

# Beginning the Trip into Adulthood: Step One, Get Organized

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In this article, Mackenzie explores the genre of Bullet Journaling. She examines the genre through the seven elements of cultural-historical activity theory. Mackenzie also looks at how a system like the Bullet Journal can help to organize the life of anyone who chooses to use it by sharing her own adventures using the system.

If you know me, then you probably know that I am not constantly on top of things. I am a procrastinator and, for a long time, this method worked for me. I got good at doing things last minute and doing them well. It was only when I was getting ready to begin my senior year that I figured out that I needed to change something. I would have a lot more on my plate with a full class load, an internship, a job, and responsibilities that I have for my sorority. An ordinary planner like most college students use was not working for me because I would not look at it every day. I would write assignments, events, and responsibilities in the planner ahead of time and then forget about it. There were times that my planner was not opened for a week at a time. On top of not being able to use a planner, I knew that I couldn't afford to watch Netflix all day and put off any homework until the last second. My final year of school would not be a fun one if I kept up my tendency toward procrastination. To try and fix my dishonorable ways, I researched organization techniques that work well for students. The one thing that I kept seeing come up in almost all of my research was the Bullet Journal.

The Bullet Journal, as described by the creator Ryder Carroll on his website, is "a customizable and forgiving organization system. It can be your

to-do list, sketchbook, notebook, and diary, but most likely it will be all of the above. It will teach you to do more with less” (Carroll, “The System”). This journaling system truly is everything rolled into one. Since I have started using it, it has been my calendar, my to-do list, a journal, an assignment organizer, and more. The system is simple and forgiving if you find yourself messing up or trying something new. There are also many resources for ideas on how it can be used to continue to improve aspects of your life and your organization skills. To start off, I will take you through some of the basics of starting a Bullet Journal before getting into the genre itself and how it can help you keep your life organized and relatively stress free.

### • Learn what a Bullet Journal is

A Bullet Journal is fairly simple to set up. There is a video that can be found on the official Bullet Journal website, [bulletjournal.com](http://bulletjournal.com), that takes you through each and every step and explains their meaning and use. There are other guides on blogs revolving around the Bullet Journal as well as on places like Pinterest, YouTube, and even Instagram. The first step is to get a journal or notebook. There are journals specifically made for this type of journaling that are available for purchase on the Bullet Journal website but it is not necessary to use this type of book. A normal notebook or journal bought at any store will work. The journal does not come with a ready-made template; the pages

are empty until the owner adds something to it. One suggestion that I have seen on several start-up guides is to get a book that is on the smaller side so it will be easy to take with you on the go should you need to.

The first thing to add to your Bullet Journal is an index page. You will most likely only need two pages for this right at the beginning of your book. The index is something that you will add to as you add to your journal. It will turn into more of a table of contents that you can reference if you are ever looking for something specific in your journal. Something else to add in the beginning of your book is a key of symbols and markings that you will use throughout your journal. For each thing that you write down in your journal there are special symbols and types of bullet

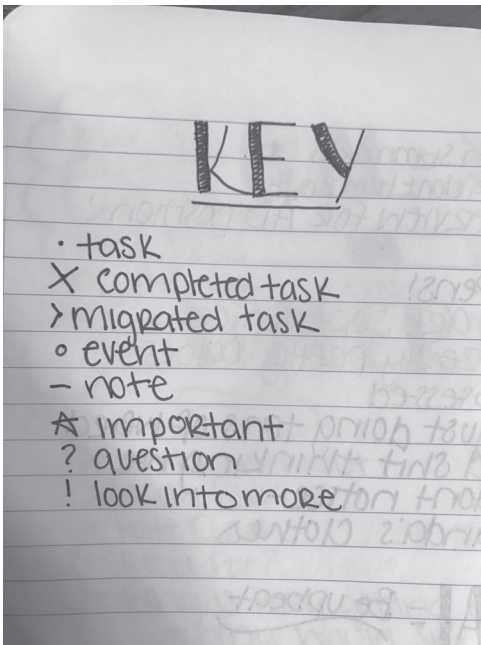


Figure 1: Basic symbols and bullet points used to denote tasks, events, etc., in a Bullet Journal.

points used which can be seen in Figure 1. This is commonly in the front of your journal so it can be referenced or added to as you continue to use your Bullet Journal.

