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Step back to move forward: Setting new priorities in the new year

By [Neil A. Lewis, Jr.](#), [Leah H. Somerville](#), [Jay J. Van Bavel](#), [June Gruber](#), [William A. Cunningham](#) | Jan. 2, 2019, 1:45 PM

Happy New Year! As you recover from the festivities and get ready to turn toward your work for 2019 and beyond, this is a great time to take a step back from the day-to-day and check in with yourself to make sure you are actually on the path that's right for you.

In the [first Letter to Young Scientists](#), we encouraged you to focus on studying the questions and topics you find meaningful (acknowledging that those might evolve over time). But in science—and other areas of life—we often get pulled in multiple directions that lead us off our desired paths. The dizzying array of commitments you may be asked or required to take on—teaching, mentoring, attending academic events, hosting visitors, service for your university or field, helping others with

res' h f \ct: in it aren't related to your own interests, to name just a few—can leave you racing from one event to another, juggling many different balls while dropping the balls that you value the most.

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To counter this pressure, now is a good time to ask yourself some key questions to help set new priorities for the year to come: Are you studying the things you care about, building the skills you want to have, and connecting with the communities that are important to you?

If you are, great! Keep doing what you are doing.

If not, understand that it is perfectly normal for interests to evolve or for you to occasionally veer off your intended course. Thankfully, it's a new year and that can be a great opportunity for a **“fresh start.”** In fact, research shows that these temporal landmarks—a new year, a new semester, a new month—can help us get back on track or start moving in a better direction. The key is to take the time and introspection required to figure out what exactly it is that we are trying to achieve so that we can then determine the right path to get there.

What do you want to accomplish, and why?

Knowing your goals is the first step to prioritizing activities to make the most of your time and help those around you. What are you trying to accomplish? What **“possible self”** are you working toward achieving (or avoiding)? Just as importantly, why do you want to accomplish those things?

It can help to start with the big picture. Once you understand your higher-level priorities, it becomes easier to set more proximal goals for the year, semester, month, week, and even day. Wil regularly asks his graduate students about their 20-year plan, 10-year plan, 5-year plan, 1-year plan, and 1-month plan. This exercise helps students figure out whether the things they are spending their time on are aligned with their long-term goals and their broader values. If a student's goal is to work at a research university, for example, that often requires building different skills than if a student's goal is to work in a liberal arts college or in industry. Developing plans that span multiple timescales helps the student ensure they are working on projects they find meaningful while letting other projects die. And for Wil, knowing what his students' priorities are (and how they evolve over time) helps him to be a better mentor.

From what a in why to how

To make this more concrete, June has developed a **goal-setting form** that both trainees and principal investigators can use now (and at the beginning of each semester) and later **revisit and reflect on** (at the end of each semester) to organize short-term goals and **concrete plans** and to jointly develop strategies for achieving individual and collective goals. The beauty of writing down these goals and plans is that it enables all parties to revisit them multiple times along the way and make adjustments as necessary.

It also helps break down big, overwhelming-seeming goals into granular, achievable tasks to be executed on a realistic timeframe. For example, if one of your goals for 2019 is to submit two manuscripts for publication, then that might mean setting subgoals to submit the first by the end of June and the second by the end of December. That could mean getting a draft of the first paper to your adviser by April so that they can provide feedback by May, giving you time to revise and submit by June. Well, getting that draft to your adviser by April requires a consistent writing schedule—starting soon!

And when both you and your mentor are aware of these goals, you can support one another throughout the process. For instance, if your mentor knows that you set a goal to write from 9 a.m. until noon every Monday, they will know that they should not email you or ask you to do anything else during those hours so that you are not distracted and can stay on track.

Getting back on track when things don't go according to plan

From time to time, you may get off track and not complete your planned task on time. That's OK. Don't throw the whole goal out the window—start over next week. It can feel disappointing to not hit your target exactly as planned, but remember that some progress is better than none; don't let perfect be the enemy of good. As professor Susan Dynarski recently **tweeted**: “If stressed because you can't get everything done, do one thing.” And be sure to do the things you need to **sustain yourself**.

Taking a step back enables you to think about your work in the broader context of your life—it allows you to see forest instead of getting lost in the trees. We each have but one life to live, and there is a limit to the amount that we can do in that life. In science, there are always infinite things you could be working on, which makes it easy to lose track of your broader goals. Balancing priorities in and outside of the “lab” makes you a human for whom doing science is just one part of your life.

Send your thoughts, questions, and suggestions for future column topics to letterstoyoungscientists@aaas.org and engage with us on Twitter.

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Neil A. Lewis, Jr. is an assistant professor of communication and social behavior at Cornell University.

 [Twitter](#)

Leah H. Somerville

Leah H. Somerville is an associate professor of psychology at Harvard University.

 [Twitter](#)



Jay J. Van Bavel

Jay J. Van Bavel is an associate professor of psychology and neural sciences at New York University in New York City.

 [Twitter](#)

June Gruber

June Gruber is an assistant professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

 [Twitter](#)

William A. Cunningham

William A. Cunningham is a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto in Canada.

 [Twitter](#)

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