

# 3-2-1 Thursday

*“The most wisdom per word of any newsletter on the web.”*

**Note from James:** Each week, I send out my “3-2-1” newsletter to email subscribers. Each newsletter contains: 3 ideas from me, 2 quotes from others, and 1 question for you.

This PDF contains the 10 most popular 3-2-1 newsletters.

Enjoy!

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# 3-2-1: On systems vs. goals, identity-based habits, and the lessons of life

## 3 IDEAS FROM ME

I.

You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.

Your goal is your desired outcome. Your system is the collection of daily habits that will get you there.

This year, spend less time focusing on outcomes and more time focusing on the habits that precede the results.

For more on this concept, read [Atomic Habits](#).

II.

Your identity can hold you back:

- I'm terrible with directions.
- I have a sweet tooth.
- I'm bad at math.

...or build you up:

- I'm the type of person who doesn't miss workouts.
- I finish what I start.
- I read every day.

Build habits that reinforce your desired identity.

III.

For my final thought, another quote from [Atomic Habits](#):

Time magnifies the margin between success and failure. It will multiply whatever you feed it. Good habits make time your ally. Bad habits make time your enemy.

## 2 QUOTES FROM OTHERS

I.

**F.M. Alexander** on the importance of habits:

“People do not decide their futures, they decide their habits and their habits decide their futures.”

II.

**Zora Neale Hurston** on the lessons of life:

“There are years that ask questions, and years that answer.”

Source: [Their Eyes Were Watching God](#)

## 1 QUESTION FOR YOU

Think of the ultimate outcome you are hoping to achieve. Is there a path to accomplishing this where you would encounter less resistance?

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## 3-2-1: On mastery, learning to let go of trivial arguments, and bias

### 3 IDEAS FROM ME

I.

Mastery requires both impatience and patience.

The impatience to have a bias toward action, to not waste time, and to work with a sense of urgency each day.

The patience to delay gratification, to wait for your actions to accumulate, and to trust the process.

II.

When making plans, think big.

When making progress, think small.

III.

A simple strategy that will save you so many headaches: don't care about winning trivial arguments.

Did someone say something you don't agree with? Smile, nod, and move on to more important things.

Life is short. Learning to not care about having the last word will save you so much time.

## 2 QUOTES FROM OTHERS

I.

**Morgan Housel** on bias:

“Your personal experiences make up maybe 0.00000001% of what’s happened in the world but maybe 80% of how you think the world works... We’re all biased to our own personal history.”

Source: [\*Ideas That Changed My Life\*](#)

II.

Housel’s quote contrasts nicely with this advice from British writer **Norman Douglas**:

“There are some things you can’t learn from others. You have to pass through the fire.”

## 1 QUESTION FOR YOU

What are the most likely sources of pain in my life over the next year? How can I prepare for or prevent them?

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## 3-2-1: On comparison, consistency, and what's not going to change

### 3 IDEAS FROM ME

I.

To improve, compare little things.

- marketing strategies
- exercise technique
- writing tactics

To be miserable, compare big things.

- career path
- marriage
- net worth

Comparison is the thief of joy when applied broadly, but the teacher of skills when applied narrowly.

II.

If you want to be in the top 1% of a particular domain, then you can't take your cues from and follow the social norms of 99% of people.

This is harder than it sounds. We are wired to imitate. The further you want to climb, the more carefully you need to construct your tribe.

## III.

Most people need consistency more than they need intensity.

Intensity:

- run a marathon
- write a book in 30 days
- silent meditation retreat

Consistency:

- don't miss a workout for 2 years
- write every week
- daily silence

Intensity makes a good story. Consistency makes progress.

## 2 QUOTES FROM OTHERS

## I.

**Jeff Bezos**, founder of Amazon, on the importance of what's not going to change:

"I very frequently get the question: 'What's going to change in the next 10 years?' And that is a very interesting question; it's a very common one.

"I almost never get the question: 'What's not going to change in the next 10 years?' And I submit to you that that second question is actually the more important of the two — because you can build a business strategy around the things that are stable in time...

"In our retail business, we know that customers want low prices, and I know that's going to be true 10 years from now. They want fast delivery; they want vast selection. It's impossible to imagine a future 10 years from now where a customer comes up and says, 'Jeff I love Amazon; I just wish the prices were a little higher,' [or] 'I love Amazon; I just wish you'd deliver a little more slowly.' Impossible.

"And so the effort we put into those things, spinning those things up, we know the energy we put into it today will still be paying off dividends for our customers 10 years from now. When you have something that you know is true, even over the long term, you can afford to put a lot of energy into it."

Source: [\*Jeff Bezos at reInvent, November 2012\*](#)

II.