Next, you want to section a few pages into halves or thirds. This will be your Future Log. Each section will be labeled a different month and you can record as many months ahead as you want. It all depends on how long you will be using that journal. If you think that you will use it for six months, then only put six months in your Future Log and if you think that you will be using it for longer than feel free to include more. This section allows you to record events, deadlines, etc., in advance so you can reference them later when creating your Monthly Log at the beginning of each month.

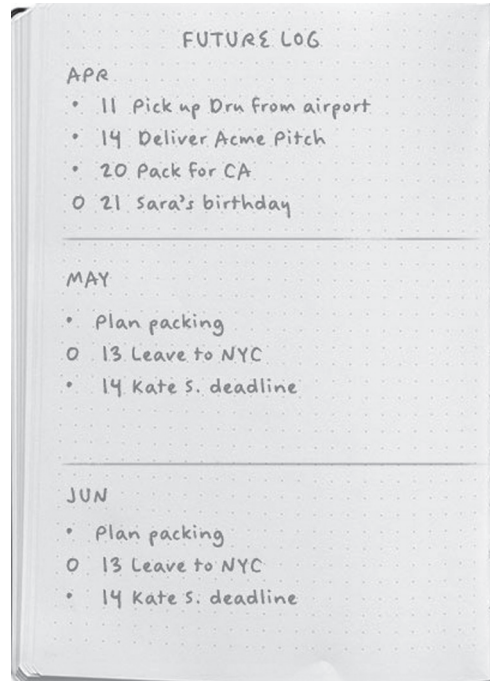


Figure 2: Example of a Future Log from Bulletjournal.com.

The Monthly Log will take up a page or two at the start of each month. On one page, I write down the date and first initial of the day for the entire month down the side of the page, leaving room for me to write down events and/or deadlines that I will need to remember. This is when I will reference my Future Log and then transfer the information to my Monthly Log. I will usually do this on the last day of a month so I am ready the next day to start out the new month. Something great to include on the opposite page from the Monthly Log is a monthly task list. These are tasks that you will not be completing in one day. Instead, they might take you a few days or weeks. You can also include some overall goals that you might have for that month like staying positive or being productive with your time. For example, if I have a large assignment due I will write down my goal grade for the assignment.

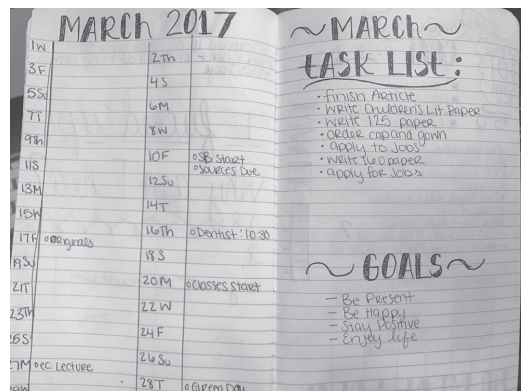


Figure 3: My Monthly Log that I create at the start of every month.

Next comes the Daily Logs. These are on the pages following the Monthly Log. To create your Daily Log, you write the date however you wish and then write down any tasks or events that you have that day. These tasks are things that you want to or can get done in one day. You can also write down any

thoughts and ideas that you have throughout the day that you might want to revisit later. Don't feel any pressure to make these super pretty and neat; if you write quickly and a little messily and it works for you, then that is perfectly fine. Another thing that you might find yourself using are Collections. These are tasks, events, ideas, or thoughts that are all related by a common theme or purpose. You can devote a page or multiple pages to a collection to avoid having these thoughts and ideas scattered throughout your Bullet Journal. Putting the page number and title of the collection in your index will help you find it whenever you need. Collections can be about anything at all. Some examples that I use are reading lists, movie lists, and packing lists. One last tip on starting a Bullet Journal before we move on is to start simple. Start with the guide on [bulletjournal.com](http://bulletjournal.com) and then expand and add things later once you have a greater understanding of the system and how it works for you.

