

UNITED WISDOM

Intention and situation: choosing a moment for action

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *Don't preach too much*

William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (1899), Chapter VIII, the author's own fourth maxim. James addresses teachers: abstract instruction should be connected with a practical opportunity. This does not prohibit discussing meaning or justify adopting his harsh judgements of people in neighbouring paragraphs.

What this article is about

We can want to engage in an activity and still not know when it will begin. A goal describes a desired direction, but an evening consists of specific events. Between a general intention and an available moment, a question remains: which situation will we notice, and what response can we carry out in it? Clarifying that question does not guarantee performance, though it makes a plan open to checking.

Imagine Victor, a hypothetical reader. He voluntarily decided to read a chosen book in the evenings to understand a subject that is new to him. After dinner, he usually picks up his phone and answers messages. Later, he discovers that his reading time has gone. He confirms again that the book matters to him. Yet an intention to read in the evening does not identify when he will open the relevant page or what conditions will be available.

The article compares implementation-intention research with James's historical educational argument. These are different kinds of knowledge, rather than a single validated method. For a voluntary, safe activity, a reader can try connecting a noticeable event with a feasible start, then check what happened. A plan does not replace endorsement, resources, the substance of work, or an appropriate reason to refrain from action.

I. An intention may lack a noticeable moment

Victor can name his goal clearly: understanding the subject of the book. This does not yet describe a start. Dinner ends every evening, but no distinct transition has been chosen among finishing the meal, clearing up, messages, and reading. An unspecified evening leaves several competing possibilities. This fact does not establish that Victor does not want to read or is generally unable to keep his word.

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It helps to examine the available sequence without explaining it in advance by a single cause. Perhaps the messages have a deadline; perhaps the book is elsewhere; perhaps free time is shorter than expected. The phone need not be the only obstacle. Clarifying a situation starts with the observable order and necessary materials, rather than a moral accusation about a familiar movement of the hand.

A general intention differs from a specific obligation as well. Victor’s choice of a personal activity has different boundaries from work promised to another person. Our example has no recipient with an agreed deadline. This lets us discuss his own reading moment without silently transferring the example to a contract, a mandatory procedure, or someone’s responsibility for safety.

The intention need not be dismissed as empty because action has not begun. It may indicate what remains worthwhile. Still, confirming a goal again does not automatically answer the question of starting. The next step needs separate information: which moment is distinct, what conditions exist there, and which response Victor actually chooses. This clarifies a form rather than testing a person’s worth.

Victor may notice a simpler uncertainty too: “evening” was associated with an image of free time instead of a checked interval. An image differs from the actual sequence. If the evening is already occupied, clarification should not make it free merely in words. He can first check what time remains, then choose a moment. This respects the chosen goal without promising it a place just because it seems important.

II. Goals and plans answer different questions

In his 1999 article, Gollwitzer distinguishes a goal intention from an implementation intention linking a particular situation with a response. The abstract, introduction, and selected initial definitions were read; not all studies and results were read. This supports distinguishing two tasks, rather than demonstrating the effectiveness of any sentence a reader calls a plan.

Victor’s goal can remain understanding the book. His starting plan describes something else: after a chosen event, with the book available, open the marked page and begin reading. It need not repeat the whole goal, but it should relate to it. An easy movement may fail to support the desired direction. Having a precise sequence does not establish the meaning of the chosen activity.

The situation in a plan is conditional. If it occurs and essential conditions are available, a particular response has been chosen. This is not a promise to act despite everything. If the book cannot be opened, circumstances have changed, or an agreed activity occupies the moment, those facts need assessment. Precise wording does not authorise ignoring actual impossibility or changed consequences.

A plan can simplify the question of starting while retaining a decision about content. Opening a page does not mean understanding an argument. Beginning to read does not mean completing the intended amount. These states can be named separately. Implementation intentions should not become a universal quality criterion, an automatic guarantee of success, or an instruction to finish any response regardless of what happens.

A formulation can be conditional and still too general to observe. If Victor chose to read when in a good mood, he still needs to decide which state counts as suitable and how he will notice it. This does not establish that internal states never suit a plan. Their recognisability cannot simply be assumed from an attractive name. The external operation in our example is convenient only because Victor can check its place in his own evening.

III. An event must be distinct in the actual sequence

A situation that looks convenient on paper may be hard to notice in life. Victor chooses a moment after dinner, but it is unclear whether this means after the last food, clearing the table, or messages. The earlier uncertainty persists under a new name. A more specific event can be sought among things that really happen: for example, after clearing his own plate, once agreed activities are finished.

