VITAMIN-R

User Manual

Overview

What is Vitamin-R? and what can it do for you?

VITAMIN-R is a productivity application that starts where Getting Things Done and similar productivity approaches stop.

Most "productivity" applications are really about *capturing* and *organizing* your actions. Some of them also give vague guidelines on what your "next action" should be.

Those applications are great and there are some fine examples available on the Mac.

Unfortunately, *none* of these applications help you to *actually get anything done*. Instead they give you a nice warm feeling that you're on top of what you *should* be doing right now.

Unfortunately, most "productivity gurus" end up spending a lot more time reading about how to become more productive and re-organizing their "system" than actually getting any work done. The work itself is starting to get into the way of its organizing. Wait a minute… isn't that the exact wrong way around? .. which brings us to the core of the problem.

> *You'd be more productive just getting on with what you know you should be doing right now, rather than reading about how to do it.*

While this is certainly true, don't just run away quite yet.. but soon.

VITAMIN-R is about *really* getting things done. To this end, it helps you overcome procrastination, set specific reachable goals, accomplish them and gain forward momentum (= motivation) for the next iteration.

If you are like me, you probably think that you suffer from perennially poor self discipline and spend your days bemoaning the fact that you just can't do as much as you surely *should* be able to.

Self discipline, however, is not the panacea that one might think. Most of the time our failure to get things done has more to do with a combination of vague objectives (knowing what to do and how to get it done) and the way our brains are wired. Self discipline is the masochist's way of getting things done and the results are often very poor indeed, because you are going against the grain of who and what you are.

You can reach true productivity only by creating a "system" that makes it easy to do the right thing every step of the way.

VITAMIN-R is our attempt to create just such <u>a system where doing the easy thing is also doing the right thing</u>. Vitamin-R being bits of codes executing on your Mac, rather than ink-on-paper, makes it possible to introduce you to new techniques and the the (mostly simple) tools that are required to put them to work. This allows you to learn "on the job" where it makes most sense and has other desirable "side effects", such as making it easy to log your progress and achievements. This helps you understand your own best way of working, as well as helping you value your achievements.

VITAMIN-R takes a *pragmatic* approach to using the insights of various productivity gurus and yes, even scientific research into how we are wired. But don't be afraid, it is not a "system" in the sense of an all-encompassing set of rules that you have to adhere to rigorously for all your work, all of the time. Rather, you get to discover what works for you and what does not. Once you have figured out what works for you, keep using it and feel free to ignore the rest.

As an aside: if you happen to be the paper & pen kind of person (or more likely rollerball & moleskin kind of person), that's fine too. Feel free to use your pen and paper for taking notes, or even your tomato shaped timer (you know who you are!) if you feel like it. I still hope that using **VITAMIN-R** will provide you with some insights into how you can improve the way that you get your work done.

This manual is designed to give you a context into which you can place the various techniques built into **VITAMIN-R**, but the "meat" of the system is embedded in the application itself. This is document is more about giving you the "big picture", so that you can understand what the rationale behind specific design choices are.

The Logic Behind the Madness

In the next few sections, we'll have a look at what the concepts behind **VITAMIN-R** are.

Vague Objectives Cause Us to Procrastinate

It would seem natural that we should know **what** we need to do before we can get on with doing it. So why don't we heed that advice more often?

Everybody recognizes the dread of starting a new task: Authors call it "writer's block", the fear of the blank piece of paper. The problem is obvious: you could write or indeed draw *anything* on that piece of paper. If it was a form to be filled out, you'd fill it out straight away with no hesitation (at least until you get to the bureaucratic jargon that is). The terror comes from the fact that we need to narrow down that *anything* to just *one single thing*.

If we were logical creatures, we'd get straight on with working out what needs to go on that page, but.. that is not the way we are wired. What happens instead is that we put off doing the task and fill our day with some other tasks; often knowing full well that they are less important and that the blank page is still going to be waiting for us the next day.

Neurologically what happens is that our "reptilian brain", the part of our brain that is responsible for keeping us out of harm's way, triggers the alarm as soon as it detects the uncertainty. Imagine a security guard looking at a wall of screens. He doesn't know what the screens really show, but his job is simply to push the big read alarm button as soon as he sees "something suspicious". This big red button is the "**Fight-or-Flight-Response**" and it can as easily be triggered by a blank piece of paper as by a saber tooth tiger.

The adrenal medulla produces a hormonal cascade and our IQ plunges because this is obviously no time for the clever guy working in the neocortex to philosophize about the meaning of life. We are left with a binary two choices: fight or fly. Clubbing the page to death (though tempting) is unlikely to work, so we start running. Not literally, but by directing our attention to something else.. probably doing our weekly action point review to (evidently falsely) re-assure ourselves that we are still *in control*.

Unreachable Objectives Lead to Failure

How often have we been asked to "think big" and set our sights high? It shows ambition, it's the *Can Do* attitude. Besides, if you set your sights too low, you're never likely to get anywhere, right?

Well actually *no*. Setting unreachable, unrealistic goals will lead you to fail miserably. Every time. Guaranteed. That will make you miserable and no matter how good you get, you'll never be *quite good enough*. This is an interesting and time tested way of bringing up the next generation, but it is not the way of getting anything done. Besides, if you find yourself in the dreaded situation of having achieved your innermost goals, effortlessly and too early in life.. you can always keep climbing and be happy every step of the way.

Small Successes Keep Us Motivated

More importantly, unreachable objectives are usually not very useful for getting started. They tend to be very vague, so they are effectively *un-actionable*.

One of the most useful lessons of David Allen's GTD is to insist on specifying the *next action that needs to be taken*.

Moreover, another platitude "success breeds success" comes into play here. Once we have achieved our first, now by definition *reachable* goal, we feel more motivated and less stressed about reaching our next goal.

Ideally our every working day would consist of a chain of mini-successes, leaving us energized and fully in control of our professional destiny, rather than making us go home dejected and stressed out.

Attention v. Time

Time is the great equalizer. We all have the same amount of time in every day, but is it really our time that is limited or is it our attention?

Time is comparatively easy to come by. Some people believe that they can work 14 hour days with full concentration and that any one hour chunk of that time is as good as any other, but once we put down the work-yourself-to-an-early-death business book and have a cocoa, most of us suspect that this isn't *really* the case. Not that we would dare say so aloud lest somebody else, who clearly can work those 14 hour days, were to overhear us.

Especially in creative endeavors, we simply can't juggle more than a certain number of things at the same time and we certainly do not have 18 hours of attention to expend every day. It's a bit like "spending time with your kids" versus "giving your kids the attention they deserve". You can sit with your kids in front of the box for hours, but what they really need is some "quality time" with their parents.

Our various "projects" need our attention more than they need our time and attention doesn't necessarily come in exchangeable 60 minute blocks.

Some people work better in the morning, some better in the evening. Monday may be a better day for goal setting than Thursday. Simply re-scheduling tasks so that you can do them at the times of the day, or indeed the day of the week that works best for you can give you a significant productivity boost.

Single Tasking v. Multi-Tasking

Multi-tasking has been quite the buzz word for a long time. Reams of productivity literature have advocated using every last bit of spare processing power to reach new heights of productivity. Doing your taxes while on the phone, running on your treadmill and keeping half an eye on your stock market ticker has been advocated as the height of "manager nirvana" for many years.

Unfortunately, we are *really, really, really bad at multi-tasking*. Doubly so if we happen to be carrying around a "male differentiated" brain. The clever scientists looking into how our brains work have long known that we only have around 6-8 "chunks" available in our working memory: adding a new chunk will simply push out an existing one.

