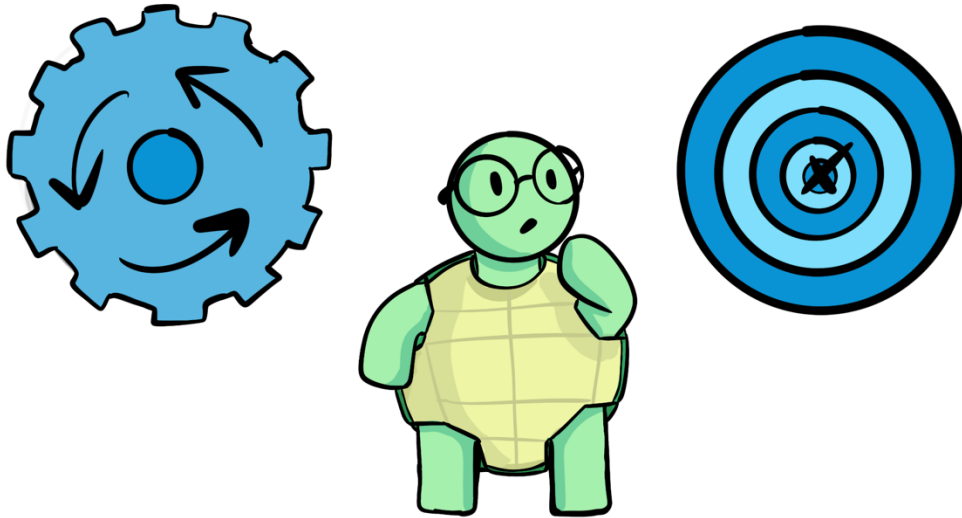# What are Systems vs. Goals?

If you spend any time on the productivity or self-improvement side of the internet, you may have heard the saying that you should "set systems not goals." What does that mean? Why should you do it?

What is a goal?

A goal is an endpoint, a target you are trying to reach. Making an A in your physics class and graduating from college are both goals. Goals are great for picking a direction for your month, year, or life. But having a goal doesn't automatically set you up to achieve it.

What is a system?

A system is a fancy way of saying "a habit." It's basically a plan for action. Deciding to spend 30 minutes after every physics class working through problems from the lesson is a system. While goals are the direction you want to head, a system is a path that gets you there.

In more straightforward terms, a *goal* is something you are trying to achieve. A *system* is how you are going to achieve it. Scott Adams, author of *How to Fail at Everything and Still Win Big* describes the difference between system and goals this way:

"If you do something every day, it's a system. If you're waiting to achieve it someday in the future, it's a goal."

Why you should focus on systems over goals.

Goals certainly have their place. I still think having specific benchmarks you want to reach is valuable for making decisions on how you will spend your time. However, if you *only* focus on the goal, you can easily end up stuck thinking about the outcome without having any plan for how to reach it. James Clear describes this problem in his book *Atomic Habits*.

"…goals create an "either-or" conflict: either you achieve your goal and are successful or you fail and you are a disappointment."

A goal without a plan can put you in a perpetual state of feeling like a failure. You may only feel like you've succeeded once you reach the goal. If your goal is to be able to run 3 miles without stopping, you may feel like a failure every time you go for a run and don't hit 3 miles. If you have a system where you go for a run every Tuesday and Thursday, you will succeed every time you go for a run. Not only will you feel better about your progress, but the twice-weekly runs will eventually enable you to run 3 miles, or maybe even more!

Systems vs. Goals Examples

Let's take a look at the difference using a system instead of having a goal makes in real life. The first scenario focuses on a goal, while the second relies on a system.

Scenario 1

Say you set a goal to get an A in your physics class. Perhaps you spend a lot of time studying the week of the test, but don't study at all other weeks. You may find yourself cramming for each test or turning in assignments at the last minute. And when you don't make the grades you want, you'll feel frustrated and confused. You thought you spent all this time studying, what happened? The problem is, all you had was a goal to get a high grade. *A goal is not a plan*.

Scenario 2

On the other hand, instead of simply setting a goal to get an A in your physics class, say you also set up a system of studying. You dedicate 30 minutes after every physics class to review your notes. You decide whether or not you will read the textbook for that class. You work through each problem set for the upcoming chapter before class so you can ask questions about what you got stuck on. And every Sunday evening you go through what you learned that week and make sure all your assignments are done before they are due at midnight on Monday.

In the second scenario, you have a plan. You don't have to beat yourself up for not reaching your goal, because you will. And even if you don't get an A, you can proud of the fact that you did your best to learn the material and made time for the class.