### **–What is so great about the Bullet Journal?**

So, what is the big deal? Why is the Bullet Journal so great? The short answer, in my opinion, is that it helps to organize your life while also allowing you to be as creative and free as you would like. The long answer has many more components and illuminates more reasons why the Bullet Journal is useful and beneficial to whoever chooses to use it. To make it easier to analyze, I am going to look at the Bullet Journal through the elements of the cultural-historical activity theory or CHAT. Not all of the elements of CHAT are completely relevant to the Bullet Journal (or the person using it) but I will mention all of them, spending more time on some rather than others.

The **production** (or the ways and means that a text is produced) of each individual Bullet Journal is different and completely under the control of the user and writer. The basic format, as I mentioned before, can be found in multiple places online: [bulletjournal.com](http://bulletjournal.com), [tinyrayofsunshine.com](http://tinyrayofsunshine.com), and Boho Berry's YouTube channel being a few of them. Most people will say to start with this simple layout and then keep your journal fairly simple while you are familiarizing yourself with the ins and outs of the system. From there, once you feel that you are comfortable with what the Bullet Journal is, the journal can be *anything* you want and you can change, alter, add to, or improve upon the format based on what works best for you. You can change anything that you want in your Bullet Journal so that it fits your schedule, personality, or whatever other uses that you have for the journal, better. Maybe your journal is being used for a hobby that requires some planning or preparation, or maybe you are only using the journal for work purposes and it has no use in your everyday life. No matter what you are using the journal for, it can be adjusted to your own personal needs. The basic format given by Ryder Carroll is the more simplified way to Bullet Journal, and it is purposely shown

in this straightforward way to give the new user time to get used to the Bullet Journal and its uses and methods before the user can make it their own.

When I first started my Bullet Journal I used this simple format for about a month and a half before I felt comfortable enough to start making changes. I started out making slight changes to ease myself into it, and more often than not, my changes were made on a trial and error basis. I would try something because I thought that it would fit my needs better, and then I would see if my idea actually worked the way that I wanted it to and if it had merit to help me. Some things that I was adding had to be altered and adjusted several times before it functioned as I wanted it to. The Bullet Journal is a very forgiving genre. At no point did I feel like I was messing anything up by trying different things. Now, my Bullet Journal is completely my own, and although there are still traces of the original layout there, I have added my own spin on it (see Figure 4). So far it has been working great for me. The Bullet Journal allows me to do whatever I want with it and use it in whatever ways that I wish. I have absolute control over everything.

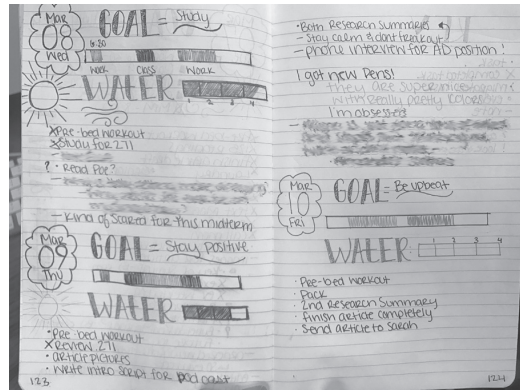


Figure 4: The way that I currently format all of my days. I still add adjustments periodically.

To take you through an example of some of the things that I tried using trial and error, one of the things that I added to my journal is a Weekly Log. This is something that I craft every week, usually on Sunday nights or Monday mornings. It started out with me adding a small weekly calendar that allowed me to see what was coming up in the next week. I used this to write down events and deadlines mostly. I also made sure to leave some space for me to write down anything that I needed to remember or do just before an event or deadline. This overview helped me to stay organized and it is something that I implemented over time. It took me a few weeks to get my Weekly Log looking and functioning how I wanted it to. At first, I simply wrote each day down and then listed what was happening that day followed by little things that I needed