Can we really be that stupid? But we went to the moon! The answer seems to be a resounding "YES" written in mile-high letters. We *can't* multi-task. At best, we can do two or more things with half or less of a brain, at worst we'd be better off having done neither of the tasks because our error rates sky rocket when we are going against the grain of our abilities.

Note that this applies mostly to logical thought (L-mode or "left" brain stuff) and not so much to more internalized skills. For most people, for instance it's okay to walk and talk at the same time, but when you observe a toddler who is learning to walk, you can clearly see that at that age both activities are still using the same hardware.

Distractions & Interruptions

All this brings us to another productivity killer: distractions.

Our "working memory" is where we do our logical reasoning and filling those 6-8 slots with useful chunks is very much harder than emptying them. All it takes to empty the slots is a ringing phone, but once you want to refill them with the useful chunks, you need to rely on your long term memory.. and the less said about the speed and accuracy of this, the better.

In practice, this means that as soon as your attention wanders, your "working stack" is dumped and it can take up to half an hour to get it back up to operating temperature. Even then you run the risk that some things have just vanished forever.

A phone call thus does not just cost you the five minutes it takes to field it, but it might wreck your entire work session.

This is why it's so crucial to limit distractions to an absolute minimum at least for as long as you are actively working on something that requires mostly logical thought.

When viewed in this light, the current craze for tweeting, messaging, emailing, etc. is tantamount to productivity suicide. High distraction work settings such as open plan offices, while being nicely social, are also concentration killers.

The Exocortex: Your brain outside of your brain

No, the exocortex is not located somewhere in your skull, or your body for that matter.

It's a geeky word to describe the external tools and systems that we can use to patch the holes in our "wetware".

Pen and paper dramatically improve your performance in an IQ test. It's a great place to keep those chunks that keep dropping out of your working memory. The chunks are no longer in your working memory, but the "breadcrumbs" left on the piece of paper can "jog" your brain into retrieving them more quickly.

A small example: Try dividing 156 by 13 in your head. You probably can't do it. Now try the same thing on a piece of paper. Assuming that you were paying attention in primary school, long division shouldn't be a problem. Now try doing it on a calculator. See what I mean?

R-Mode & L-Mode

We've all heard of the two sides of the brain: the "left" and the "right" hemispheres.

The "left" hemisphere has long been the star of the show. It houses language, numbers and logical thought and it proceeds in a linear sequence. The "right" hemisphere is a bit messier and gets a lot of bad press as a result. It processes information in a visual and intuitive manner and can come back with a deep insight immediately, never or any time in between.

Since the division into two "sides" isn't really all that strong, the terms L-mode (linear) and R-mode (rich) are more useful.

L-mode is great because it can be relied upon to mostly work properly and come back with results in a nicely predictable manner. Once you've worked something out in L-mode, you know exactly how you came to your result. The R-mode on the other hand can be a bit of a capricious diva. You ask it a question and if you are lucky, you get a deep insight straight away. Only you don't know *why* so you need to get the L-mode working overtime just find out how to justify what you already know. If you are not so lucky, nothing at all happens. Often for a very long time. You *might* wake up in the middle of the night with the right answer (that's how the three dimensional structure of DNA was worked out), or you might get into the bath, have a brain spark and then run naked through the streets of Athens shouting "Eureka" (that's how Archimedes worked out the previously intractable problem of how to calculate the volume of irregular objects). Then again your R-mode might never come back with anything useful at all.

In most situations both modes work together. Experts rely much more heavily on R-mode than beginners who focus almost exclusively on the L-mode. Learning typically involves a flow from L-mode to R-mode. Experts don't work out problems more quickly by going through the same steps as beginners. They skip the steps by having better intuition about what needs to be done, then work backwards to find a logical justification for their snap judgement (and are often right into the bargain).

Time Slices

This is a key building block of the **VITAMIN-R** approach to helping you get things done.

Time Slice is our term for describing a "chunk of time". This is variously called a "time box", a "sprint" or a "pomodoro", but we prefer to use the connotation-free "time slice".

In a way, it's a misnomer. It should really be called "Attention Slice" but attention is hard to measure and time isn't.

In order to become more productive, we first need to accept that our attention is limited and that allocating more of it than we have, is not going to do us any good. Integral to our approach is that we accept that we can only *really concentrate* on

one thing at a time and for a relatively short amount of time at that. Very few people can *really* concentrate for an entire hour. The best racing drivers can do so for up to two hours, but not every day, and not more than once in any 24 hour period.

Our time slices are thus short. They don't all necessarily have the same length, but they very rarely go beyond the 45 minute limit. More typically, we'd recommend something between 15 and 25 minutes.

A time slice is thus a chunk of time in which we are working towards a well-defined specific goal that is easily reachable within that time frame.

The Importance of Guilt-Free Breaks

After concentrating for 45 minutes, we need to switch gears, so taking guilt-free breaks is an integral part of the **Vitamin-R** system.

Taking a break doesn't necessarily mean that we need to stop working. We just don't work with total focus. Ideally, we get up and leave our computer and do something different: perhaps return that call that we ignored during the time slice, check our mail, tweet if we can't help it.. or go off to the coffee corner or out for lunch.

Getting up and away from your computer also has obvious health benefits. Sitting cramped up in front of your computer screen merely tapping away at a keyboard for hours on end causes all kinds of health problems, ranging from run-of-the-mill tension headaches, blurred vision, aching backs, tense necks and sore shoulders to serious repetitive strain injuries (RSI) and Cumulative Trauma Disorders (CTD), such carpal tunnel syndrome, etc.

It is also a good idea at this stage to remember that that we can think in two modes, the "linear" L-mode and the temperamental "rich" R-mode. During the time slices, the time pressure and attentive focus put the L-mode firmly into the driving seat. The R-mode is still active, but works at a reduced pace because it shares some of its resources with the L-mode which is in overdrive mode.

The R-Mode has received some poor press because we are much more comfortable associating "logic" and "analysis" with intelligence rather than crediting vague and unreliable attributes such as "intuition" or "creativity". That's a shame because the R-mode is, in addition to all the mushy emotional stuff, also responsible for things such as pattern recognition, synthetic learning and non-verbal and visual problem solving. Paradoxically this is precisely how we become experts. It's how we just "know" something straight away but can't quite put it into words (hint: R-Mode doesn't do language).

We first learn something and do it as "beginners" using mostly L-mode. Once we become really good at it (that's the goal), we don't need to think about it anymore. An experienced car mechanic doesn't need to work out that your clutch is burned out from first principle. By the time you have finished your first sentence (I'm not sure..), he's recognized the pattern and already knows that "it's going to cost you". What comes after that is using the L-mode to double check the assumption and come up with a proper explanation (working out *why* he knew straight away without looking).

Keeping our brain busy with L-mode tasks for long periods thus does not only burn out the L-mode, but it blind-sides us to things that would otherwise be obvious to us.

Of course, these are all gross oversimplifications. Both modes almost always work together, but most of the time one of them is dominant.

Every hobby programmer recognizes this scenario: you just start writing a few lines and suddenly you are "in the zone". Five hours later you have written an amazing amount of code and you slip into bed (this picture isn't complete without the sun already rising outside) in the knowledge of a job well done. The next day, you wake up tired.. and with the realization that you could have done a *better job* in just 5 minutes.. strategic thinking is one of the things that L-mode suppresses.