Investor **Josh Wolfe** on the best advice he ever received:

“The best, most useful advice I ever got was from Jim Watson, [the scientist who discovered DNA], over tea at his New York apartment.

3 words, 2 meanings: Avoid boring people.”

Source: [Josh Wolfe, Twitter](#)

## 1 QUESTION FOR YOU

The people who have already walked through the fire can help you do the same. Who are you surrounding yourself with?

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## 3-2-1: On editing your own work, being original, and failure

### 3 IDEAS FROM ME

I.

Optimists win in the long-run because their miscalculation of how long it will take or how likely it is to succeed motivates them to give it a try.

If you knew how hard it would be and how long it would take in the beginning then you might not try in the first place.

You can't guarantee success, but you can guarantee failure: never try.

II.

Your body adapts to what you eat.

Your mind adapts to what you consume.

Your soul adapts to what you love.

What you feed yourself today is who you become tomorrow.

## III.

One of the most underrated career skills that isn't really taught anywhere is editing your own writing.

Great writing is actually re-writing. Simplifying paragraphs. Clarifying key points. Double-checking for typos.

Good writing will impress in any job.

## 2 QUOTES FROM OTHERS

## I.

Author and journalist **Anna Quindlen** on being original:

"...nothing important, or meaningful, or beautiful, or interesting, or great ever came out of imitations. The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect [in the way people expect] and beginning the work of becoming yourself.

"This is more difficult, because there is no zeitgeist to read, no template to follow, no mask to wear. Set aside what your friends expect, what your parents demand, what your acquaintances require. Set aside the messages this culture sends, through its advertising, its entertainment, its disdain and its disapproval, about how you should behave.

"Set aside the old traditional notion of female as nurturer and male as leader; set aside, too, the new traditional notions of female as superwoman and male as oppressor. Begin with that most terrifying of all things, a clean slate. Then look, every day, at the choices you are making, and when you ask yourself why you are making them, find this answer: for me, for me. Because they are who and what I am, and mean to be.

...

"This will always be your struggle whether you are twenty-one or fifty-one. I know this from experience. When I quit the New York Times to be a full-time mother, the voices of the world said that I was nuts. When I quit it again to be a full-time novelist, they said I was nuts again. But I am not nuts. I am happy. I am successful on my own terms. Because if your success is not on your own terms, if it looks good to the world but does not feel good in your heart, it is not success at all."

Source: [\*1999 Mount Holyoke Commencement Speech\*](#)

II.

**John Gardner** on failure:

“Everyone fails. [The professional boxer and world heavyweight champion] Joe Louis said ‘Everyone has to figure to get beat some time.’ The question isn’t did you fail, but did you pick yourself up and move ahead?

“And there is one other little question: Did you collaborate in your own defeat? A lot of people do. Learn not to.”

Source: [\*Personal Renewal\*](#)

## 1 QUESTION FOR YOU

This week’s question builds on the quote from John Gardner above.

How are you collaborating in your defeat?

Don’t take it the wrong way. This question doesn’t mean your current situation is entirely your fault or even that it is 50/50. But the truth is you bring something into every interaction you will ever experience. (At the very least, you bring your attitude.)

How are you contributing to your own struggle?

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## 3-2-1: On building better habits, focusing on the process, and optimism

### 3 IDEAS FROM ME

I.

New goals don't deliver new results. New lifestyles do.

And a lifestyle is not an outcome, it is a process. For this reason, all of your energy should go into building better habits, not chasing better results.

*Note: For the ultimate habit-building guide, see [Atomic Habits](#).*

II.

How to Be Unhappy:

- stay inside all day
- move as little as possible
- spend more than you earn
- take yourself (and life) too seriously
- look for reasons why things won't work
- always consume, never contribute
- resent the lucky and successful
- never say hello first
- be unreliable

Invert for happiness:

- get outside each day
- move: walk, exercise, dance
- spend less than you earn
- view life as play
- be the one who looks for solutions
- develop a bias to contribute and create
- learn from the lucky and successful
- be the first to say hello
- be reliable

III.

Some people need more focus. Others need to broaden their perspective.

Some people need to try harder. Others need to stress less.

Some people need to care more. Others need to let it go.

The secret is you are both people. The key is to know which one you are in this moment.

## 2 QUOTES FROM OTHERS

I.

A line from the **Bhagavad Gita**, the ancient Sanskrit scripture, on focusing on the process rather than the results:

“You are only entitled to the action, never to its fruits.”

Source: [\*Bhagavad Gita\*](#), chapter 2, verse 47

II.

Co-authors, **Rosamund and Benjamin Zander**, on optimism:

“People who describe the glass as half full are not delusional optimists. In fact, they are more based in reality because they are describing a substance that is actually in the glass. They are describing reality as it is. The cynic who describes the glass as half empty is focusing their energy on something that is not actually there.”

