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The Power of Two: Two Tips for Mathematicians

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The Power of Two: Two Tips for Mathematicians

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Every person I know, even mathematicians, have their favorite numbers. Mine used to be 13, because I liked being contrarian. Then I switched to 17 because it was the seventh prime number and I also liked 7. But what is so special about the number 2? Of course, it is the only even prime, but what else?

If you did not know before, you might be interested to learn (from [Wikipedia](#)) that 2 is the only number x such that the sum of all the reciprocals of the powers of x equals x . [Wikipedia](#) will also tell you that “powers of two are central to the concept of Mersenne primes, and important to computer science.” There are even interesting things to learn about [the power of two in poetry](#). But why should readers of the e-Mentoring Network blog care?

On these blog pages, readers will find personal success stories to learn from and thoughtful essays chock-full of solid advice. My goal writing here has been a lot more modest. From the beginning, I have tried to share things I have learned from the vast literature about productivity and then personally tried to implement into my own idiosyncratic life. In [my first post here](#), I wrote about writing things down, how “getting things out of your head and into a trusted system” can be helpful. Then I wrote about how making [a plan for your summer](#) as you ease into it might be a good idea. Finally last summer I wrote about [digital organization](#). Along the way I also wrote a little post about [giving math talks](#) and there too I have tried to share what I learned from others and what seems to work well for myself (whenever I can get myself to listen to myself!)

So this post is about two great tips involving the number 2 that I learned along the way. They will perhaps not double your happiness or fortune, but I promise you that you will not regret it if you do decide to take them along for the ride.

Here is the first one: **The Two-Minute Rule**. I learned this from David Allen’s famous book [Getting Things Done](#), but it is easy to learn it independently of his program. The rule is quite simple:

If you find something on your to-do list that you could do in two minutes, just do it!

Of course this works well if you have a to-do list, but it can be applied to many other contexts. So here are some corollaries:

Corollary 1. If you are going through your email inbox and you see some emails that are easy to answer quickly (and, this is absolutely essential, only if they are worth answering), then go ahead and respond.

Corollary 2. If you have to print out some handouts for your class that you have already prepared, just go ahead and print when you remember to.

Corollary 3. If you need to go to the bathroom, just go!

(Ok, maybe the last one there did not need to be included, but some of us need to be occasionally reminded of this! This and “You should go and fill up your water bottle when it is empty.”)

What is the point of the two-minute rule? It is simple: It clears your inbox, it clears your to-do list, it helps you move forward, and it makes you feel good about yourself. That is a handful of points all at once. But there is more.

The two-minute rule also trains your mind to look at tasks on your list in a time-sensitive way. You learn eventually to think more carefully about how much certain types of tasks will take you. This is amazingly helpful when you are thinking of taking on new tasks. You might find that you just have too much on your plate already. Wouldn't that be a good thing to notice before you take on more?

Alright, time to move on to the second tip invoking the special powers of 2: To rhyme with the first one, I will call this **The Two-Week Rule**. Here it goes:

When you receive a revise-and-resubmit request from a journal about your paper submission, turn it around in two weeks.

Sometimes this may mean that you will be dropping some of the other balls on the air to the ground, but it will only be temporary. And once you do turn that paper around in two weeks, you will feel so great! And yes, it is almost always doable. Ok, if you were asked to incorporate a new semester's worth of data to the paper, then maybe not so much. But often the requests are much more minor than that. Even when the referees are asking for "major revision", you can often take care of it in two intense weeks.

I have used this tip myself with much success. Each time I have received feedback, even some that I was quite displeased with, I gave myself one whole day to fume and bicker, and then I started the clock. Literally. Once I actually counted the total number of minutes it took me to handle a set of referee reports. I have seen that it has taken me about twenty-four hours. That is one full day, but spread over a couple weeks, it is not that bad. And in the end, you can still keep the "submitted" tag on your CV for that paper until it is accepted!

I have to admit that I do not do this all the time. In fact there is a paper that is still sitting in the depths of my computer filing system waiting to be revised. My defense: the four referees each requested that I do something totally contradictory to the others' requests. So I basically gave up. But was that wise of me? No. I do believe in the paper, so I should get my act together and take care of it. And after writing this post, now we all know that I have to do it in two weeks. What do you think? Can I?

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