Taking regular breaks allows our R-mode to catch up with what we've been busy doing and provides it with an opportunity to process, pattern match, associate and synthesize the experience. At the end of the break we can see more clearly how to proceed, and perhaps what needs a little more work or needs to re-done (hopefully better) from scratch.

Taking a break is thus nothing like "being idle". It allows us to re-charge our batteries, process what we've done and plan what we need to do next. Feeling guilty about taking breaks, is counterproductive as it reduces the effectiveness of our recovery and prevents us from letting go of the narrow L-mode focus and thus impedes our ability to thinking strategically.

We will now explore three different techniques for getting the best out of breaks: **timed breaks**, **priming** and **breadcrumbs**.

Timed Breaks

So we've seen that taking regular breaks is essential to being productive, but there is one caveat: you need to get back to work at some stage and as tempting as spending an entire day letting your R-mode get on with things might be, it won't get the job done.

Getting back to work after a break isn't just a matter of restoring your "working stack" from backup. There is also the small matter of overcoming your resistance to starting again. Of course, if your motivation is already high because your last time slice was a big hit that won't be much of problem.

On the other hand, open-ended breaks do lend themselves to endless procrastination and instead of having to overcome your resistance to get started once or twice a day, using short time slices in the manner suggested might mean having to overcome this resistance every half hour!

Something that really helps keep things moving smoothly and with little resistance are **timed breaks**.

If you decide up front that you will have a 20 minute break and you use some external means to keep track of that time, be that a wind-up timer or a superbly neat Macintosh application (hint), you can enjoy a truly guilt-free break and find it much easier to get going again as soon as the time has elapsed. In this way, you never really tell yourself "I've stopped working now" and you thus don't have to overcome the initial procrastination hurdle for each iteration of the process.

The Priming Technique

We have already discussed the beneficial effects of taking regular guilt-free breaks on our R-mode's performance. We can take this a step further and instead of just letting our R-mode get on with it, we can *plan* what we want it to work on while we are enjoying our break.

In particular, when we stop in the middle of a task, it is worth taking a few moments to fast forward and predict what the next stumbling block for that task might be. Most intellectually challenging and creative tasks require us to take difficult decisions based on incomplete information or make seemingly arbitrary choices between largely equivalent alternatives.

If one of those choices or decisions is waiting for us when we come back from lunch, the first thing that will happen is that we just will not know how to continue and all progress on the task will effectively be blocked until we make that choice. Worse yet, if we just flip a coin to get going again, chances are that we've taken the *wrong* decision and may never realize.

If we can anticipate such road blocks before we take our break, we can "**prime**" our R-mode to work on this decision or choice while we go for lunch. Sometimes we will obviously draw a blank and still be blocked by the problem when we get back, but frequently we will get that priceless insight "for free".

Priming itself is very easy. We just need to identify the problem and think about it for a few seconds. Just think "I'll need to have a decision on this by the time I come back".

If you want to, you can try to provide your brain with a bit of sensory input to make sure it gets the message. You can type or better yet handwrite or speak the question out loud.

We obviously don't have to wait until just before the break before we determine what the next road block is going to be. The Now & Later Board provides us with a convenient place to jot down any stray thoughts while they go through our heads and reviewing the "later" pad before we take our break is a best practice.

Leaving Breadcrumbs

In the world of productivity literature, Hänsel and Gretel and the Brothers Grimm are often overlooked and while using the "breadcrumbs" technique ultimately did not work for them (those pesky birds ruin things for everyone), we can all learn a valuable lesson from them:

"*Just wait, Gretel, until the moon rises, and then we shall see the crumbs of bread which I have strewn about, they will show us our way home again.*"

We can apply the same technique to mitigating the inevitable downside of having a break: you dump your working memory and will have to painfully rebuild it before you can become productive again. Instead of letting it evaporate into thin air, simply dump your "working stack" on a piece of paper or into a text editor. You don't need to write a novel; a few well chosen words can jog your memory and make it much easier to restore your working memory from its backup.

How Vitamin-R Puts All This To Work

In this section we'll see how **Vitamin-R** puts all these ideas together to create a smooth flow of work.

Workflow

In its simplest form, the **Vitamin-R** workflow works looks this:
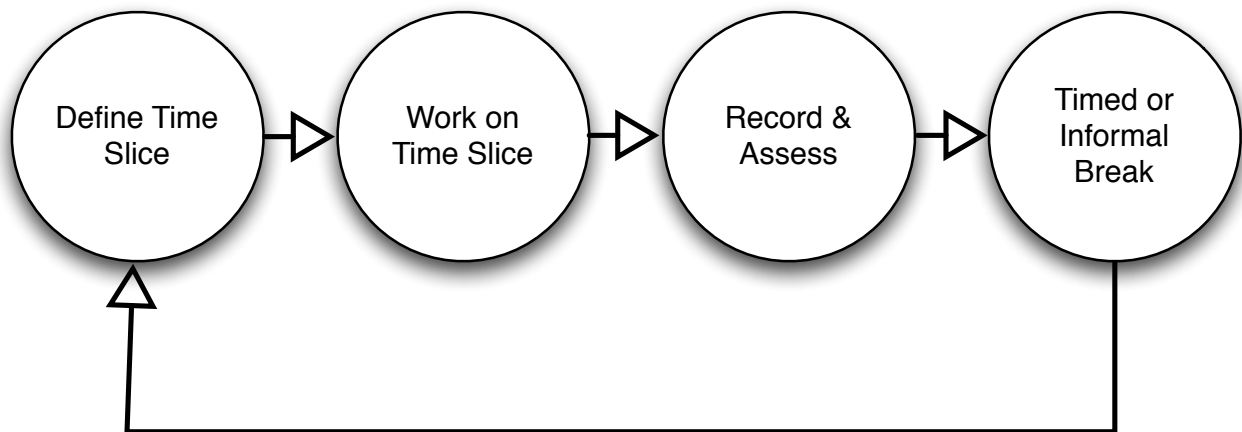
First, you define a time slice (the combination of an objective and a time frame), then you work for that amount of time on your objective. You then record and assess how you did (to allow you to become more aware of what works for you and keep you motivated by recording your successes) and have an at-your-desk or an away-from-your desk break. Then you start all over again.

Of course, **Vitamin-R** assists you throughout this process.

In the first stage, **Vitamin-R** walks you through the process of defining a time slice with a clear, specific and easily reachable objective and appropriate time frame.

While you are working on the time slice, **Vitamin-R** keeps time for you and helps you stay focused by reminding you of your objectives and the time pressure that you are under. The **Vitamin-R** logo in the menu bar displays the remaining time and optionally can periodically play ticking clock sounds or use speech synthesis to inform you of the time passing. The spoken text is fully customizable and can inform you on how much time has already elapsed, how much time is left or re-state your objective to knock you out of your day dreaming.

Once your time slice has elapsed, **Vitamin-R** will ask you to (very briefly) rate your attention level and if you have not managed to complete the time slice it guides you through the process of assessing whether you should continue immediately or take a break first. It will automatically record the details of your time slice and your rating of it to allow you to gain more awareness of our work habits.

You are then sent either on a timed or an open-ended break. At the end of the timed break, you'll return automatically to the "define time slice" stage. In an open-ended break, it's up to you to go to **Vitamin-R** and start a new iteration.

The Now, Later & Scratch Pads

In addition to the pure workflow and recording aspects of the tool, **Vitamin-R** also offers you the services of its **note pads** which acts as a notepad that you can use to keep track of the resources you need to achieve your current objective, jot down notes to dump your working memory, remember things for later and getting them out of your mind without having to worry about forgetting them, plan your current activity, keep snippets, etc.