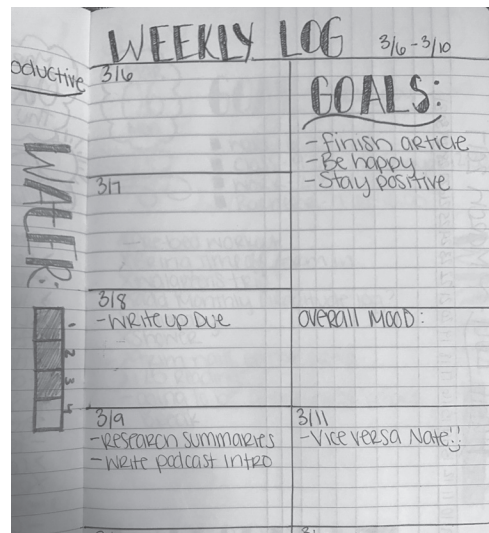


Figure 5: Example of what my Weekly Log is currently like and what I now include.

to remember that were related to something happening that day. I ended up not liking this format at all. It got to be very messy and it did not look the least bit structured or organized. Over the next few weeks I changed how I formatted the Weekly Log until I got the result that I wanted.

Now, I have a page sectioned off into the seven days of the week with a little bit of room left over for various notes about the week (see Figure 5). Everything is listed in order of occurrence. Since I have arrived at this format for my Weekly Log, it has worked really well for me. I like being able to go over my entire week, knowing what my responsibilities are and what my schedule looks like. I also enjoy creating my Weekly Log every week because it gives me a sense of peace to organize my week and place things in their own little box. It is nice knowing that I do not have to follow someone else's format for their journal exactly; I can do what I want without fear of anything because it is my journal, and all that really matters is that I like the way that it looks and that it works well for me and my needs.

It is entirely up to the holder of the journal what things to use when writing in the journal. You can include memories in the form of objects taped to or pressed between the pages, or even pictures kept on the page that corresponds to the date a memory happened. It is also your decision what utensils to use. If there is a pen or collection of writing instruments that you really like, it is completely up to you if you use them for your journal or if you use number 2 pencils. Everything that goes into the production of the Bullet Journal is under the control of the user and it makes the journal more personable.

**Representation** is about how the creator of something thinks about and plans it. It also factors in things that might affect how people think about it. In relation to the Bullet Journal, representation is mostly in the mind of the person who is creating and using their personal Bullet Journal. How are you thinking of changing or adding something? Why are you changing or adding something? What is going to be the most efficient way to use your journal? Your personal schedule comes into play here as well. Most likely, you will be changing or adding something to your journal so that it will work better with your schedule and what you are doing in your life. In this way, your schedule will probably be a large influence on how you will think about your Bullet Journal, especially when you are still making it fit your needs and changing it semi-regularly.

My schedule ended up being so busy that I found myself forgetting about things or getting dates wrong. This was a big factor in my decision to add a Weekly Log to my journal. I needed to be able to keep everything straight in my head. My next step was to think about the best way to achieve this using my Bullet Journal. Did I want to write events and important things down every single day? I ruled that option out fairly quickly because I thought that it would

clutter up my every day space and I wanted to keep my journal looking neat and clean. What I needed was a way to look at everything all at once without taking up extra space on each individual day. This is how I came up with the idea of putting everything important for the week on its own page at the start of every week. From there, as I mentioned before, there was some experimenting with how everything would be organized and how I would make it look clean and productive. This is when trial and error came in rather than spending a lot of time thinking about my options. I found that it would be better to just try something out even if it does not work right away and then move on, if needed, to other options or continue to tweak one option until it did work.

Another aspect of Bullet Journaling that many will think about and add to their journal, myself included, is colors. Minimalists who use Bullet Journals will commonly only use black ink to keep things simple. However, others might color coordinate things in their journal. I use different colors for my daily schedule that I put at the top of all of my Daily Logs. I didn't have anything specific in mind when I chose what colors to use for what events although others might choose colors for reasons that make sense for them. I chose to use pink for work, purple for classes, green for my internship, and blue for anything I had to do outside of class that involves schoolwork like group project meetings or study sessions at the library. Having these colors to represent activities that I have throughout the day helps me keep everything straight. Now, I only have to glance at it to know what is going on that day or what is coming next.