An event does not suit a plan simply because it is easy to describe. It may occur at another time, leave no room for reading, or require an immediate move to another task. What is available afterwards needs checking. A noticeable moment and suitable conditions play different roles. He can clearly notice a cue while still lacking the opportunity to carry out his chosen response.

Place also needs specific assessment. If Victor intends to read at the table, the book must be available and the table suitable for that use. A shared table does not become private because reading is useful. The plan depends on participants’ agreements, lighting, time, and other conditions. The article offers neither a universally correct room nor a rule for every family.

An external cue is not necessarily better than an event in a sequence. A reminder may help, or may appear when the response is unavailable. An event after clearing a plate may fail too. What is offered here is an editorial check of the fit between situation and response, rather than a ranking of cues. Research definitions help frame the question; the selected moment’s suitability is checked in one’s circumstances.

The same sequence can be available today and unsuitable tomorrow. A guest at the table, a changed working day, or an absent book changes what needs assessing. Noticing an event is insufficient if the following conditions have changed. This need not require lengthy deliberation every time: sometimes the change is immediately visible. Still, a plan must permit acknowledging its significance instead of calling every old response fidelity to the plan.

IV. The response must fit the chosen moment

Victor can choose a feasible start: take the available book, open the marked page, and read a chosen passage. Its size depends on his goal and conditions. The article establishes no number of lines or minutes. A short response is not always simple, especially when the material requires prior knowledge, a return to an earlier argument, or time for understanding.

Preparation can be part of addressing conditions. He can put the book in an agreed place and mark the page beforehand. This reduces searching but creates neither understanding nor guaranteed reading. If the book is found but reading does not occur, preparation still has an accurate status. It can be used later without declaring the activity it serves already completed.

A plan benefits from a clear starting boundary and a checkable ending for the chosen operation. When Victor opens the book, one state begins; when he reads the passage, another appears. Checking understanding is a separate criterion if needed. The chosen response should not quietly change: first he only needed to start, then starting was said not to count without a full chapter analysis.

Feasibility cannot be assigned from outside merely by visible size. One paragraph can be harder than several pages of familiar material. Victor clarifies his present conditions and the cost he voluntarily chooses. Another participant can help with materials without determining his readiness to understand the book right now. The article preserves participation and cooperation without turning them into a right to control a personal evening.

Starting to read can be a completed operation while the activity remains an unfinished task. An accurate name for the chosen boundary helps: open a page, read a passage, or check a specific question. These criteria are not interchangeable. If only the first is chosen today, the book should not be called mastered. If the third is needed, preparation can be recorded without declaring a goal achieved when its required result is absent.

V. An average research effect is not a promise

In their 2006 meta-analysis, Gollwitzer and Sheeran discuss whether specified planning supports goal achievement. The authors’ abstract reports 94 independent tests. For this article, the abstract and available publisher portions of the introduction and conclusion were read; the full methods and tables were not. An accessible overview must not be presented as independent verification of every included study.

The authors report an average effect across tests. This does not establish Victor’s probability of success or promise a result after one formulation. Different tasks, people, and conditions do not become identical through having a plan. For a particular evening, available materials, a noticeable situation, the endorsed action, and changing circumstances still matter.

A strong intention alone does not guarantee goal achievement: that distinction appears in the authors' abstract. It does not imply that intention is useless and a plan always sufficient. A plan has its own task in organising action. The goal's content and the result's quality need other grounds. The article does not replace one with the other to make a convincing promise.

Our book trial has not been studied in this form. If Victor starts reading once, this is a fact about that evening. It does not establish the cue's causal effect: several conditions may have changed. If reading does not occur, it does not establish that all implementation intentions are useless. A bounded conclusion helps revise the chosen plan without turning one outcome into a universal law.

VI. James considers a practical opportunity

In Chapter VIII of his talks to teachers, James discusses habit and the connection between intention and action. In his own fourth maxim, he directs attention to practical opportunities for participation instead of abstract instruction alone. This historical educational context can support a question about a concrete moment. It does not replace a modern definition of an implementation intention.

The address to a teacher matters to the meaning. James considers helping pupils think, feel, and act in an available situation. Comparing this with Victor's personal reading is an editorial application, rather than a claim that the source tested that particular plan. An opportunity for action must be real, rather than produced by demanding that it be seized at any cost.

Neighbouring paragraphs contain harsh character judgements, absolute claims about omissions, and historical ideas about the nervous system. This article does not adopt them as demonstrated modern norms. Reading the context prevents presenting a short fragment as permission to humiliate someone or promise infallible habit performance. A useful question can be retained without accepting the whole historical argument.