While the note pads offer a full-featured rich text format (RTF) editor with niceties such as spell checking, different fonts and colors, drag & drop support, external links, picture embedding and much else besides, they are meant as a working memory note pads, not a word processor. To that end they have a number of additional features that should make it easier to use them in that manner.

There are three pads: the Now Pad, the Later Pad and the Scratch Pad. The Now Pad is for dumping your working memory to make it easier to get back to where you were should you get interrupted or run out of "chunks". The Later Pad is for everything that goes through your head but isn't needed right now. You won't be able to get it out of your head until you write it down *somewhere* because you'll be worrying about forgetting it. So put it in the Later Pad and then feel free to forget all about it. The Scratch Pad is a free form note taking tool for everything that does not fit neatly into the other categories.

Note pads are all very good but what should you put in them? Vitamin-R offers a number of ready made templates that get inserted at the beginning of the relevant sections and walk you through the questions to ask and the things to write down.

Finally, the **FastType** feature allows you to create action items, bulleted lists and checklists with a minimum of fuss by automatically translating certain characters into those formats. Try typing "+ Ring your brother" into the Now & Later Board and see what happens!

First Contact

Enough theory already. Let's go through an example of how to use Vitamin-R in practice.

Let's say that I have to write some documentation for my latest application. What the heck, let's call it "Vitamin-C". I'm dreading this because what kind of documentation should I write? what style should I write it in? do I start with a screencast? or with the user manual? the help book? In other words, I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed here and the temptation to procrastinate is definitely there.. so let's use Vitamin-R.

The application is already running, so I go to the right side of the menu bar and click on the (R) icon:
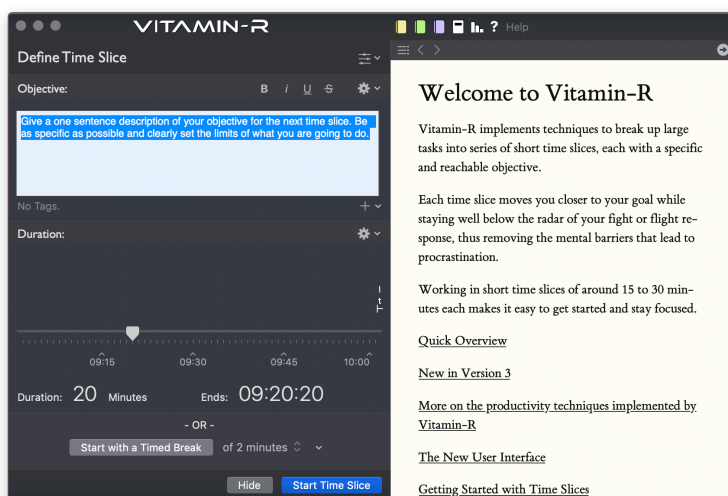
I'm greeted by the Vitamin-R window with the Help Pad open on the right. The Help Pad is a great place to learn about Vitamin-R and the productivity techniques it embeds. Many features have a ? button that leads to the relevant Help section. For now though, a quick click on the ? icon in the window title bar collapses the Help Book to give me a more streamlined interface.

The colorful icons to the right of the Vitamin-R logo in the window title bar open and close the pads that expand to the right of the window. They are in order: the Now Pad, the Later Pad, the Scratch Pad, the Log Book, the Statistics Pad and the Help Pad.

On second thought, I don't want my calendar events to interrupt me either, so I click on the little ⚙⌄ icon next to the "Duration:" title and select "Hide Calendar Events".

After that little bit of customization, let's get on with defining our objective:
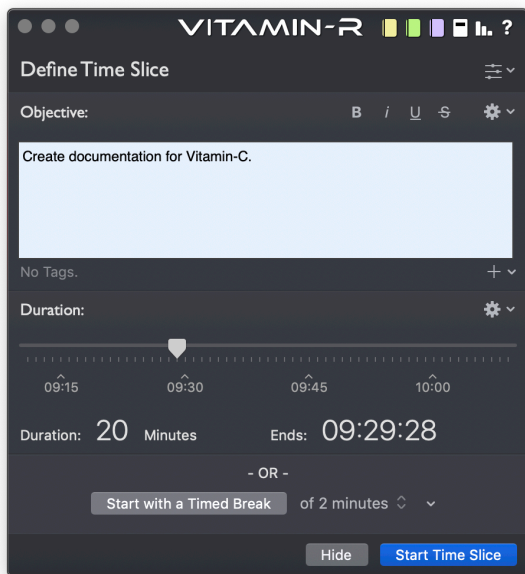
That's as clear as the objective is in my head right now.. but we've learned that this isn't a very good objective. There is some doubt that I'll be able to complete this in a single 15 to 30 minute time slice. It's very vague and gives me no indication of where to start and I'm feeling definite resistance to starting such an ill-defined, open-ended task. Perhaps it's time to go and grab a coffee.. No!

There are several ways of getting out of this conundrum and there are different ways to do so inside of Vitamin-R. I'll just show you what I'd do.

I'd go to the end of the line and type two dashes. As I type the second dash, FastType strikes out the entire line:
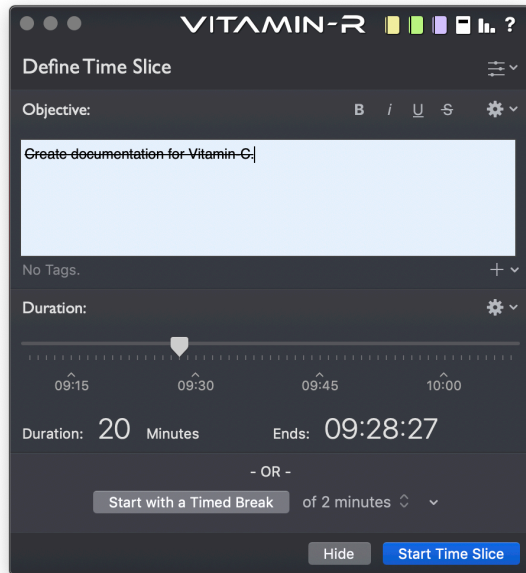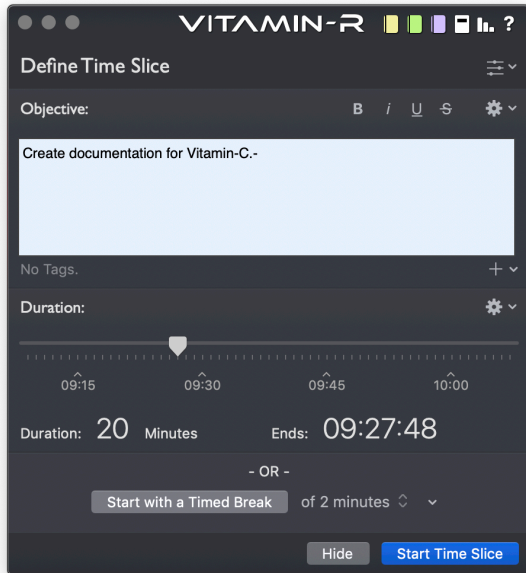
There are other ways of doing the striking out. I could have selected the line and clicked the little S icon on the top right for instance.