**Distribution** and **socialization** work hand in hand with the Bullet Journal. Most would not want to distribute their personal journal because it is very personal and no one wants their thoughts and feelings left out for the world. However, there are a few people out there who post images of their journals online for others to learn from. There is an extensive community that has emerged around the Bullet Journal. Most of the time, any information on the shared pages that is personal will be blurred out using photo editing software. They are posting pictures of their journal to share formats, structure, and ideas. They are not sharing these images to share their personal information. In this way, these people are distributing parts of their journals without sharing personal information about them. Another aspect of distribution relates to people having the ability to purchase the official Bullet Journal notebook on [bulletjournal.com](http://bulletjournal.com). The journal is made by Leuchtturm1917. Ryder Carroll and Leuchtturm teamed up to create a journal specifically for the Bullet Journal. It is the same size and kind as their A5 journal with a few adjustments. The official Bullet Journal has an extra bookmark, pages marked at the beginning for the index, key, and future logs. It also features a guide at the back of the book, should you need it. There are many that choose to use this journal and it is available to purchase online.

Returning to the vast community of Bullet Journalists, three blogs that I have found and enjoy are [tinrayofsunshine.com](http://tinrayofsunshine.com), [prettyprintsandpaper.com](http://prettyprintsandpaper.com), and [bohoberry.com](http://bohoberry.com). All three of the women that run these blogs use the Bullet Journal. Each pose ways to use the Bullet Journal that other users might not immediately think of. They also do things that are more interactive like monthly challenges that help to improve your handwriting, your Bullet Journal, or to help you become more productive. These challenges are interactive because, if you choose to, you can post a picture of your status with the challenges with a certain hashtag and your picture might be reposted by one of them.



Figure 6: Home page of Bohoberry.com.

All three of these bloggers offer forums and comment options on their sites. In these places, people are free to talk about their own experiences, ask questions, and even meet other people who are also interested in Bullet Journaling. These three blogs and more like them have created a community of Bullet Journalists that continues to grow. Communities like this allow people to socialize about ideas, tips, things that work well, things that might not work well, etc., which ensures that the community will always be growing and that innovative ideas will always emerge. The genre of Bullet Journaling will continue to grow and evolve. Without this community that I have talked about, there is a chance that the Bullet Journal would float to the background and eventually cease to exist. However, by allowing people to communicate and continue to generate new ideas, the journal will live on. This community truly is amazing. Everyone is very helpful and supportive. They are always available to help and discover something new.

**Reception** comes into play after socialization because it is all about how something is taken up and used by others and how they might change it. Most start in the same place with the Bullet Journal, but as I mentioned before, where it goes from there is up to the user. One person might choose to use their collections to record their sleep patterns and include a food log, while another might record movies that they want to see and then give them a rating so they will always know if they liked a movie or not.



Recently, in the first days of the new year, I was looking through some of the **Bullet Journal** blogs that I follow and came across an article on [bulletjournal.com](http://bulletjournal.com) written by the creator and author of [tinyrayofsunshine.com](http://tinyrayofsunshine.com) about the top five ideas that emerged for the **Bullet Journal** in 2016. For each item on the list there were multiple examples of how different people implemented the idea into their journal. There were images of several different journals submitted by the owners to demonstrate the way in which they did something new and creative. It is helpful to have articles like this because it lets people know that they can take this idea that they like and make it their own. These articles also show reception in progress. Each of these people featured in the article had the same general idea or heard about it somewhere and then went about implementing it in different ways. Everyone's reception and use of something is going to be a little bit different which is part of what makes the **Bullet Journal** so amazing. No two journals will be the same; they are entirely personalized.

The actual physical thing that you engage in while creating your **Bullet Journal** is **activity**. The main activity that you are doing is putting some kind of writing utensil to paper and writing. But what else do you do? Do you draw things in your journal? Do you talk to others while you are writing? Are you online when you write to find new ideas? There are many things that activity can encompass and it will be different for everyone. One of the reasons that **Bullet Journaling** has worked so well for me is because of activity. I got myself into a habit of sitting down and writing in my journal every morning while I eat breakfast. I repeat this same action every day and now I am conditioned to write every morning and, as a result, I almost never forget. As I mentioned earlier, I also have made a habit of creating my **Weekly Log** the night before a new week begins so I am prepared for the next day and the week ahead. If I did not have these routines then I would probably find myself forgetting to use my **Bullet Journal** and it would not have been as effective in helping me. Activity has been something that continues to draw me toward the **Bullet Journal** and my continued use of it. It has probably had a considerable influence on others who use the journal too, especially if they like routine.

