



Organize Your Homeschool

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Teach, Write, Organize



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Why Organize?

Many people ask, “Why bother to organize? It is too much work!” That has an easy answer: organization equals peace and consistency! In addition, I think that it is much less work to teach in an organized space than to try to find space and tools to teach every day. You reap what you sow: sow peace and efficiency into your homeschool to reap peace and effectiveness. Have you ever seen a farmer’s field with crooked rows or several different kinds of plants growing in the same row? Neither have I! Farmers know that in order to harvest the best crops, they need to organize their fields.



Does it take you half an hour to find the grammar book each morning? Do the kids take five minutes to find and sharpen a pencil? Have you ever found three copies of the same book lying around because you had no idea you already owned it? (Yes, I know someone to whom that has actually happened!)

Here’s a little parable to illustrate my point. Behold, a mother went out to teach her children. And as she taught, some lessons fell by the wayside; and the dirty socks and lost library books came and devoured them. Some fell on messy desks, where they did not have much space, and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of thought. But when the days were long, they were forgotten, and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among unorganized

papers, and the papers sprang up and choked them. But others fell on sharpened pencils and yielded three-point paragraphs, some a ten-point paragraph, some six, some four. She who has ears to hear, let her hear! (A very liberal retelling of Matthew 13:3–9.)

Organization Defined

What is organization anyway? *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition*, defines the word *organize* as “to form into a coherent unity or functioning whole; integrate; to set up an administrative structure for; to arrange by systematic planning and united effort.” Some synonyms of the word *organize* include classify, categorize, group together, plan, order, establish, and methodize. While the Bible does not use the word *organize* specifically, it does have an admonition about *ordering* one’s house, “But all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40, ESV). Proverbs 16:3 says, “Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.” Let’s stop for a moment and ask God to bless our time of preparing to get our homeschools organized.



This is our tenth year of homeschooling, but I was born organized. It has taken some time to mesh the two, but with each passing year, our homeschool gets more organized

and more efficient, which means that we can focus more on learning. My goal for my homeschool is for my girls to hear and absorb the Word, not to spend time looking for it.

Decide on a Basic Style or Plan

The first thing you need to do is to decide on a basic style or plan for homeschooling. This relates to organization in that your style will determine what kinds of materials you need, how you want to organize your space, and how your children learn best. The basic styles include classical, Charlotte Mason, pre-packaged, unit studies, eclectic, and relaxed or unschooling.

Classical homeschooling is based on the classics, with three basic stages that correlate with how children learn at different ages: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. It's methodical, rigorous, and the style that my family and I have embraced for many more reasons that I don't have space to detail here. The Charlotte Mason method is more flexible, emphasizes nature and artistic studies, and uses a lot of narration. A pre-packed curriculum is just what it sounds like: everything you need in a box from one publisher, including lesson plans. Some of the more well-known publishers of pre-packaged curriculum include A Beka, Bob Jones, and Alpha & Omega. Unit studies focus on one key topic at a time—say, butterflies or moon landings—and encompass most of the required academic subjects. Homeschoolers who use some of this and some of that are classified as eclectic. They take what they see as the best of several different methods and/or publishers and craft a more custom educational experience. Relaxed or unschooling families are more child-centric and use real-life experiences to teach their children. They take each day as it comes and include more play and games than worksheets and grades.

I encourage you to take the time to explore each of these approaches and to think about your family's current lifestyle. A number of books are available that detail each of these methods. Other books are available that will help you to figure out your children's learning style. Knowing your children's learning styles will enable you to tailor your homeschool teaching to your children, which will enable them to thrive.

Organize Your Space and Your Stuff

Let's think about where you want to conduct the bulk of your homeschool. If you have very young children and you're mostly reading aloud with a few worksheets and crafts thrown in for good measure, the living room couch and the kitchen table will probably suffice. If you have high schoolers, they'll definitely want their own desks and study areas. The unit study approach with several children is probably best suited to gathering around that unused dining room table (so you don't have to clean off the kitchen table for lunch in the middle of a project).