Alternatively, I could have hit Command-A to "Select All" and have just typed over offendingly vague objective.
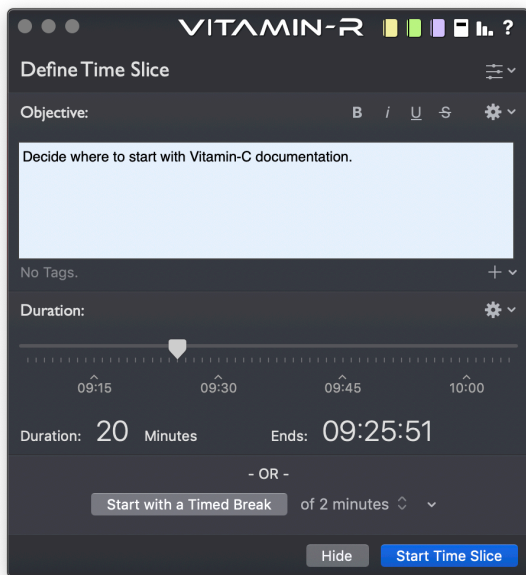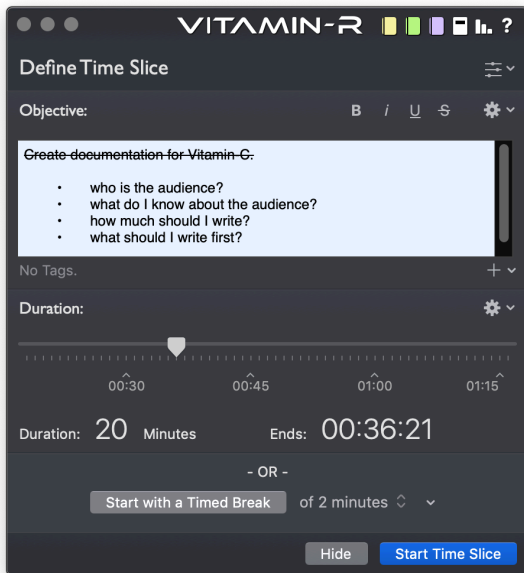

and started on my time slice, but I like thinking on paper and there's enough space right inside the Objective text view to do just that.
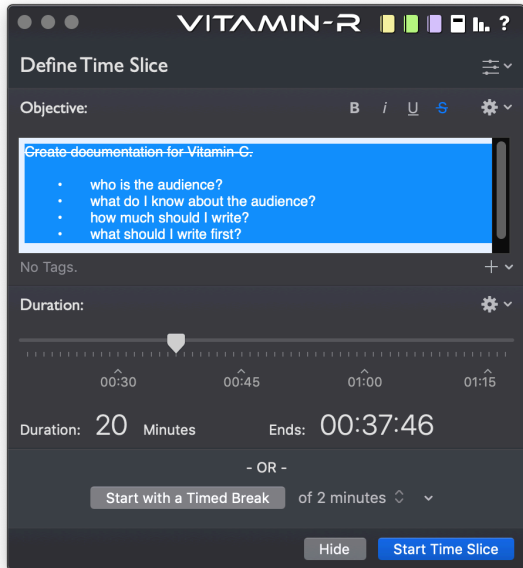
I'm going back to my struck out first draft and I'll add a bullet list of things that need doing. Fast Type will convert a "*" character followed by a space into a bullet point, so when I type the space I get:
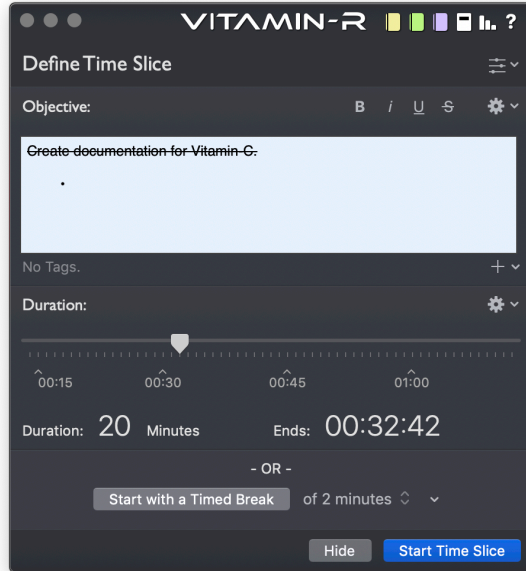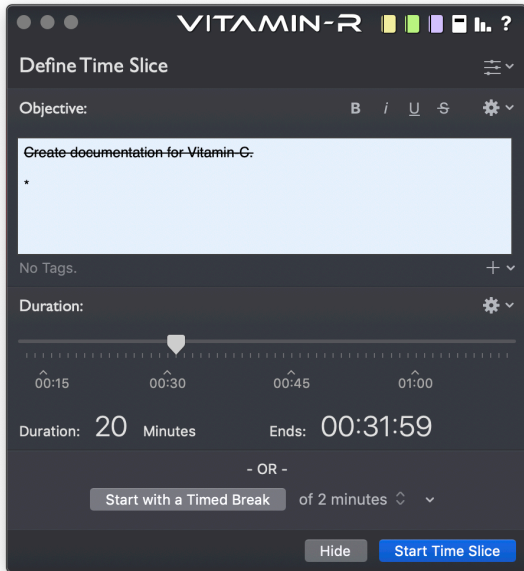
Let's think some more on paper:

Okay, I think I know where to start now.. I press Command-A to select all and get ready to enter my first objective:

But wait.. that's three objectives and which one should I start with? Let's start with the first one, "Decide which documents are needed". I could just delete the other items, but I'll actually select the whole thing and I'll copy it over to the Later Pad, which I tend to use a lot as an "aide mémoire".

I select everything with Command-A, press Command-C to copy it to the paste board, then I hit Command-Option-L to get the Later Pad to expand and focus and paste the whole thing into it.
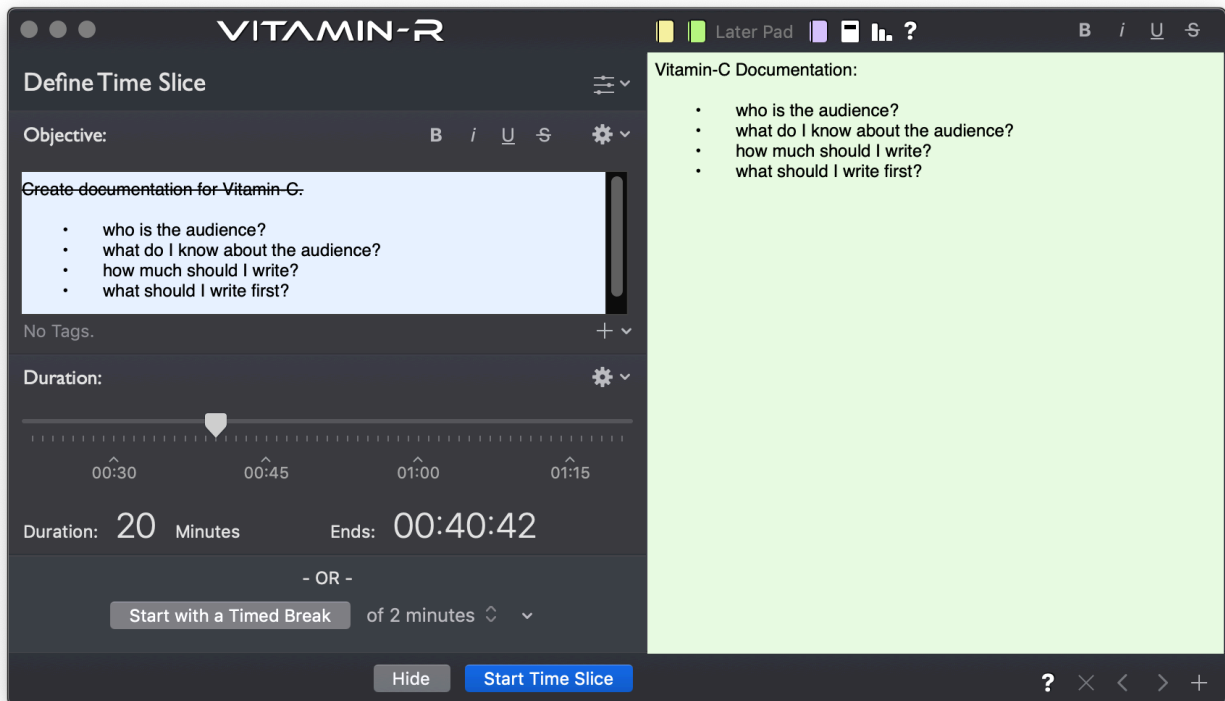
I press Command-Option-L again to make it disappear again. Then I edit the objective field down to my first, easily achievable, actionable and small objective:
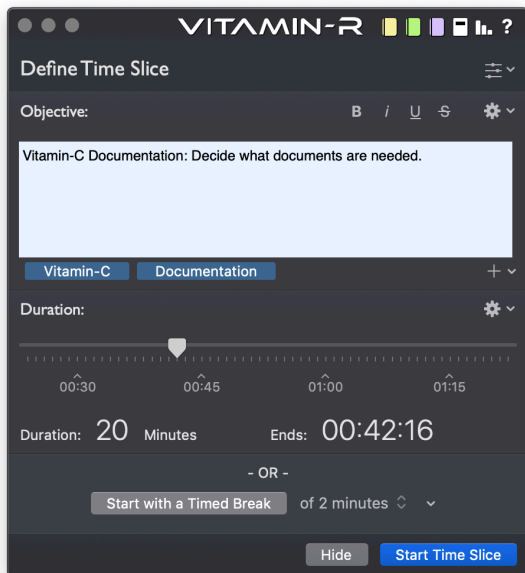
Since I'm an advanced user, I have also added the "Vitamin-C" and "Documentation" tags to the objective because I want to be able to easily find out how much time I've spent on the "Vitamin-C" project and "Documentation" activities in general. The "Report" statistic will let me filter based on those tags later on.