James also quotes other authors. Both direct reader roles here come from his own fourth maxim, rather than embedded quotations from Bain, Mill, or Darwin. Provenance matters even for a short fragment. Our comparison concerns attention to a practical opportunity; scientific validation of a modern plan remains a separate question.

VII. A written plan is not yet an established habit

Wood and Rünger consider habits as learned associations between a response and a familiar context. The preliminary Review in Advance 2015 version and selected sections on mechanism, formation, and change were used. This helps distinguish a connection proposed in a plan from one already supporting familiar action. A similar formulation does not establish that they are identical.

When Victor first chooses reading after a particular event, he has a plan rather than a demonstrated habit. Repeating the sequence provides information about repetition. Ease of starting may change, but its degree is not established here without measurement. Fast action is not always habit; a frequent operation need not retain current endorsement of the goal or the quality of understanding the book.

Lally and colleagues studied growth in self-reported automaticity for chosen everyday actions. Trajectories varied; estimated times do not form a universal promise for every activity. The abstract, introduction, methodological context, and discussion were read, but not all results and figures. The study does not identify how many book evenings will make Victor’s plan fully automatic.

These distinctions protect the accuracy of a result. He can say that he noticed the chosen moment, opened the book, and read the passage. This does not immediately establish that the whole practice is permanently secured. A starting plan, response repetition, self-reported automaticity, and understanding material are different objects of assessment. Information about one does not replace information about the others.

VIII. An unperformed response needs its cause clarified

Suppose the chosen event occurs and Victor picks up his phone. One episode does not reveal what happened. He may have missed the transition, received an urgent message, found the book unavailable, or changed his decision. Such a case should not automatically be called forgetfulness, weak will, or lack of real interest. Clarification needs information about the sequence.

If the situation was ambiguous, its description can change. If the response was too demanding, the response and resources need assessment. If the book is not worthwhile now, the question concerns the goal. Distinguishing causes guarantees no correct decision, but avoids correcting an unconfirmed explanation. Rewording a cue will not remove every difficulty of understanding or someone else’s obligation.

Victor should not be compelled to complete reading retrospectively merely to preserve the plan. Today’s result remains what happened. He can choose another available opportunity and name the new action separately. Postponement does not mean the original response occurred; an unperformed response does not make previously read pages nonexistent. An accurate history allows continuation without rewriting states.

Repeated similar episodes invite a broader look at the arrangement. A different time, fewer sessions, or a revised goal may be needed. Frequency alone does not establish a cause. The article does not propose endlessly adding reminders until a person submits to a schedule. A plan serves a chosen activity, and its suitability remains open to checking.

To clarify an episode, he can begin with what is known: the selected event occurred or did not; the book was nearby or absent; the message had a verified deadline or its significance remained unknown. These facts need not immediately form a final explanation. The cause can remain open pending a check. Possible explanations help only as directions for inquiry; they do not turn presumed tiredness, resistance, or interest into an established fact.

IX. A backup moment should not expand the requirement

Sometimes the main moment is predictably unavailable. A backup opportunity can be chosen beforehand if it is real and suitable. For example, if an agreed activity continues after dinner, Victor can return to the book when it finishes, provided time remains. This is not a promise to read anywhere or in any state. Backup conditions need the same assessment as the main response.

A backup plan should not turn one chosen episode into numerous compulsory attempts. If Victor names two possible moments, both should not be treated as necessary regardless of the outcome. The second moment’s role needs defining: replacing an unavailable first moment or serving a separate task. Clarity preserves an accepted workload without concealing its growth behind the word “flexibility”.

An option to pause can remain too. For personal, safe reading, lacking a suitable moment does not require action at any cost. If there is a recipient or agreed deadline, the state is discussed with that person. Victor’s decision does not establish another participant’s consent. A precise plan helps reveal a conflict but does not automatically authorise removing someone’s expectation.

Treatment, safety, and mandatory professional operations have their own timing and performance requirements. Our sources do not determine an acceptable backup arrangement for them. Instructions cannot be replaced with a book-evening example. The trial concerns a voluntarily chosen safe activity; essential rules are checked against appropriate competent information rather than inferred from general planning research.

X. Specificity helps reveal the actual result

Return to Victor. He chooses a distinct transition after clearing his plate, if agreed evening activities are finished and the book is available. At that point, he opens the marked page and starts the chosen passage. This is an example of a conditional plan rather than a rule for every reader. If conditions are unmet, he assesses another opportunity or a pause without claiming the response occurred.

After the evening, he can record separately what happened. The event was noticed; the book was available; reading began; the passage was read; understanding remained incomplete. No

state needs to conceal another. If starting did not occur, he can identify where the sequence diverged from the plan. An accurate observation is needed rather than a complete account of a person’s character.