If you have the space in your house, I strongly encourage you to set up a dedicated schoolroom. Perhaps you have a finished basement, a playroom, or a little-used dining room that could be furnished with bookshelves and desks. Be creative! Not all of the furnishings have to be new or traditional. Cinder blocks and wooden planks can be stacked for bookshelves and desks. Yard sales and the Salvation Army often have good deals on used furniture. This setup fosters a quiet learning

atmosphere. It gives each child her own space, yet keeps everyone together so you can keep an eye on them and be available for guidance. It helps to eliminate the distractions of sibling rivalry and fighting that sometimes occur in confined spaces with constant contact.



In addition, having a dedicated space for homeschooling means that you're not constantly pulling out books and supplies, and then having to clear off the kitchen table for meals. You may find that you have to try several different rooms and configurations before

you find something that works, as our family has done. The goal here is to find a setup that works for your family's learning and living lifestyle.

Top Ten Must-Have Tools

Now that you've decided on a basic approach and purchased your teaching materials, let's organize all your stuff. A few simple tools and ideas will solve your disorganization problems and help you to prepare the soil of your homeschool so you can focus on learning and growing instead of on hunting and weeding. Here's my top-ten list of supplies:

- 1. BOOKSHELVES**
- 2. BINDERS**
- 3. 3-HOLE PUNCH**
- 4. BASKETS AND/OR SHOEBOXES (CARDBOARD OR PLASTIC)**
- 5. VARIOUS SMALL CONTAINERS**
- 6. LETTER STACKING TRAYS**
- 7. CALENDARS**
- 8. LESSON PLANNER**
- 9. TIMERS**
- 10. TRASH CAN**

Here's how to use all those nifty supplies to organize your stuff. First on my list are bookshelves. Any kind will do, just be sure to measure your space before buying or making them. You might have to be creative to find room for bookshelves—perhaps that unused formal dining room has space for a few bookshelves along the walls. Measure to see if each child's room has space for

even a small bookshelf. After you have the bookshelves assembled and positioned or attached to the walls, it's time to fill them. Sort out the books first. Designate a shelf (or more) for each category, including unused curricula and curricula you are currently using. For instance, I have separate shelves for unused curricula (the stuff we're currently using is on the shelves above my desk), art and music, science, ancient history, medieval history, modern history, language arts, history reference, other reference books, theology and doctrine, Christian living, Bibles, and juvenile fiction. Make your labels fit the type of books you have. Blank address labels will work just fine, or even a piece of masking tape, if you do not have access to a labeler. Then, shelve each book in the proper section. Within each subject, you can alphabetize by author or title, or shelve by book size, but save that project for a later time. The main idea is to get every book you own onto a shelf with other books of the same subject. It might help to make the labels temporary until you have all of the books situated the way you want them. In addition, make sure that you have general resources readily available where they can be accessed during school: a dictionary, a thesaurus, science and history encyclopedias, CD or traditional-book general encyclopedias, Bible reference books, and so on.



Next on my list are binders. I have at least twenty binders in the house, all properly labeled with a single subject each. The binders with clear pockets as covers are the easiest to label and kids love to make title pages to slip inside the covers. Make

sure to leave room on your bookshelves for them. Along with binders of various sizes, you will need to invest in a 3-hole paper punch. They are not very expensive, but they are necessary so that you can actually put your papers neatly into the binders.

Make an administrative binder with all the paperwork required by your state homeschooling laws. Have a tab for each child and put in the oldest material first, so that the newest papers for the current year are at the beginning. Make sure you keep all official communication in that binder and a copy of each child's immunization records and testing records, if they are required by your state. The Home School Legal Defense Web site (<http://www.hslda.org>) has links and information on every state's legal requirements.

The next step is to buy a binder for each child to have on his/her desk or table space. I let my kids pick out their own cool-looking binders. We usually go through one per year per child. In this binder, have a tab divider for each subject that child will do in school. For a younger child and/or if you are using a lot of worksheets, use the folder-type dividers. On one side of the folder, write "to do." On the other side, write "done." Take all the work that you have planned for a week or two and put the papers in the "to do" side for each subject. After each page is finished, graded, and returned, have the child put it in the "done" side of the folder. For an older child, or one working primarily out of textbooks, have a divider for each subject and add plenty of filler paper to each section. Make sure the papers are filed in order by date or lesson number as they are completed.



Every few weeks, take all of the papers out of each child's individual binder and put them in a large two-inch or three-inch binder. This can be a portfolio for each child, as required by some states, or it can be used to showcase the progress each child makes throughout the year. Have one for each child and put into it

the same subject dividers that you put into the smaller binders on their desks.