Choosing a **duration** for a time slice is more about how you feel than about the time it takes to complete the task. This seems counterintuitive at first. Surely, a task takes a given amount of time to finish and that's all there is to it. Actually most tasks can take radically different amounts of time to accomplish depending on many things. As we have seen in the "Time v. Attention" section, the scarce resource is really attention, not time, and the question is thus more about how much undivided attention I can bring to bear on my objective given my current state of mind.

If you feel a lot of resistance to getting started, I would recommend going for a 5 minute time slice. "Five minutes!?" I hear you say, "What am I going to achieve in 5 minutes?". You'll get started is what you will achieve.. and that is often the hardest thing. Once you've started, it's hard *not* to think about your task and the "rich" mode of your brain is forced to engage with your objective. In the early stages of a big task that is what you really need. If you feel highly motivated however, you'll quickly become frustrated with numerous breaks, so feel free to go all the way to the 45 minutes mark.

Sixty minutes is the largest time slice duration that you can pre-select, but 45 minutes should probably be your limit. This is because almost nobody can really concentrate fully for any longer than that. Note that it is possible to change the duration of the time slice during the time slice and again after the time slice elapses, so the duration that you choose is your *intended* duration and is not written in stone. Vitamin-R is not about coercion, it's about structuring your work so that it's easier to do the right thing than the wrong thing.

Note that if you do choose a longer duration, you'll probably run out of steam earlier, will neglect strategic thinking for longer and feel more tired and less motivated tomorrow. Just saying.

I'm deciding to go for my favorite slow but sustainable duration: 20 minutes. Okay, I'm not *that* motivated either and I'm looking forward to my guilt-free break because I want to make waffles.

I'm also way too lazy to click on the "Start Time Slice" button, so I start my time slice by hitting Command-Return which does the same thing but with less effort. There are lots and lots of keyboard shortcuts in Vitamin-R. Look through the menus to find them.

Normally, I would probably not stray too far from Pages for the duration of the Time Slice (after all I'm supposed to be thinking about documentation), but today I'll take some time to check out the features of Vitamin-R instead..

I have of course made sure that I'm not going to be interrupted. My iPhone is on "Do not disturb" mode, the answering machine is on, my door is closed and my "Do Not Disturb! or else!" sign is up.

Wait, what was I doing again?

I press Option-Shift-Command-O from within Pages and Vitamin-R reads my objective back to me. "Vitamin-C documentation: Decide which documents are needed". I knew it!

There are a bunch of system-wide keyboard shortcuts for common things, such as bringing up the Note Pads, ending the time slice prematurely, etc.. check out the "Preferences" in the "Vitamin-R" menu.

I feel particularly distracted today, so I have to check again. A quick click on the "R" in the title bar reveals my objective again:
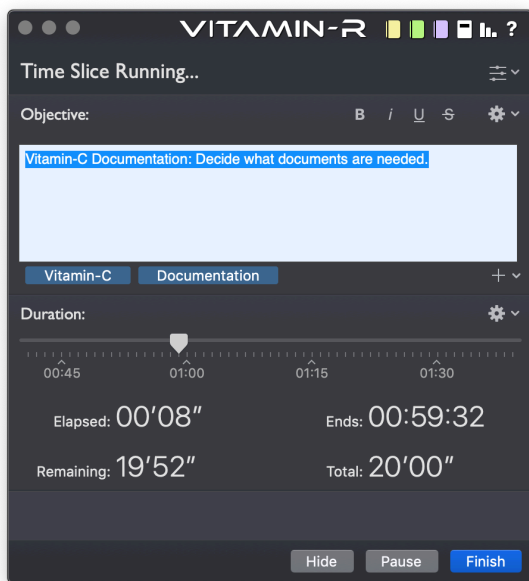
Command-H or clicking on the "R" icon once more will hide Vitamin-R. I could in fact have used the system-wide Vitamin-R shortcut Control-R to bring Vitamin-R up and hide it again. Let's try that a few times.. fun!

Also note the "Pause Time Slice" button that I can use should I ever get interrupted despite all my precautions.

Vitamin-R is announcing "5 minutes left" and I can hear the clock ticking in the background. Time to buckle up and get writing..

Version 3 of Vitamin-R introduces **soft breaks**, so instead of the time slice just elapsing and Vitamin-R stealing the focus, the arrival of the end of the time slice is announced by two tick sounds followed by a tock sound when the time slice actually elapses. If you are still typing or mousing, Vitamin-R will wait until you stop doing either for 3 seconds before it will come to the foreground automatically. At this stage, you have up to 30 seconds to finish off work before Vitamin-R will come to the front regardless.
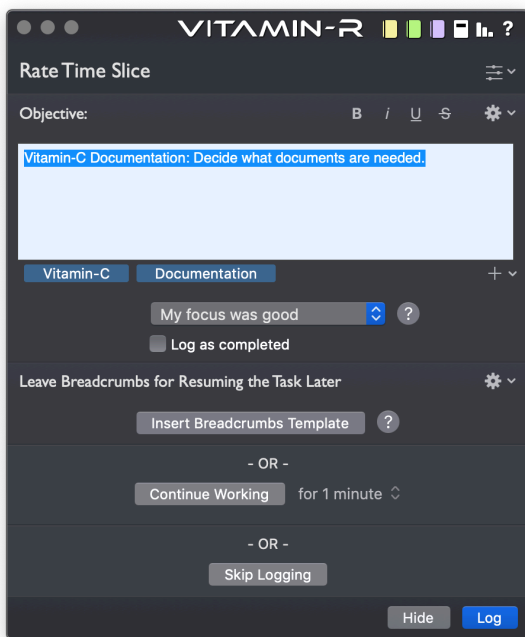
You can also easily extend the time slice duration by bringing the window to the front (*or* right clicking on the R icon in the menu bar):