The best part about **ecology** (in relation to the **Bullet Journal**) is that it doesn't really matter that much. You do not have to purchase certain expensive materials if you do not wish to. You can use a spiral-bound notebook and cheap pens if you want. I definitely use the cheap pens because I still am a broke college student and I am not about to spend my money on nice pens until I have an actual income. The **Bullet Journal** is also a physical thing that can be used mostly anywhere and everywhere. You never have to worry about not being able to access your journal because if you have your journal and a pen or pencil with you then you will never have a problem. You do not need to be able to access the internet or any kind of technology in order to access your **Bullet Journal**.

## –Can the Bullet Journal really help?

Looking at the Bullet Journal using CHAT, it is easy to see that it is a diverse and flexible genre. There are many things that you can do with it, and it can be adapted to fit and work for anyone, no matter what they are using it for. Jessica

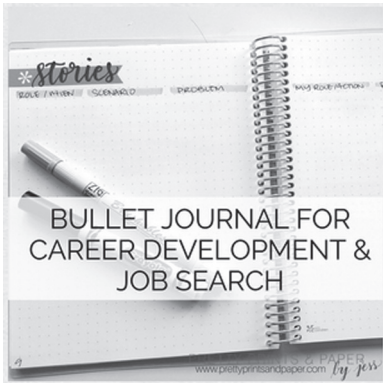


Figure 7: Cover art for a blog post on [Prettyprintsandpaper.com](http://Prettyprintsandpaper.com).

Chung, who runs the blog [prettyprintsandpaper.com](http://prettyprintsandpaper.com), created a host of blog posts about using the Bullet Journal for different things. In the Bullet Journal section of her blog there are titles such as, “Bullet Journal for Career Development and Job Search,” and “Bullet Journal for Adulthood.” There is even one titled “Bullet Journal for Job Interviews.” There are an endless number of ways to use the Bullet Journal, and these ways can be changed and adapted to fit your personal needs. The variations available continue to amaze me. Kim, who runs [tinyrayofsunshine.com](http://tinyrayofsunshine.com), has many resources for the Bullet Journal on her blog as well. She has posts focused on starting a

Bullet Journal, tips and tricks of the trade, and pen and notebook options and reviews. Kara’s website [bohoberry.com](http://bohoberry.com) has similar things as Kim’s. She also has blog posts that go through her setup for each month out of the year. She takes pictures of the pages in her journal and talks about some of the layouts that she uses. These three blogs have become my favorites and the ones that I find myself repeatedly visiting. However, there are other blogs out there as well. There are also resources outside of the blogging platform. On [bulletjournal.com](http://bulletjournal.com) there are links to various Facebook pages. These pages are targeted toward everyone from students and mothers to those struggling with mental health problems such as depression or anxiety. Another large part of the community is YouTube. Kara (Boho Berry) is a large part of this community on YouTube. She posts videos about her journal and the different things that she is doing with it. She also has a series on YouTube about starting a Bullet Journal called “Bullet Journal 101,” in which she goes through everything it takes to start a Bullet Journal. She gives tips for starting one and goes into depth about what a Bullet Journal is and what it does. Once again, there is no limit to what you can do or where you can go for ideas or advice. The community is extremely open and does not hesitate to give advice or tips that might help someone to improve what they are trying to do.

### ◦ Start a Bullet Journal

In my opinion, the Bullet Journal is the ultimate resources for organizing a busy life. It has been a wonderful thing for me and, at this point, I don’t know what I would do without it. It has become something that I bring with me

everywhere I go. I use it to keep my schoolwork organized, my work schedule, any other events happening, as well as keeping my own mind straight by using it as a plain old journal. I create packing lists in my Bullet Journal when I am going on a trip and I have even used it for my shopping list every once in a while. The Bullet Journal can be used for whatever you need. Analyzing the Bullet Journal using CHAT has only reinforced my opinion that it is an amazing tool and has the ability to adapt to anyone and anything. Now it is your turn. If you feel that the Bullet Journal would be beneficial for you, which I hope you do after learning more about it, then I suggest you visit some of the websites that I have mentioned and get started on creating your own Bullet Journal.

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