Usually, it is not necessary to keep every piece of paper, so just keep the tests and a small sampling of schoolwork. Even if your state does not require that you keep a portfolio, this is an easy way to see progress, to save favorite projects, and to corral the paper monsters. Younger children, especially, do not like to throw away their hard work and love to show off what they have done and learned.

I also have several binders filled with odds and ends of additional resources, articles, workshop notes, maps, coloring pages, and so on that I have collected over the years. They are all categorized by subject and separated by dividers, of course. If you lack bookshelf space, but have a small filing cabinet, these papers can be filed in it by topic.

I find it helpful to remove the binding from and punch holes in workbooks that are reproducible. Then I put each in its own binder and put the original cover and spine inside the clear binder cover to label it. It is so much easier to copy a single page that way, or to copy a bunch of pages, than it is to fight with laying a workbook completely straight on the copier glass, over and over again.

Baskets and/or shoe boxes (cardboard or plastic) help to corral slightly larger craft supplies, math manipulatives, extra pens and pencils, markers, science experiment supplies, flashcards, etc. These baskets or boxes need to be clear, open on top, or labeled so that everyone knows not only where to find supplies, but also where to return them. The boxes can live on a designated bookshelf, be placed into a larger, portable, plastic tote, or stored in a closet or pantry.

Small containers are next on my list of organizational essentials. “A place for everything and everything in its place,” goes the old saying. There is just no sense wasting time looking for a paper clip or another package of filler paper when you have those supplies already on hand. Leave the kids at home and go to your favorite office supply store; recruit several other homeschooling moms and make a girls’ night out of the project. Invest in some desk containers to contain paperclips, erasers, pencils, small manipulatives, CDs, tape, scissors, glue, rulers, post-it notes, tacks, pencil sharpeners, and so on. If that seems too expensive, have a craft afternoon with the kids. Clean and cover soup cans and small shoe boxes—one for each type of supply. Small drink powder containers will hold a few tacks or paperclips (bonus: they can also be saved for painting). A covered soup can makes a serviceable pencil holder for each child’s work area, and yours as well. All containers need to be either see-through or labeled neatly. After you have a collection of containers, then comes the fun part: putting everything away. Here’s where your children can get involved. Have a contest to see who can find and put away the most paperclips, pencils, erasers, glue sticks or whatever. Or, have each child be responsible to find all of one type of supply. This will save time later when you are looking for something, and it will also keep you from buying supplies that you do not need. Now, go put those cool, filled containers closest to

where you do the majority of your schoolwork. You can designate one shelf on your bookshelves for them or put them in a closed cabinet.

While you're at pick up some one for each type wide and college paper, cardstock, Also, designate yourself and one



the office supply store, stacking letter trays. Use of paper (sort by color, ruled filler paper, printer graph paper, and so on). one tray as an in-bin for for each child. Your tray is

for work that needs to be graded or filed. Train your children to put every piece of paper that needs your attention into that in-bin. When you have time to grade school work, all the papers will be in one spot. The children's trays are for work that needs to be corrected and/or put away in their desk binders. Train them to check their in-bins several times a day at designated intervals and to deal with the papers immediately and properly.

Calendars are essential for every family, especially for families who homeschool. I have learned not to rely on my memory for events (even ones that take place every week) for myself or for my children. If I don't write it down, it goes out of my head! Even if you are blessed with a phenomenal memory, using calendars helps to keep you from getting overbooked and ensures that everyone else in the family also knows what's happening. Have a central family calendar (posted on the fridge or somewhere everyone can see it easily and frequently) with every single appointment that every single person has outside of the house on it. You can make it fun by having a different color of pen for each family. I have a write on/wipe off monthly calendar on our fridge and each person has his/her own color marker. I

especially like the one that I have because each week is separate, so I can always see a full month ahead of the current date. Train everyone in the family to check on the master planning calendar before committing to anything. In addition, train everyone to write his or her own appointments on the calendar with the proper color pen/marker.

Vital to a smoothly run homeschool day are lesson planners. Even when my children were small and I simply did the next page of *Five in a Row*, the next reading lesson, and the next math page, I still liked to know which page was coming next and if I needed to find a certain map or pick up a particular craft supply. Now that my kids are in middle and high school, I find lesson planning to be even more indispensable. The intention of lesson planners is not to be restrictive, but to provide a framework for each day, week, and month, with the freedom to change if necessary.

