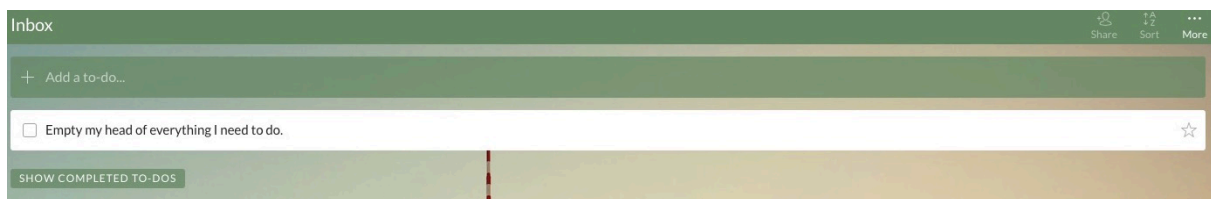
Keep going. Write down *everything* that comes into your head, that you know you need to do or would like to do at some point, until you can't think of anything else.

Wunderlist keeps a track of how many to-dos you have in any list at any one time, and displays this as counter on the left hand side of the screen, next to the list name.
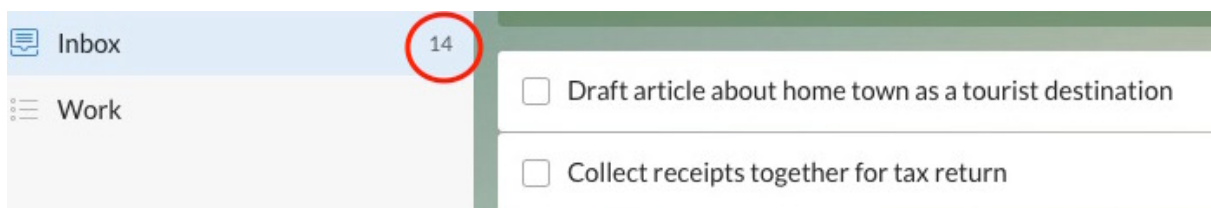
At the moment I've added 14 items in my Inbox list. They are:

1. Draft article about home town as a tourist destination.

2. Collect receipts together for tax return.

3. Renew subscription to magazine.

4. Start planning next holiday.

5. Book car for MOT.

6. Read through research collated on trip to local museum.

7. Submit short story to competition.

8. Review / edit short story.

9. Write letter to Readers' Letter page of Country Life.

10. Pitch idea to editor at local county magazine.

11. Get frozen dinner out of freezer.

12. Visit Museum of Moving Images for next novel.

13. Start planning next novel.

14. Empty my head of everything I need to do.

Every to-do has a checkbox next to it on the left-hand side. When you've actioned that item, simply click in the checkbox. Now that I've emptied my head of everything I need to do (which, actually, wasn't much!), I can tick off item number 14. You'll hear a satisfying 'ding', and then the to-do will disappear from your list.

Although it has disappeared from your list, it has not disappeared completely. At the bottom of your list is a toggle button: **Show Completed To-Dos**.

Click on this and it will display all of your to-dos that you've ticked off.
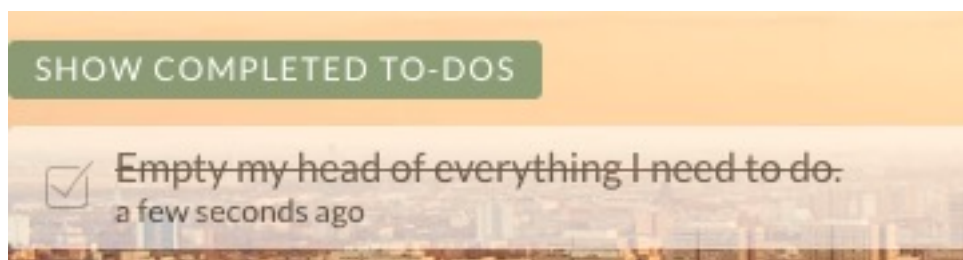
To hide the completed to-dos simply click on the button again and they'll disappear from sight. I usually keep them hidden, because once they've been completed I focus on the next to-do that needs tackling. However, there are times when it's necessary to check when something was completed, so having the information just a click away is extremely useful.

And that's how easy it is to create a list in your inbox. It's no different to sitting down with a blank sheet of paper and writing down everything that you have to do on that. However, instead of working from one giant list, Wunderlist allows us to create lots of lists: one for every project. And that's what we shall look at next.