



Keeping a time log

TN11 Training Notes series: Leadership

These notes were first published on the website in October 2002 and last updated in January 2026. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

"I don't know where the time has gone!"

You'll not be able to say that if you create a time log. Sounds complicated? Not if you follow these notes. This straightforward method could help you understand better how you work and enable you to plan your time more effectively.

Unconvinced? Give it a try! You might be surprised.

A time log is a simple way of finding out where your time has indeed gone. But time (or, more accurately, self) management is very much an individual issue. So be ready to take on board the general themes outlined here, but don't be afraid to adjust some of the detail to fit the person that is you.

1 **Clarify why you want a time log**

What matters is not the methodology, but what you want from the results. Possibilities:

- The time spent on a specific task undertaken intermittently over several days.
- The proportion of your time spent on specific areas of work (eg. sermon preparation for a Minister, face-to-face case work for a community worker, administration for us all).
- Achievement or otherwise of an aim to spend more time on certain areas of work.
- A check on, for example, whether you are undertaking creative work at the times when you are likely to be at your best and more routine tasks when not.
- Non-work reasons: to see how much time you give your family, or prayer.
- Simply a better understanding of your way of working.

Adjust what is described below to give the results you are looking for. For the first bullet point (above), you will need a more detailed analysis of each period than for the second. The third point would mean undertaking this exercise for limited but regular periods. For the fourth you will need to analyse not just the length of time undertaken, but the time of day employed too. And so on.

2 **Decide who will help you**

For many of us, a solo exercise will fail. Make yourself accountable to someone who is committed to making it work, and you have the necessary framework for success. So ask someone who:

- knows your weaknesses;
- is prepared to be firm with you;
- understands the purpose;
- helps you design the exercise;
- checks it out with you regularly;
- works through the subsequent analysis with you;
- ensures you achieve your purpose.

3 **Agree when you will do it**

You may want to undertake the exercise:

- continually (as I do – the method described below is simple enough to do this);
- over a given but limited period (eg. a week), perhaps every three months;
- one-off but over a longer period for greater accuracy (eg. over a full month);
- just for the working day, or for your complete life over 24 hours.

If undertaking the exercise for a limited time, you want to avoid unusual circumstances as far as possible such as a holiday time or periods of unusual activity.

4 **Select your categories**

- 1 Select about six to ten main **work** categories into which you want to analyse your time.
- 2 Choose a small number of **support** categories, including a GENERAL item.
- 3 Add in a few **personal** categories if you are investigating your whole life-style and not just your work.

The main **work** categories should be chosen to match the purpose for undertaking the time log (see point 1) and should normally be based firmly on your job description or role definition (if you don't have one, consider your priority areas of ministry). Don't have too many or the exercise gets too complicated.

Support categories should again match your ministry but might include 'Personal administration' ('Church administration' has probably been included in the first list, even if it is definitely not your main priority), 'Theological reading/study', and possibly items like Promotion, Research, etc.

Add to this list a **GENERAL** category – very necessary to keep the analysis simple. Use this whenever you have a run of short items all to do with your main ministry (ie. not 'support' items) but the system (explained below) does not allow you to categorise them in such detail. So a period of time involving a range of phone calls on different issues, a couple of interruptions, writing two short emails, and jotting down possible headings for a forthcoming talk could be classed in this way.

Personal categories might include Spouse/family/friends, Household (cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc.), Sleep, Exercise/relaxation, Personal discipleship, Church activities.

When categories overlap (which they will) you need to make your own decisions as to which is the prime one to use. Don't get too up-tight about getting it 'right'.

You will need to decide too how to treat 'meetings'. Try to avoid having this as a category as every meeting should be part of a more fundamental task. It may be helpful, however, to note how much time you do spend in meetings as a separate exercise. For some of us the time spent in travel can be treated similarly.

5 Follow the method

METHOD 1

Take an A4 sheet and divide it into two columns. Down each column mark the period of the day you want to analyse (24 hours or your working time) into half-hour blocks. So it might start:

7.00 - 7.30 am.

7.30 - 8.00

8.00 - 8.30

and so on right through the day. Leave a space to fill in your activity beside each half-hour slot.

Head each column with space for a date and you now have a pro-forma to copy and keep on your desk, or in your diary (whether paper or digital) if you are on the move. Alternatively, you may find a personal organiser with something similar- again whether paper or digital. The important principle is to ensure that it is visible beside you right through the day.

Some schemes ask you to log everything that happens (number of telephone calls, and so on). This method is much simpler. Once an hour or so (don't leave it longer) you simply jot down the main activity for each half-hour period.

So, if you were preparing a talk at your desk but had a couple of short phone calls during the half hour, you jot down TALK PREP (if this is a category you have chosen) and ignore the calls. If, however, the calls took up more than half this time and concerned a specific activity such as a pastoral matter, you jot down PASTORAL and ignore the talk. And if a number of different things happened during the half-hour, you may want to use your GENERAL category.

The key is overall emphasis, not minute-by-minute accuracy. If you eventually feel this is not accurate enough, adjust to 20 minute periods instead, but I have found 30 minutes quite adequate. What you under-count on one half hour this way will get over-counted in another half-hour.

METHOD TWO

This is more suited to those who work in larger blocks of time without constant interruption.

No pro-forma here, just a pad of paper (I use A5 or even A6). Here you jot down each main activity as you finish it (try working to the nearest quarter of an hour). So, rather than half-hour blocks, the log might look like:

11.00-12.15	Talk preparation
12.15-12.45	Admin (tel calls)
12.45-13.30	Lunch / read church paper
13.30-15.15	Hospital visit inc travel

Again, minor interruptions do not appear on this. Use the GENERAL (for ministry) or ADMIN (for support) categories for a mix of short items. If it was a mix of both choose either one, and next time the same thing happens choose the other.

6 Analyse the results

Once a week analyse everything into the categories you have chosen and, if interested, note the total number of hours worked in a week and how the work categories come out as percentages of this. If time of day is another consideration, you need to note any items that you worked on at a less-than-ideal time (coloured highlighters are helpful). You may also want to reanalyse your GENERAL time into the other ministry items by proportion.

At this point call in your adviser/friend (see point 2) to help you interpret the results. What do they tell you? What changes do you note? Are you giving your priority job description categories priority time, or are other things crowding those out? What actions do you need to take to correct anything that is not what it might be?

Look both at the detail, but also stand back and observe the overall pattern. You may receive some surprises. But you do need someone else to do this with you or you miss much of the benefit. Most of us cannot be trusted to be firm enough with ourselves.

The whole exercise does not take long (remember to keep it simple at every point). It might even transform your life.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN11. See also Article A50, *The 'To Do Diary' guide*, and DIY Workshop W5, *How to manage yourself*. Also Training Notes TN7, *Ideas for how to make time for life*, TN43, *Did Jesus use an iPhone?*, TN62, *Know what distracts you*, TN84, *How to say 'No' when you should*, and TN106, *Talk about taking time 'off'*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN11 under Leadership.

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU
Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>