Timers are my favorite tool to prod along a slowpoke and to teach autonomy to a clinger. For my dawdlers, I figured out about how long each subject should take (plenty of resources are available online for this, or you may be able to figure it out from your teacher's manuals). After we had our instruction time together, I would set the timer for the appropriate length of time (say, an hour for math). If the child stared out the window the whole time, then she had that subject for "homework" later. When the timer dinged, we went on to the next subject. That freed up my time and kept pokey from asking for the grammar lesson just as I was about to start dinner. One of my kids liked to race the timer; she tried to finish each subject before the timer went off. Dawdling solved! Timers also teach autonomy. Kids don't even have to be able to tell time to use them. I didn't have to keep telling my

kids to hurry up and they didn't have to keep asking how much time they had left to finish.

The last essential tool is a trashcan. Yes, you read that correctly! An ordinary trashcan, which you already own, is a basic supply for homeschooling. My personal mantra is, "When in doubt, throw it out!" Just keep the best of the zillions of papers your children generate—in binders or files. Throw out junk mail as soon as it arrives in your mailbox. Ditch old circulars, invitations, and old newspapers. Take pictures of large-scale projects and, after an appropriate length of time, throw out the project. If it's broken and/or unused, get rid of it. It won't hurt, I promise! Your house will be cleaner, and you'll have more room for the things you really need and enjoy.



Now that you've got all the stuff, and you've got it all organized, what do you do? You plan!

Plan Ahead

Long-Term Planning

Long-term planning involves choosing curricula for each child that matches her learning style and that will be used for several years in order to have continuity in each subject. It can also involve planning which science classes and which literature periods will be covered during the four years of high school (or grade school). Deciding which method of homeschooling (classical, Charlotte Mason, traditional, eclectic, etc.) suits your family best falls under long-term planning, too. Involve your spouse as you make long-term goals for your family. Involve your older children and teens in the planning process as well. Use their interests and

abilities to customize their high school experiences. For instance, my oldest daughter was obsessed with tornadoes and weather for a number of years. I indulged this by purchasing weather workbooks to supplement her science curriculum. When she was in ninth grade, I paid for her to take an online, high school level, weather course from the University of Oklahoma for credit. She discovered what I had suspected all along: meteorology involves too much math and science for her level of comfort. However, I'd rather have spent the money while she was still in high school and discovered that, than to have her work for four years towards something that she was not going to enjoy or excel in.

Mid-Range Planning

Mid-range planning focuses on planning several months ahead and/or using the (summer) months in between grade levels to plan for the coming school year. Mid-range planning involves breaking the school year down into quarters (or whatever units you use), then months, and then weeks. I plan which books will be read when and which projects go with which history and science units. I also look at every textbook, workbook, and living book we'll be using to see approximately how many pages and chapters need to be done every quarter, month, and week. It saves time when I do my short-term planning during the school year, and it also helps me to keep the children on track to finish each book by the end of the school year (but not three months early, unless we want to do it that way).

For example, in working on my youngest daughter's Bible, history, and reading schedule for this coming year, I started by making a chart in Word with a column for each subject and a row for each of the thirty-six weeks. This year's chart has five columns: 1) the card number (we use the history



and Bible cards from Veritas Press), 2) the title of each history card, 3) supplementary resources (we're also using The Early 19th Century from History Through the Ages' Time Travelers series), 4) reading assignments (living books that go along with each week's history subject), and 5) the title of each Bible card.

Short-Term Planning

Short-term planning involves deciding on specific pages, chapters, lessons, and projects for each day of our school week. I have found that it works best for me to do this once every two weeks. Doing it every week tends to feel cumbersome and never ending. If I do it only every three or four weeks, we tend to get out of sync too easily by an unexpected field trip or illness. It may take you a few tries to figure out what timing works best for you, but you will be much more relaxed throughout the school year if you take a little bit of time now to do so.

The key is to figure out about how many weeks a particular book will take to read and to put each book on the schedule in approximate chronological sequence. I also look at the fun projects and put those on the schedule to coordinate with each history topic. I don't consider all this planning boxing myself in; I consider it detailing all of the possibilities so that we have many choices during the school year. If we don't read every book on the list or complete every project, that's okay. If I find a really cool project online in the middle of the year, we add it.