User Manual
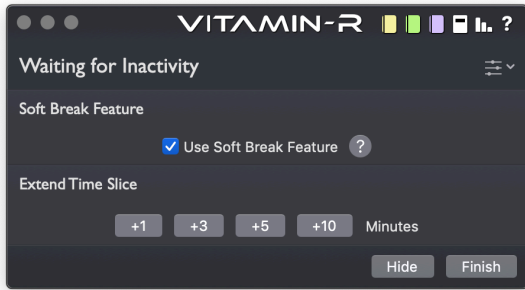
Time is up and Vitamin-R comes to the foreground again:
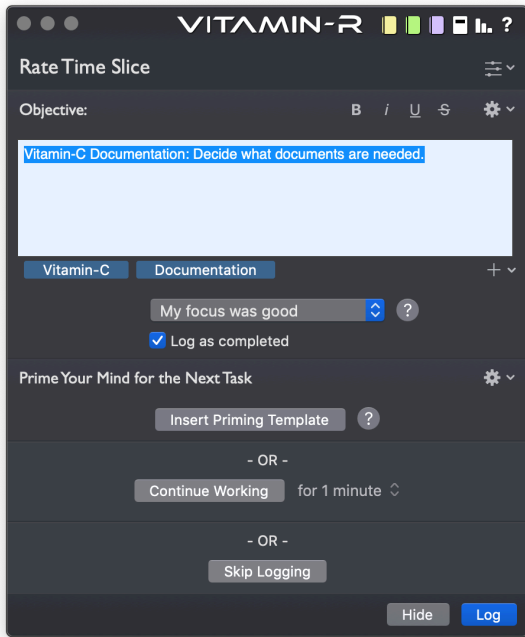
I'm not really finished and I was distracted, so let's adjust the settings accordingly.

The "Leave Breadcrumbs for Resuming the Task Later" section has magically appeared because I'm reporting that I'm not finished. Clicking on the "Insert Breadcrumbs Template" button would open the "Scratch" Pad and pre-fill it with a form designed to help you capture the kind of breadcrumbs that are actually useful.

I also have the option to continue working or to skip the logging. Note that if you want to un-clutter the interface, you can hide the options using the ⚙⌄ and ⎚⌄ icons next to the section titles.

Clicking on the "Log" button (or pressing Command-Return) gets us to the next stage in our workflow:
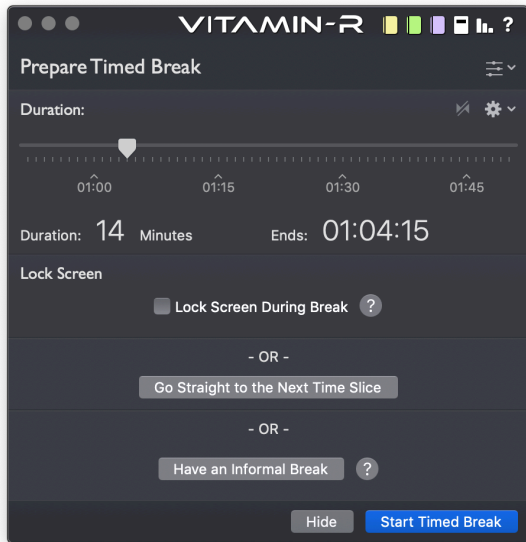
Choosing the right break duration is an art rather than a science. I like "Pomodoro"-style breaks where you take 3 short breaks followed by a longer break, so I'm going to click on the ▶ icon to the right of the "Duration:" title bar:
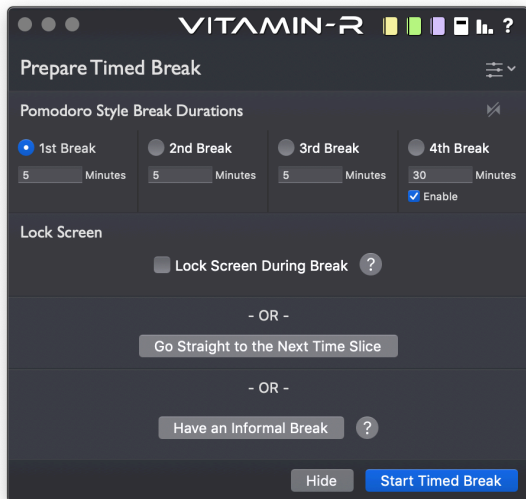
This switches to the "Pomodoro Style Break Durations" control. Clicking it again will return us to the previous control style. I'm happy with the 5/5/5/30 minutes preset, so I'm starting my break. Vitamin-R will keep track of which break I'm on for me.

Breaks are timed in much the same way as time slices are, but the default notifications during a break are less intrusive as you might not even be at your computer. Speaking about notifications, there are a **lot** of options for your notifications in the "Preferences". Check them out in the "Preferences…" menu item in the "Vitamin-R" menu.

We also have the option to lock the screen during the breaks. This will literally lock the entire screen and force you to go away from your Mac.
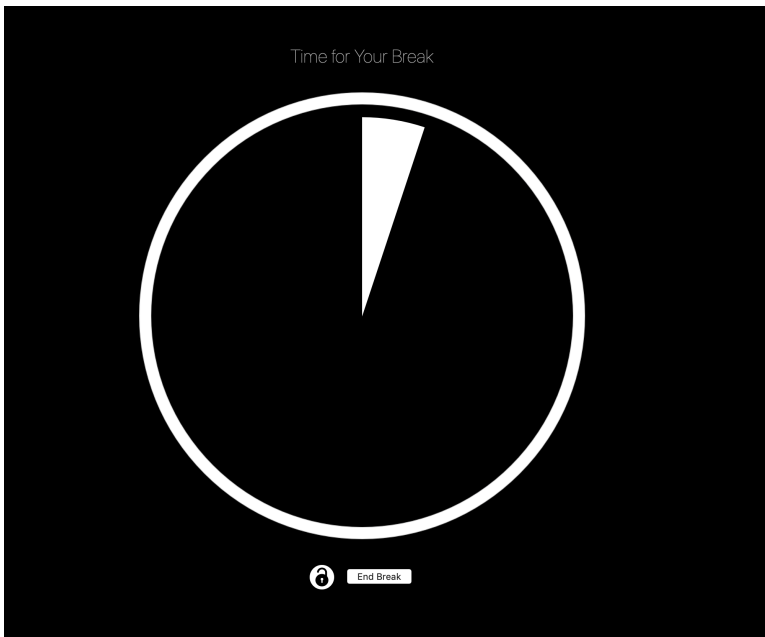

Every 30 seconds you get the option to end the break prematurely, but it is designed to feel like a cheat and make you feel bad about not respecting your break time.

