

Needs Must

By Cynthia Vaughn, Associate Editor for Independent Voices

For many voice teachers the beginning of the fall semester is the busiest and most hectic time of the year. After a summer of travel, conferences, family time, and an irregular teaching schedule or break from teaching, Fall shouts, "Get to work! Get organized!" For most, fall semester marks a new academic year or independent studio school year and a renewal of order and routine. Schedules must be planned, music must be purchased, technology must be reviewed, new policies or rates must be decided, new students must be welcomed and onboarded, meetings must be scheduled with department chairs or colleagues. Ducks must be in a row. Must Must Must. There is an old English idiom — "needs must" — that means necessity compels you to do something that perhaps you might not want to do at that moment. "Needs must" is something I say to myself when I need to start, stop, or switch tasks.

Often the challenge is procrastination and difficulty in starting a task or activity. The bigger the project (a book) or the more looming the deadline (this column), the harder it is to begin.

I have always found transitioning from one activity to another to be challenging. Even as a child playing outdoors, when it was time to come in and practice piano it was a chore. Even though I loved both activities, I procrastinated and whined, "Just one more game, pleeeeeeeeeee!" Then when I was practicing piano, I'd get so caught up in the playing that I didn't want to stop to come to dinner. "Pleeeeeeeeeee, just one more song!" The worst transitions were from something I enjoyed to something I dreaded like washing after dinner dishes, cleaning my room, doing homework, or going to bed. "Pleeeeeeeeeee, just one more story before bed."

A lot of scientific research has been done on transitioning between activities, especially in relation to behavior and attention, however, it's not limited to people with ADHD.

"Transitions are hard for everybody," says Dr. David Anderson, senior director of the ADHD and Behavior Disorders Center at Child Mind Institute. "One of the reasons why transitions may be hard is that we're often transitioning from something we like to do to something that we need to do."

If you have difficulty stopping an activity and find yourself going down a rabbit hole or endlessly scrolling social media, it may be helpful to set a timer. A visual timer can help you see how much time has passed so that you aren't abruptly jolted from your hyper focus when the timer goes off. Move! Getting up and moving around the room helps me switch tasks when the timer goes off and creates a buffer before the next activity. Maybe you only need a minute or so to switch tasks. I find that I need at least 15 minutes to switch from other activities (especially email) to get ready to teach voice lessons. My students deserve to have me fully engaged and present when I begin teaching, not thinking about the last email I answered or need to answer.



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Often the challenge is procrastination and difficulty in starting a task or activity. The bigger the project (a book) or the more looming the deadline (this column), the harder it is to begin. Strategies that help me include implementing some elements of GTD®, David Allen's famous *Getting Thing Done* method. I don't go too deep into the methodology, but I always have something with me to write notes and get ideas out of my head. Writing things down or sending myself a note, photo, or voice message with the Braintoss app on my iPhone has been a life changer. When I'm in the middle of a big project, but my brain keeps reminding me that I need to buy laundry detergent, that thought will keep looping until I write it down or ask "Alexa" to add laundry detergent to the shopping list. Allen states, "There is an inverse relationship between things on your mind and those things getting done." Write it down! To get started I ask myself, "What is the first thing I need to do to begin this task?" It can be as simple as "Put paper in the printer," or "Open laptop and load Mac Pages." Once I get started, it is usually easy to find my groove and time flies by. Then, the challenge become stopping. (See above!)

Know yourself. Some people can work in noisy, cluttered spaces or a busy coffee shop or co-working space. I know that I need a quiet space away from distractions like the television or refrigerator. That may be impossible if you are working from home with family, children, and pets! Some parents are able to set boundaries on when they are working (office door closed) and not working (office door open). When my children

were young, however, I found that a closed office or studio or bathroom door was an invitation for little hands to knock on the door and cry “Mommy!” That is when I became a night owl, doing most of my creative and writing work late at night when I had the whole house to myself. Some colleagues find their most productive time is very early morning before the household wakes up. When I check my email at 9 a.m., I see the colleagues who emailed me at 5 a.m. — hello, Karen Michaels. Whatever works for you!

If you aren’t familiar with habit stacking, I highly recommend James Clear’s book “Atomic Habits — Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results.” Habit stacking has helped me establish a fairly steady routine for mornings and bedtime. When I’m truly stuck on a project, I step away. Sometimes a short walk, a drink of water, or a snack can recharge my ideas and I can return to the computer ready to write. It also may help to have an accountability partner. Who can you reach out to who understands your process? It could be a coach, a friend, or a family member.

A calendar or planner is an absolute necessity. I’ve tried them all, and I find I do best with a paper planner and an iPhone calendar and separate To-Do app. I like the **Panda Planner** paper calendar’s focus on gratitude; however, my current favorite paper planner is **Monk Manual** daily planner with two pages for each day and plenty of white space. The daily *Prepare* page on the left has space for three priorities, eight To-Do checkboxes, things I’m grateful for, things I am looking forward to, and a blank daily schedule. I map out my day in the morning or the night before, making sure that I schedule breaks or buffers between activities. At the end of the day, I complete the daily *Reflect* page on the right that includes spaces for ways I can give, three highlights, I was at my best when..., I felt unrest when..., one way I can improve tomorrow, and open space for notes about anything. Each month I choose a daily Monk Manual habit and theme. Habits are quantifiable (drink water). Themes are not quantifiable (delight). I love the **Fantastical** calendar on my iPhone that syncs with iCal on my desktop. My absolute favorite productivity and organization app is **Things 3**. For digital notes, I use the built-in Apple Notes that syncs between my devices. For handwritten notes and student lesson notes, I am a huge fan of erasable cloud-connected **Rocketbooks**. It’s taken awhile to find my ideal tools and resources for staying organized. These work well for me, and I encourage you to search for tools that help your organization and productivity. I could write an entire article just about productivity tools, however that would keep me from finishing this column and getting ready for my next task. So instead, I’ll say, “Needs must.”



PS: If you’d like to go down a delightful historical rabbit hole about the grammar and etymology of the adverb turned idiom, “Needs must,” and the later proverb, “He must nedys go that the deuell dryues” (He must needs go that the devil drives), visit O’Conner and Kellerman’s [Grammarphobia](#).

This issue’s Independent Voices articles feature Brenda Earle Stokes’ “Piano Skills for Singers and Voice Teachers” with suggestions for revamping the way singers are taught piano in universities and private lessons. Nicholas Perna, NATS Vice President for Outreach, encourages independent studio teachers to sponsor their own non-university Student NATS Chapters, and Michelle Markwart Deveau shares a story with a message, “The Italian Toaster.”

— Cynthia Vaughn

Cynthia Vaughn, associate editor for *Independent Voices*, has been a NATS member since 1983. She has been active in leadership at the chapter and regional level and was an invited master teacher for the 2020 NATS Intern Program (postponed to 2021 due to COVID). She recently retired from Magnolia Music Studio, the multi-teacher studio she founded and directed in Colorado and Washington 2008 to 2022. Previously she was on the voice faculty of Colorado State University. Vaughn and the late Meribeth Dayme, PhD, co-authored three editions of “The Singing Book,” a leading college voice class textbook/anthology. A new fourth edition is in progress with editor Matthew Hoch. Vaughn and Hoch edited “The Essentials of CoreSinging: A Joyful Approach to Singing and Voice Pedagogy” by Meribeth Dayme which was released in June 2022.