While this may seem like a lot of unnecessary work, it makes my planning during the year go much more smoothly. When I do my bi-weekly planning, I simply look at my chart and decide what to do each day. That way when we get to the end of the year, I don't discover a really cool project that we forgot we had or find a book about an explorer when we're studying the Civil War.

First of all, plan—at least roughly—your starting and ending dates for the school year. Be sure to incorporate holidays and other dates you know you'll be taking off from official academics. Make sure you have the required 180 days. It's okay if these dates fluctuate during the year—really!—at least you've got a framework.

The next step is to write all of these dates into your paper planner or to program them into your e-planner. The nice thing about e-planners is that they will calculate the number of days for you and it's much easier to change dates if something unexpected comes up, and it will. This feature comes in handy towards the end of the year when the kids (and you) are getting antsy for the last day of school. Our state requires us to keep and submit a yearly attendance log, which is a breeze with my e-planner. No more counting out days and trying to remember if we did school on Columbus Day or not.

Many tools exist to help you with all this planning. You can go to a teachers' supply store or to a homeschool convention and find many different types of paper planners. If you like to have a physical notebook in your hands, this is the way to go. Take the time to choose the style that will best suit your needs: large family, unit studies, high school, and many others are available. When I used paper planners, my favorites were these two: *The Home Schooler's Journal*, published by Fergnus Services Foundations for Learning, and *Homeschool Teacher's Plan Book*, by Grace Publications. TOS (The Old Schoolhouse Store <http://www.theoldschoolhousestore.com>) has a homeschool planner that has just about *everything*; it is downloaded from the Internet onto your computer. It has forms for everything under the sun related to homeschooling and home keeping that you can fill out on the computer to print out, or you can print out the blank forms to fill in by hand. Then, you store the forms in your teacher's binder. If you're computer savvy and don't want extra papers cluttering your desk, then

check out the wide selection of electronic planners. Some are web-based, meaning that your computer has to be connected to the Internet in order to access them. Some can be downloaded from the Internet, and some can be purchased on a CD-ROM to download onto your computer yourself. There are a few freebies online, so if you're trying to decide whether or not planning on the computer is for you, that's a good place to start. My personal favorite computer-based planner is the Homeschool Tracker Basic (<http://www.homeschooltracker.com>), which is free to download.

Keep It Organized!

The key to planning of all sorts is to keep up with it. Check off subjects as they are completed daily. Move uncompleted items to the next day. Over the weekend or on Friday afternoon, look at the following week to see if you need to make a library or craft store run. When you're out of daily plans, write some more! Discipline yourself to set aside the time you need to plan ahead.

Now that you have everything neatly organized, how do you keep it that way? It sounds simplistic, but it really does work: put each thing away after it is used and train your children to do the same thing. Start good habits early; "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6, ESV). I read somewhere that it takes twice as long to put things away later as it does to put them away immediately. I find that if I put a book back on the shelf where it belongs as soon as I am done with it, it only takes a few seconds. But, if I have a whole stack of books to put away, it can take five or ten minutes to get the job done. Crayons and math counters tend to be the same way; putting a few away at a time does not take nearly as long as putting away several boxfuls at once, or as

long as searching for items first and then putting them away. Keeping your garden free from weeds can foster better growth of your young seedlings.

Encouragement

You can do it! You can organize your homeschool and you can keep it organized! Yes, it will take time. Yes, it will take discipline, but having an organized homeschool is worth those efforts. Isaiah 58:11 encourages, “And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.” Trust in God to help you to be organized so that beautiful flowers (your children) can flourish in your well-tended garden (your homeschool).

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Bethany LeBedz is a veteran homeschooler, professional editor, writer, and speaker. You can check out her personal business website, <http://www.bethanylebedz.com>. She contributes regularly to Heart of the Matter Online.com., has a column in the Home School Enrichment.com magazine, and occasionally writes for other magazines, Web sites, and newsletters. She has edited many books that have subsequently been published. Bethany and her family live in North Carolina. In her spare time, she enjoys music, reading, scrapbooking, sewing, genealogy, and keeping up with friends. Check out her blog, Confessions of an Organized Homeschool Mom @ <http://www.bethanylebedz.com>.