GOAL	SYSTEM
Lose 20 pounds	Go to the gym every tuesday and thursday
Get more sleep	Turn off electronics at 10 pm every night
Read 1 book each month	Read for 10 minutes when you wake up
Be more social	Talk to the person you sit next to in each class
Make an A in French	Review vocabulary for 10 minutes before bed

For any epic fantasy fans out there, the idea of setting systems before goals always makes me think of this quote from Brandon Sanderson's *Stormlight Archive*

"Life before death. Strength before weakness. Journey before destination."

Every student wants to make a good grade and get a degree. That's your destination. *Learning the material* is the journey. Without a plan to take even just one step every day, you won't reach your destination.

How to make a system?

Now that you know what systems and goals are, the next step is to know how to set systems instead of goals. To clarify, a system is not just breaking a goal down into smaller chunks. For example, if your goal is to make all A's and B's, deciding you are going to make no less than a B on every test is still not a system. You've just split the big goal into smaller goals.

To make a system, you need to focus on the *actions you will take*. Break things down into daily or weekly routines. If your goal is to lose weight, your system might be to go to the gym twice a week and say no to sweets Monday through Friday.

Step 1: Decide what actions matter most
When you're creating a system think about the actions that are most crucial to achieving your goal. To do well in a math class, it's more important to work on practice problems than to read the textbook. If you want to get a job as a web developer once you graduate, you'll want to spend more time learning about the programming languages used by web developers.

Prioritizing what most directly leads to your goal is hard and takes practice. Looking at goals you want to reach and distilling them into their basic parts is a skill in and of itself. For many class-related goals, it should be pretty straightforward. You can even ask your professors what they think you should focus on the most to succeed in their class.

Step 2: Make your system achievable
Once you know what actions you are going to take, simplify them and make them easy. Instead of trying to solve every optional practice problem for each chapter in your calculus book, maybe just set a goal of working through 5 - 10 each day. It's better to

pick something that seems almost too easy. The less mental and emotional resistance you have to your system, the more likely you will be to follow through with them.

Step 3: Make your system maintainable
James Clear's *Atomic Habits* is an awesome resource for this. As I said earlier, a system is basically just a habit. There are things you can do to trick your psychology to make it easier for you to perform that habit. Making the action small is one thing that makes it easier, as mentioned in step 3. It's way less intimidating to do 5 pushups every morning than aiming for 20 right away.

You can also use the 2-minute rule. Maybe you find it really hard to study on Saturday mornings. But you can at least open your textbook and at least read the first problem, right? The 2-minute rule says, "Sure you don't want to do that, but you can get through it for at least 2 minutes." Usually, starting is the hardest part.

Step 4: Don't keep the end in sight
Once you've set your system, stop worrying about how close you are to reaching your goal. The beauty about systems is that they allow you to forget your goals and just focus on doing what you need to do.
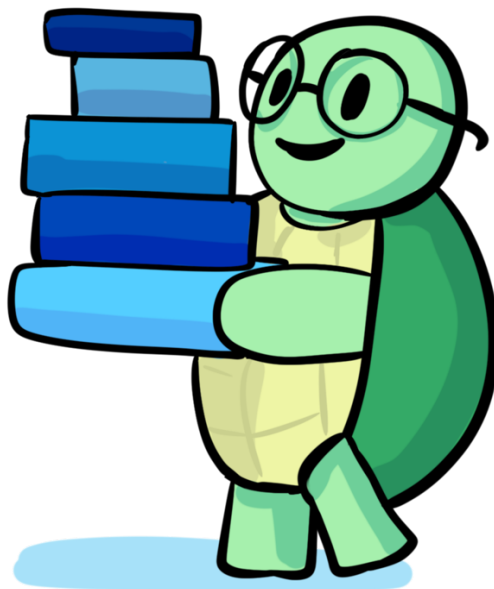
Now that you've learned how to create systems instead of goals, you may be looking to learn more ways to increase your productivity. Well, this website is a great place to start! We have plenty of advice on healthy habits, study strategies, and tips you can use when deciding what to include in your systems. Add your email in the box below to get

free advice and resources for doing college well! If you want more information on creating systems for your life, I recommend these resources.

Books to Read
- Atomic Habits
- How to Fail at Everything and Still Win Big
- Deep Work

Articles to Read
- How to be the Perfect College Student
- The Nightly Morning Routine
- https://www.samuelthomasdavies.com/goals-systems/

A Video to Watch
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WK-sZjuXA6A&ab_channel=RowenaTsai