The next trial can preserve the moment, change the response, prepare materials, or revise the goal. One successful episode does not require keeping the form unchanged forever. One unsuccessful episode does not establish that reading is impossible. A plan connects a chosen action with a situation amid conditions that can change. Specificity therefore includes checking and adjustment.

A question about timing does not cancel a question about meaning. Victor can clarify whether the book matters before choosing a start. He can keep the goal and change the sequence. He can acknowledge that only a passage was read today and understanding requires other work. Discipline here involves a clear relationship between intention, conditions, response, and result, without a promise of automatic success.

A plan can remain useful after change. Victor retains what he learned about the evening: availability of the place, the marked page, and the need to agree on time. A new form does not erase this information. Yet knowledge of conditions does not prove that the former response remains suitable. He can use a past observation while checking its relation to the present situation. Revision need neither defend a plan at any cost nor dismiss all preparation as meaningless.

What this means in practice

For one voluntary, safe activity, you can try a conditional plan. This is an editorial trial rather than a separately validated method or a guaranteed research effect.

Name the goal and feasible starting action separately. Choose a situation you can notice in the actual sequence. Clarify which materials, time, and agreements are needed afterwards. Do not treat precise wording as proof that a response is available.

Describe the chosen response and its boundary. Distinguish preparation, starting, a completed operation, and quality by the facts. If understanding is needed, opening the book does not establish it. Do not add the full amount as a hidden condition for counting the start.

Specify an exception for unsuitable conditions, a backup opportunity, or a pause beforehand. A backup moment should not increase compulsory actions unnoticed by you or participants. If someone is waiting for a result, clarify its state and the agreement.

After the attempt, check what happened and what information an explanation still needs. Change a suitable element of the plan instead of assessing the whole person. Do not transfer

this trial to treatment, safety, or mandatory procedures: the article's sources establish neither their arrangements nor acceptable omissions.

Key quotation

> *be prompt to seize those as they pass*

William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (1899), Chapter VIII, the author's own fourth maxim. "Those" refers to the practical opportunities mentioned immediately before it. In this educational context, the subject is attention to available pupil participation, rather than an instruction to act despite conditions or a scientific guarantee of results.

Connections between traditions

1. **Intention and a starting plan.** Gollwitzer distinguishes a goal from a situational response. Precision does not establish goal endorsement, available resources, or result quality.

2. **Historical education and modern research.** James directs a teacher's attention to practical opportunities. The comparison with a personal plan is editorial; it does not make the historical psychological argument a modern validation.

3. **Plans and habitual associations.** Wood and Rünger consider a learned response in context. A newly written plan does not yet demonstrate that association or automaticity.

4. **Repetition and measurement.** Lally measures self-reported automaticity rather than all skills or quality of understanding. Calendar frequency creates no universal formation deadline.

5. **Specificity and revision.** Distinguishing an event, available conditions, a response, and actual results is an editorial way to check a plan. No source validates it as a compulsory technique for every activity.

Sources

1. James, W. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (1899), Chapter VIII. Primary text, Project Gutenberg 16287. The Chapter VIII context, HTML paragraphs365–392, was read; the author's own fourth maxim was used, rather than embedded quotations. The entire book was not read.

2. Gollwitzer, P. M. *Implementation Intentions: Strong Effects of Simple Plans*. American Psychologist 54 (1999), 493–503. DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.54.7.493. Author's copy. The abstract, introduction, and selected definitions were used; full studies and results were not read.

3. Gollwitzer, P. M.; Sheeran, P. *Implementation Intentions and Goal Achievement: A Meta-analysis of Effects and Processes*. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 38 (2006), 69–119. DOI: 10.1016/S0065-2601(06)38002-1. Authors' abstract and publisher preview. The abstract and available parts of the introduction and conclusion were used, rather than full methods and tables.

4. Wood, W.; Rünger, D. *Psychology of Habit*. Annual Review of Psychology 67 (2016), 289–314. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-psych-122414-033417. University copy. The preliminary Review in Advance 2015 version was used: introduction, automaticity, and selected discussions of formation, goal inferences, and habit change.

5. Lally, P.; van Jaarsveld, C. H. M.; Potts, H. W. W.; Wardle, J. *How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World*. European Journal of Social Psychology 40 (2010), 998–1009. DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.674. Primary study text. The abstract, introduction, methodological context, and discussion were read; not all results and figures were read.

Tags

intention, situation, starting, action, goal, planning, implementation intention, cue, event, moment, conditions, resources, book, reading, understanding, preparation, result, habit, automaticity, repetition, checking, revision, voluntary action, pause, agreement, Gollwitzer, Sheeran, James, Lally, United Wisdom

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