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How to Track Time

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“How to Track Time” by Anna Leahy

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It is daylight, or it is darkness. The sky tells it like it is, if you're listening with your eyes. You act accordingly, without thinking about it.

Patterns discerned in gestures and words are called rituals, and sequence matters. It's easy to think that ritual is all about performance or religion, until you're repeating something to no one, not even god. Don't bother separating the symbolic from the functional when it comes to ritual. Brush your teeth, comb your hair, change your clothes. The beginning is the beginning; don't skip the greeting. Right now could be the start of something, the once upon a time you'll look back on.

Consider tools: sundial, hourglass, candle, pendulum, watch.

If time is an arrow, it'll hit its mark. But one thing about time is that its passage allows things to get messy. We call this entropy, and it was invented to measure the chaos of an isolated system. The house needs tidying. Lawns fill with weeds after the rain. Thoughts in the head get jumbled. Once you're worked up, it's hard to settle down.

Still, time seems to know where it's going, and there's a *then* coming.

Notice déjà vu. This occurs when the mind confuses the present for the past. Repetition seems inevitable, but this or that didn't happen exactly the same way before. This day rhymes with another day, with all the other days, when you stop to listen. The garbage truck rumbles to a stop to take the leftover detritus from the last week, and this moment could be a week ago. The mail falls through the slot onto the mail that fell through the slot yesterday. The rhymes slant so that past and present appear as echoes of each other, if you're seeing with your ears. The future is another chance for the vaguely familiar.

Consider units of measurement: second, minute, hour, the solar day. A stitch, a nick. Consider whether anything happens in an instant, or everything does. Consider the heartbeat, the breath.

The train can leave the station according to schedule, or it can leave when everyone is on board. A timetable leaves people behind. It forces people to make up their minds and plan ahead, when the point is to get where the tracks are going. The platform is crowded, then empty. If the train's just left the station, there's no reason to be there, unless you know when the next one's set to arrive or you've nowhere else to go or be.

Consider the world divided into time zones, and who saves the daylight—and for what. You may want a compass and a sense of cardinal directions instead of a chronometer. Take daily steps, fold the laundry, bookmark where you stop reading. There's either a devil of a time or a whale of a time to be had. Something might be done in next to no time or in your own damn time. You might pass the time or live on borrowed time.

If time's not linear like an arrow, then it's not about the clock. It's about the work to be done and the people who do it. This moment is filled with whatever you're doing, and that's why you're doing it now. There's no rush. Time cannot be wasted or squandered.

Chronology is sequence, and if time is anything more than chronology, then *if* precedes *then*. You're looking for causes that suffice for meaning because meaning, not duration, is what life's supposed to be about. You're looking for what the effects of this moment might be. You find chickens and eggs in the fridge, and you make them into memories of breakfast and dinner. Remorse and hope reside here, when time offers some daily sustenance.

[Anna Leahy](#) is the author of the nonfiction book *Tumor* and the poetry collections *Aperture* and *Constituents of Matter*. Her work has appeared at *Aeon*, *The Atlantic*, *BuzzFeed*, *The Southern Review*, and elsewhere, and her essays have won top awards from the *Los Angeles Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Dogwood*. She directs the MFA in Creative Writing program at Chapman University, where she edits the international *Tab Journal*.