In the "Prepare Timed Break" screen, we also had the option of having an "informal break":
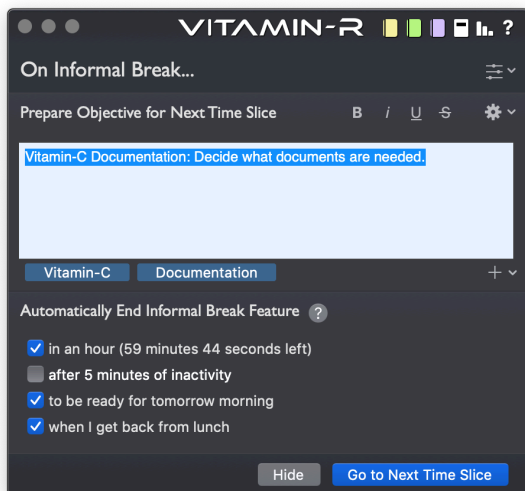
Informal breaks are not timed, which is both a good and a bad thing. As I mentioned, you don't need to use Vitamin-R all day, every day. You can just keep it for special times where you feel unmotivated or are working on tasks that need to be broken up, etc..

Informal breaks let you keep Vitamin-R ready without having to be on a timer. Of course, they are also invitations for sloth and time wasting to once more ruin your productivity. The options that you can see in the "Automatically End Informal Break Feature" work together with similar options that are well hidden under the popup menu of the "Define Time Slice" screen.

In reality, a timed break can be timed after all. When it elapses, Vitamin-R will automatically go back to the "Define Time Slice" step to be ready for the next time slice. There are particular settings that deal with the two times a day that you will

definitely step away from your Mac and where you may forget to get back to your time slices, potentially forever: lunch and the end of the day.

If you leave "to be ready for tomorrow morning" ticked, you will find Vitamin-R's "Define Time Slice" screen magically waiting for you when you unlock your Mac in the morning. The "when I get back from lunch" option does the same thing for your lunch hour.

The informal break screen also allows you to prepare an objective for the next time slice, so you are ready to go when you come back.

The Joy of Productivity Statistics

Vitamin-R's Statistics Pad provides many powerful tools that allow you to gain objective insights into the work patterns that actually work best for you.

The **Hour of the Day** statistic shows you how your concentration levels change throughout the day. The **Day of the Week** statistic does the same for the days of the week. Furthermore, you can tag each time slice with as many tags as you wish, so you can run your own experiments by using the tag or date filtering features of the statistics window.

You want to decide whether you are better off writing in your home office or in the coffee shop? Simply tag your time slices with "Location: Home Office" and "Location: Coffee Shop" and compare your concentration levels after a few days.
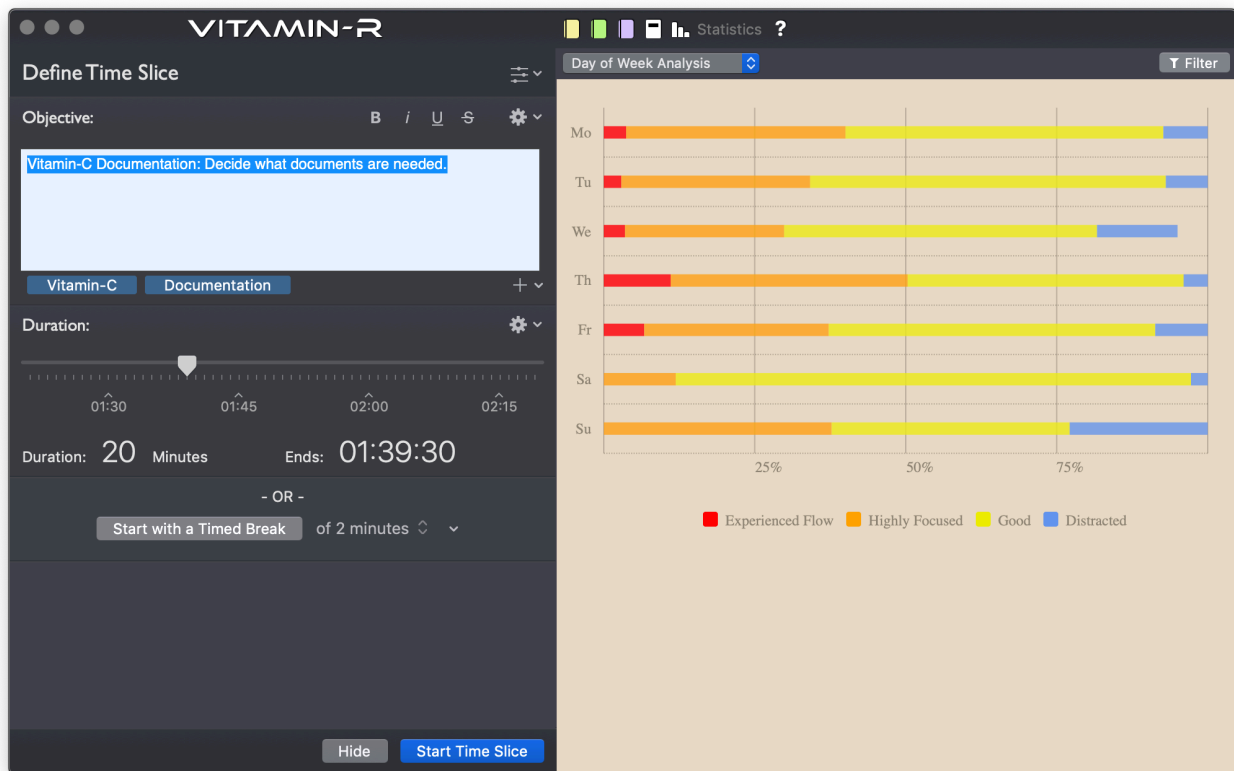
Dead Easy Time Tracking

Tagging your time slices can be a great help for many things besides arranging your work day. You can also use the Statistics window's "Report" statistic to keep track of different activities, clients, projects, locations, etc.

For no fuss time tracking of client projects, for instance, you can just tag your time slices with client and project data, such as "Client: John Herbert", "Project: NoFuss.com". The report statistic will then tell you exactly how much time, how many time slices and how many days you've been working on this combination of tags.

Disclaimer

This manual is full of pseudo-science mumbo jumbo that few people understand fully and those who do vehemently disagree with one another on many fundamental questions. The author has a Ph.D. in Computer Science (yes, really) not in Neuroscience (sad face). Of course, neither do most productivity gurus.

You should take a wholly pragmatic approach to this information: if it works for you, use it. If it doesn't, don't.

In any event, I'd be delighted to hear from you.

Recommended Reading

Below you will find a selection of books that I have found useful and you might want to read if you want to find out more about some of the ideas in this manual.

- David Allen, **Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity**, Penguin, 2002, ISBN 0142000280
- Matthew MacDonald, **Your Brain: The Missing Manual**, Pogue Press, 2008, ISBN 0596517785
- Mark F Bear et al., **Neuroscience: Exploring the Brain**, 3rd Edition, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2006, ISBN 0781760038
- Mark Forster, **Do It Tomorrow and Other Secrets of Time Management**, Hodder & Stoughton, 2008, ISBN 0340909129
- Neal A. Fiore, **The Now Habit: A Strategic Program for Overcoming Procrastination and Enjoying Guilt-Free Play**, Tarcher, 2007, ISBN 1585425524
- Francesco Cirillo, **The Pomodoro Technique**, Lulu.com, 2009, ISBN 1445219948
- Andrew Hunt, **Pragmatic Thinking and Learning: Refactor your Wetware**, Pragmatic Bookshelf, 2008, ISBN 1934356050
- Staffan Noteberg, **Pomodoro Technique Illustrated: Can You Focus - Really Focus - for 25 Minutes?**, Pragmatic Bookshelf, 2009, ISBN 978-1934356500
- Richard E. Nisbett, **Mindware: Tools for Smart Thinking**, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, ISBN 978-0374536244
- Cal Newport, **Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World**, Grand Central Publishing, ISBN 978-145558669