



## 5 Steps to Organizing Any Room Like A Professional

So you've decided to organize your garage, your office, your kitchen or your master closet. Guess what? It doesn't matter what room it is or even what size of an area it is. It could be your entire home or just your junk drawer. The process is exactly the same, regardless of size.

I'm going to share the method I use – a method used by almost every experienced residential organizer in the country. You master this, and you can organize practically anything in your home. The only thing this method is not designed for is organizing paper. That is a different process, which I will share with you at a future date. For now, if you come across paper during your organizing project, just set it aside or store it in banker box.

Just like any home improvement project, before you get started, you will need some basic tools. Here's what I recommend:

- **Large plastic contractor or trash can liner bags** (for lighter-weight items to donate.)
- **Tall translucent trash bags** (for real trash, except recyclables)
- **Large paper lawn bags** (for paper recyclable items such as old magazines, discolored wrapping paper, excess paper bags, junk mail, discarded notebooks, etc.)
- **2 Banker boxes with handles** (use one to transport items that live in other parts of your home and label this box, "Lives Elsewhere." Use the other box to contain personal documents or files that you come across. You can sort through these later.)
- **2-3 (or more as needed) small and medium moving boxes** (for heavier items you want to donate, such as books or housewares)
- **2-3 paper or reusable shopping bags** (for items you intend to give as gifts)
- **Black marker** (e.g., Sharpie, for labeling boxes going outside your home for donation, friends, etc.)
- **Large folding table** or other clear surface (for sorting items)
- **Cleaning supplies** such as dust cloth, paper towel, warm water or surface cleaner (for light cleaning of areas you intend to return items to)
- **Music** (optional)



The five-step process to organizing your home is called the S.P.A.C.E system. It was developed by one the leading professionals in the field of personal productivity and professional organizing, Julie Morgenstern, author of *Organizing From the Inside Out* and several other books.

S.P.A.C.E. is an acronym for: **SORT, PURGE, ASSIGN, CONTAIN and EQUALIZE.** I adapted this system for my clients who want to get organized in preparation for moving, remodeling or simply enjoying their home more. The key to using this system is to do each step in order. I can't stress this enough. Resist the urge to toss things before you've sorted them. Don't try to decide where you can store something before you've determined whether or not you even want it. And most importantly, don't go out shopping for furniture or any permanent organizing products such as bins, space savers, containers or storage systems until *after* you've disposed of what you no longer want. Otherwise you're just wasting your space, time and money.

The S.P.A.C.E. method is a practice, rather than a one-time process. Don't aim for perfection. Perfection is the enemy of progress when it comes to organizing.

I have included additional TIPS for each section. TIPS give examples of how to make each step work better. I will take you through each step of the S.P.A.C.E system in order.

## **1. SORT - Grouping like items together**

Sorting is the key to every step that follows and if done well, makes the rest of the process that much easier. Sorting items is like discovering long lost treasure. It informs you about what types of things you own and have kept, consciously or not. Sorting also allows you to see the size or quantity of items, which makes it easier to determine the size of storage needed. Sorting also makes it easy to discover redundancies in what you own, such as realizing you have 16 pairs of black pants or 22 yellow highlighters or 63 food storage containers.

If you walk through a store, any store, most items are sorted by category. Stores do this to make it easier for customers to find what they are looking for. The same is needed for organizing. It is much easier to make decisions about what you want to keep vs. toss if you sort before you do anything else.

TIP: Resist the urge to toss or give away any item until you have grouped it with like items in that area. Don't worry if you have other like items in other parts of your home. Just focus on the one area.



TIP: Make sure you have surface space available to sort. Use a folding table or clear an area before you start sorting. Don't use the floor.

TIP: If you are organizing a small space, such as a desk drawer it's best to sort items by "type." For example, separate pens, pencils, paper clips, staples, etc. If you are organizing a large space, such as a garage, it's best to group by "category," for example tools, automotive supplies, sporting goods, camping gear, etc.