Source: [\*The Art of Possibility by Rosamund Zander and Benjamin Zander\*](#)

## 1 QUESTION FOR YOU

What are you avoiding just because you know the answer is painful?

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## 3-2-1: On mental toughness, self-awareness, and providing value

### 3 IDEAS FROM ME

I.

The fastest way to raise your level of performance:

Cut your number of commitments in half.

II.

Before you ask for readers, write the article you wish you could read. Before you ask for the sale, create the product you wish you had.

Before you need support, be the supportive friend. Before you need love, be the loving partner.

Always give value before you ask for value.

III.

You are only as mentally tough as your life demands you to be.

An easy life fashions a mind that can only handle ease. A challenging life builds a mind that can handle challenge. Like a muscle that atrophies without use, mental strength fades unless it is tested.

When life doesn't challenge you, challenge yourself.

## 2 QUOTES FROM OTHERS

I.

Japanese writer **Haruki Murakami** on kindness and disagreement:

“Always remember that to argue, and win, is to break down the reality of the person you are arguing against. It is painful to lose your reality, so be kind, even if you are right.”

*Note: For more on this idea, see [Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds](#)*

*Source: I found this quote through [Kazuki Yamada](#), but it is believed to have been originally mentioned in the Japanese version of [Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki](#) by Murakami.*

II.

**Anne Frank** on self-awareness and personal reflection:

“How noble and good everyone could be if, every evening before falling asleep, they were to recall to mind the events of the whole day and consider exactly what has been good and bad. Then, without realizing it, you try to improve yourself at the start of each new day; of course, you achieve quite a lot in the course of time.

*Source: [The Diary of Anne Frank: The Revised Critical Edition](#)*

## 1 QUESTION FOR YOU

Will this matter in six months?

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## 3-2-1: On increasing intelligence, networking, and shooting for the top

### 3 IDEAS FROM ME

I.

Qualities that lead to increasing intelligence:

1. The curiosity to experiment and explore.
2. The honesty to observe the world as it is, not as you wish it to be.
3. The humility to kill your favorite ideas when you learn something new.
4. The consistency to repeat this cycle for life.

II.

The most effective networking strategy I've found has nothing to do with conferences, cocktail hours, cold emails, or any of the common ideas you hear.

- 1) Do interesting things.
- 2) Share them publicly.

Repeat those two strategies and you'll become a magnet. Like-minded people will come to you.

III.

In the long-run (and often in the short-run), your willpower will never beat your environment.

## 2 QUOTES FROM OTHERS

### I.

**Tim Grover** was the athletic trainer used by Michael Jordan (and many elite NBA players). Here he is describing the three things he asks of every player:

“I don’t care how much you can lift, how fast you can run, how many pull-ups you can do, or whether you can hit a three while blindfolded. There are only three things I ask of every client... Show up, work hard, and listen. That’s it. It requires no talent, no special genetics, or any skill whatsoever to show up, work hard, and listen.”

He adds:

“When I train my athletes, it’s a dictatorship with three rules: show up, work hard, and listen. If you can do those three things, I can help you. If you can’t we have no use for each other. I will bust my ass for you every way possible, but I expect you to do the same for yourself. I’m not going to work harder than you do for your benefit. Show me you want it, and I’ll give it to you.”

Source: [\*Relentless by Tim Grover\*](#)

### II.

The author **Ursula K. Le Guin** on shooting for the top:

Interviewer: “Against whom were you measuring your work?”

Le Guin: “Charles Dickens. Jane Austen. And then, when I finally learned to read her, Virginia Woolf. Shoot for the top, always. You know you’ll never make it, but what’s the fun if you don’t shoot for the top?”

Source: [\*Ursula K. Le Guin, The Art of Fiction No. 221\*](#)

## 1 QUESTION FOR YOU

Here's a simple question with potentially wide-reaching implications:

Can my current habits carry me to my desired future?

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## 3-2-1: On minimalism, reading, status, and friendship

### 3 IDEAS FROM ME

I.

Focus is the art of knowing what to ignore.

II.

On minimalism:

The goal is not to have the least amount of things, but the optimal amount of things.

Two important footnotes:

- 1) The optimal amount depends on your goals.
- 2) The optimal amount is almost always less than you think.

III.

Reading is like a software update for your brain.

Whenever you learn a new concept or idea, the “software” improves. You download new features and fix old bugs.

In this way, reading a good book can give you a new way to view your life experiences. Your past is fixed, but your interpretation of it can change depending on the software you use to analyze it.

## 2 QUOTES FROM OTHERS

I.

**Jeffrey D. Sachs**, an economist and author, on money, spending, and status:

“Living doesn’t cost much, but showing off does.”