## **2. PURGE - Separating out things you love, need or use from those you don't**

The goal of this step is simple but not easy. Decide whether you are keeping something. This gives you a great opportunity to decide if you no longer want, use or enjoy a particular item. Purge does not just mean, "toss." Some organizers use the term "edit" or "part with." Either way, this is your chance to *consciously* let go of something that no longer brings value to your life now! It's helpful to think of the PURGE step like a shopping trip in reverse. Instead of buying new stuff, you are buying real estate in your home for the things you do want, love or use.

For some people, this is the hardest step. Things have many meanings in our lives. As we assign meaning to what we own, those things take on additional value. This often makes it difficult to part with something even when it no longer serves us. For example, we assign extra value to something because someone important gave it to us. I call this *gifted value*. But if you don't like a gift or you never use it, or it makes you unhappy, then allowing it to take up valuable "real estate" in your home is neither useful to you nor respectful to the person who gave it to you.

Don't keep something just because it may be useful. Almost everything can be used, from toilet paper rolls to construction materials. Keep something because you actually use it. Many of us had parents who grew up during the depression. Supplies were scarce. Re-purposing something to make it last longer was a survival necessity in a time of war. Ask yourself if you use it now or if there's a better than 50% probability that you will use it in the coming year. If your answer is no, then consider letting it go. Aim for purging as much as you can.

TIP: Don't just keep something because it can be used. Keep something because you *do* use it.



TIP: If an item is no longer useful or beloved to you, and you believe it has market value, you can either sell it, donate it or gift it. But do not get caught up in deciding how to do this during the PURGE process. It will just slow you down.

TIP: Don't waste your time selling items worth less than \$50. Almost anything that is usable can be donated, given away or recycled. If you don't want to contribute to the problem of landfills, contact your local waste management office, energy company or local government official to learn about options for recycling. Keep in mind, there may be fees to pick up or recycle large items like appliances or mattresses.

The kinds of items most organizers recommend disposing include: real trash; expired food; paper trash; cardboard; stained, contaminated or damaged items (that cannot be easily fixed or cleaned); toxic or hazardous items.

In addition to disposing, you can PURGE items through donation or gifting. These include: multiples of identical items; items you no longer use or wear; items that have bad memories associated with them; anything that can be cheaply or easily replaced; materials that could be repurposed by others, such as art, construction or educational supplies, or things you simply don't want or would not use again.

When you find things that you want to keep but belong in other areas of your house, place them in the "lives elsewhere box" for returning to their rightful place. Don't waste your energy returning these items in the middle of an organizing project. You will only get distracted.

TIP: If you find it difficult to toss anything or if you are getting stuck on this step, consider seeking the guidance of a trusted friend, professional organizer or therapist to help you understand and work through these obstacles.

TIP: Use the black contractor bags to contain usable items that you no longer want or use and plan to donate. As you fill the bags, move them out of the space you are working in to clear the area and see the progress you are making.

TIP: If you're not sure whether to purge something, ask yourself if you would buy it again if you saw it in a store today.



### **3. ASSIGN - Choosing a room or storage area where something will permanently live when it's not being used**

Whatever is left after you sort and purge, is what you've decided to keep. Just as you live in a home, *everything in your home needs a home*. When you decide where something lives in your home you are giving it a home. Why is this important? If you plop something down on a surface, avoiding the step of assigning or giving it a home, you are in essence making it "homeless." The more homeless items you have, the more clutter you'll experience.

If you are a visual person and tend to put things where you can see them, making something just visible does not guarantee you will find it later. This is especially true if putting things where you can "see" them is your only method of organizing. The more items on a surface, the harder it is to find what you're looking for because your eye can't focus. It just sees a big blob of stuff.

When you assign a home, you are saying, "this item lives here." This doesn't mean it stays there all the time. It means this is where it should return when it's not in use. Assigning a home is what enables you to find what you need when you need it. It goes hand in hand with containing. But it has more to do with the area of your home in which it "lives," such as in the kitchen, bedroom, closet or piece of furniture -- as opposed to on a shelf, or in a drawer or box.

This is an especially helpful concept when you are organizing a large area and discover an item that lives somewhere other than where you found it. This is when you will use your "lives elsewhere" box. You simply place the item in the "lives elsewhere box" and when you are done organizing take the box and deposit these items where they live. Don't worry about finding the perfect container for them immediately; just get them to their right home. You can always organize that space later.

Incidentally, if you have kids, they resonate with this idea of everything having a home. If you want them to "clean up" their toys, help them assign a home to them and use an age-appropriate container (more about this below).

TIP: If you can't figure out where something should live, think about how and where you personally use it. For example, if you have a guitar and like to play it in your bedroom, then consider having it live there. Ask "where do I like to use this item or where would I look for this item if I needed it?" Answering either of these questions about a particular item will help you "assign" its home.



TIP: Assign a home for something based on where *you* use it. Just because your friends or family may keep something in one room, doesn't mean that will work for you. For example, if you know you only use placemats on your dining room table, you can assign them to the dining room rather than the kitchen, even if the kitchen is where your mother keeps her placemats.

#### **4. CONTAIN - To keep something from spreading and within defined limits**

Although it's the 4th step in the process, many people erroneously start with this step. This is because when we're in a hurry to get things tidied up, more often than not, we just contain them in or on the first horizontal space we can find. Organizers jokingly call this the FHS method of organizing - First Horizontal Space. Most stores that sell organizing systems or products -- from bins to entire closet systems -- will want you to start with them. The message that the "perfect" product will make you more organized is a myth. All the containers in the world won't make you more organized. It starts with knowing what you have, having what you want, knowing where it lives and only then -- deciding how best to contain it.

**Being organized is a series of habits, behaviors, decisions and thought processes, which, over time, become second nature.**

Containers are not just bins or boxes. An item can also be "contained" on a shelf or surface, or in a closet, cabinet or cupboard. The idea of a container is to keep like items together or claim a space for one item. For example, a specific wall can be a "container" for a piece of art. A utensil holder is the ideal container because everyone knows how to use it. It contains like items (utensils) sorted by type (forks, knives, spoons) and contained accordingly.

The best container will be big enough to hold what it contains, small enough to fit the space where it lives, and suited to a person's individual organizing "personality."

A "visual" person, such as an artist or child, may prefer things to be seen so they can find them easily or just look at them, whereas a more cerebral person may prefer items to be "put away" in a closed drawer or cabinet. A "visual" person is not necessarily less organized. Consider that "visual" organizers design every retail environment in this country.



In general, each section of a container should contain no more than 2 related items and ideally just one. For example, a desk drawer may contain only office supplies. If you insert a drawer organizer into the drawer, each compartment of the organizer would contain one type of item: pens in one compartment, paper clips in another, note pads in another. This is true for the big stuff too. Say you are organizing your garage. Contain all your sporting goods in one area and all your gardening equipment in another. Find appropriately sized containers for things like bike parts, golf balls, ski-wear, large balls, protective equipment, etc.

TIP: Claim a room or space by displaying items that hold visual or sentimental appeal. Use a single or small grouping of decorative items such as painted or metallic boxes, photographs, ceramics, candles or a few special books to claim a dining room table, sideboard or desktop. A completely cleared surface can feel sterile or lonely and will attract new clutter. Placing a few things you love on a surface claims the space as *yours* as well as for what it was intended.

## **5. EQUALIZE - To make things equal, uniform, consistent or to adjust something back to its original level.**

From an organizing standpoint, the last definition is the most fitting. To equalize is the thing you do to maintain your newly organized space. It's the equivalent of putting things back where they belong. The more effectively you do the first four steps - SORT, PURGE, ASSIGN & CONTAIN - the easier it is to equalize.