Source: [\*The Price of Civilization: Reawakening American Virtue and Prosperity\*](#)

II.

**Seneca**, one of the great Roman Stoic philosophers, on friendship:

“...nothing delights the mind so much as fond and loyal friendship. What a blessing it is to have hearts that are ready and willing to receive all your secrets in safety, with whom you are less afraid to share knowledge of something than keep it to yourself, whose conversation soothes your distress, whose advice helps you make up your mind, whose cheerfulness dissolves your sorrow, whose very appearance cheers you up!”

Source: [\*On the Shortness of Life by Seneca\*](#)

## 1 QUESTION FOR YOU

Am I tolerating my flaws or improving them?

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# 3-2-1: On getting started as a writer, the benefits of teaching, and growing old

## 3 IDEAS FROM ME

I.

It's never been a better time for self-motivated people.

Anyone connected to the internet has the education power of a university and the distribution power of a media company at their fingertips.

Curiosity, courage, and persistence are the new gatekeepers.

II.

The most dangerous items on your to-do list are the ones that look like opportunities, but are actually distractions.

III.

3 tips for getting started as a writer:

- 1) Publish on a schedule. Consistency develops ability.
- 2) Share your writing publicly. Writing is a magnet. It attracts like-minded people.
- 3) Write about what fascinates you. You don't need to be an expert. Curiosity leads to expertise.

## 2 QUOTES FROM OTHERS

I.

Author **Robert Heinlein** on the benefits of teaching:

“When one teaches, two learn.”

II.

British philosopher **Bertrand Russell** on how to grow old. (Russell wrote this at age 81 and went on to live another 16 years.)

“The best way to overcome [the fear of death]—so at least it seems to me—is to make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede, and your life becomes increasingly merged in the universal life.

“An individual human existence should be like a river: small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past rocks and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being.

“The person who, in old age, can see life in this way, will not suffer from the fear of death, since the things he or she cares for will continue. And if, with the decay of vitality, weariness increases, the thought of rest will not be unwelcome.

“I should wish to die while still at work, knowing that others will carry on what I can no longer do and content in the thought that what was possible has been done.”

Source: [\*How to Grow Old\*](#)

## 1 QUESTION FOR YOU

In what ways are you a difficult person to work with?

What can you learn from that?

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## 3-2-1: On mistakes of ambition vs. sloth, innovation, and being reliable

### 3 IDEAS FROM ME

I.

Your 1st blog post will be bad, but your 1000th will be great.

Your 1st workout will be weak, but your 1000th will be strong.

Your 1st meditation will be scattered, but your 1000th will be focused.

Put in your reps.

II.

“Make mistakes of ambition and not mistakes of sloth.”

—Machiavelli

Mistakes of ambition:

- failing on a big goal
- creating something nobody wants

Mistakes of sloth:

- not attempting a big goal
- consuming instead of creating

Mistakes of ambition teach. Mistakes of sloth comfort.

## III.

It's crazy how often I feel like I need to resolve some big problem in my life when all I really need is one of the following:

- 1) A glass of water
- 2) A 10-minute walk outside
- 3) A good night of sleep

Three simple things that resolve many of the stresses and anxieties of daily life.

## 2 QUOTES FROM OTHERS

## I.

**Stewart Butterfield**, the founder of Slack, on the true definition of innovation:

“The best — maybe the only? — real, direct measure of ‘innovation’ is change in human behaviour. In fact, it is useful to take this way of thinking as definitional: innovation is the sum of change across the whole system, not a thing which causes a change in how people behave. No small innovation ever caused a large shift in how people spend their time and no large one has ever failed to do so.”

Source: [\*We Don't Sell Saddles Here\*](#)

## II.

**Charlie Munger** on the importance of being reliable:

“[If you want to guarantee a life of misery], be unreliable. Do not faithfully do what you have engaged to do. If you will only master this one habit you will more than counterbalance the combined effect of all your virtues, howsoever great. If you like being distrusted and excluded from the best human contribution and company, this prescription is for you. Master this one habit and you can always play the role of the hare in the fable, except that instead of being outrun by one fine turtle you will be outrun by hordes and hordes of mediocre turtles and even by some mediocre turtles on crutches.

“I must warn you that if you [do the opposite] it may be hard to end up miserable, even if you start disadvantaged. I had a roommate in college who was and is severely dyslexic. But he is perhaps the most reliable man I have ever known. He has had a wonderful life so far, outstanding wife and children, chief executive of a multibillion dollar corporation. ...you simply can't count on your other handicaps to hold you back if you persist in being reliable.”

Source: [\*How to Guarantee a Life of Misery\*](#)

## 1 QUESTION FOR YOU

Do you really need to think more, or is it simply a matter of doing the work?

# Read More

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