Equalize means getting things back to the way you had them when you finished your organizing project. It's the thing we all are taught as kids: put things in their right place when we're done using them. It's also an opportunity to review and re-evaluate all the earlier steps to see if they make sense in your day-to-day life.

For example, let's say you assigned some formal clothing to your bedroom but you find that you only need these clothes once in a while. You can re-assign them to a closet in your guest room.

**If you only keep what you need, want and use, and you know where it lives, have a suitable place to contain it, then maintain the space regularly, staying organized is that much easier.**



But life is dynamic and always changing. New things replace the old. We see something we like and we buy it. Friends give us things we may or may not like. A drawer or closet track needs repairing and we don't have time to address it, so the stuff gets left out. Someone important to us dies and we find we hold on to their stuff long after they've passed. Over time, our home fills with memories and just plain stuff. Life gets busy, things pile up and before we know it the clutter (re)appears.

The more attention you bring to the first four steps, the easier it will be to maintain your organized space going forward. You can't put something back where it belongs if you never decided where it lived in the first place!

TIP: If you want to involve your family in an organizing project, make sure you all agree on where something lives so everyone can find it and return it to the same place when they are done. The person who decides whether or not to keep something is what I call the *Decision-Owner*. You can only be the decision-owner if an item belongs to you or someone has given you permission to be his or her decision-owner.

**Never toss or give away something if it doesn't belong to you unless you have their permission or have set up explicit rules about who gets to make the decision.**

TIP: Keep trash and recycle bins nearby to make it easy to toss trash.

At the end of your organizing project, transport items for consignment or donation. But avoid letting those items pile up unless you have plenty of room to store them until you can make the trip to your local charity. If you put aside any items you want to gift to someone, the rule I recommend is to assign the item to a specific person right away. If the item is small enough, place it in a shopping bag and label it with their name and put it where you will remember to give it to them. Or better yet, schedule a date to see them and bring it with you. Just be careful not to make your clutter, their clutter. Give them the option to let it go if they wish.



## **PRACTICE, NOT PERFECTION: HOW TO AVOID "OVERWHELM"**

Many people take on an organizing project, and before they know it they are over their head; a whole day has gone by and they're only halfway done but fully out of steam.

If you find you are unable to complete your organizing project in the time you designated, you should still try to take the time to return all the "lives elsewhere" items to their assigned homes. If you are working alone, start with one small section of any room in your home. Begin with a space no larger than 5 feet wide by 3 feet deep. Here are some ideas of areas you could tackle by yourself to practice the S.P.A.C.E system:

- Boxes; and shopping bags that you haven't opened or sorted
- Bed if you can't get in it without moving things aside
- Dining or kitchen table if you can't eat off it without moving things aside
- Refrigerator and freezer if it smells
- Kitchen counter if you can't prep food on it
- Desk drawers or "junk" drawers if you can't open them or find what you need
- Dresser in your bedroom if you can't see the surface of it
- Bathroom cabinet or under-sink storage area if it's stuffed full

TIP: Surfaces have a way of attracting clutter. If you are a "visual" person and prefer to keep items you use most frequently on a surface where you can see them, use containers that are open, clear or labeled. If you prefer to "hide" items, be sure to purge as much as you can. Then choose containers with lids, cabinets with doors, or labeled drawers so you (or anyone else you live with) can find them.

I've always believed that organizing is not about what type of container to buy or whether you have a problem throwing things away -- or even about the stuff. It's about making room both in the physical space in which you live as well as in the mental space of your mind.

As you practice this method and get better at Sorting, Purging, Assigning (a home), Containing and Equalizing, you get to *enjoy* your life more and discover what is truly important and what isn't. You'll find having an organized home will give you more peace of mind, more time for what you love to do, more money to spend on what you need, and, most importantly, more room for you.