

In order to get started building the systems and routines that will power your daily life and allow you more free time, less stress, and better health, we have to get on the same page about exactly what that *means*.

We need to create a shared understanding of what, exactly, a system is. And what a routine is so that we can communicate effectively and eliminate confusion as you start to create your own systems and routines in the different areas of your life and work.

So, that's exactly what we're going to do now. We're going to answer those two questions:

1. What is a system? And
2. What is a routine?

This is going to be a little bit academic, but I'll give you some examples along the way so you can connect what you're learning with everyday life.

Let's go ahead and answer that first question: What, exactly, is a system?

For the purpose of this course, the best way to think about a system is a series of connected parts that work together and allow you to achieve some useful and repeatable results.

There's a lot packed into that description, so let's break down the different parts.

First, a system is a series of connected parts. Think of these as "tangible things." Things you can actually see and touch.

A car is a good example. The steering wheel, the body, the seat, the engine, the wheels, and all the other parts and pieces that work together make up a system, and we call that system a car.

A system isn't *just* a collection of parts, though. We need to emphasize that those parts have to be working together to achieve some useful result.

In the case of a car, all the connected parts work together to take you somewhere you want to go. If it didn't do that, it wouldn't be useful and, therefore, not a system—at least not in *our* definition.

Another example of a system we can all identify with is a personal hygiene system. Your toothbrush, toothpaste, water, floss, and mouthwash. These are all parts of a

system. When you use them together, you get the useful result of preventing cavities and having fresh breath.

Systems exist everywhere, and they're both natural and manmade. A tree, for example, is a system. The trunk, the roots, branches, bark, and leaves all work together to sustain life. And, following that example, your body, with all its organs working together to keep you alive and thriving is a system of its own.

But we've left something out of the equation. We need parts working together. And we need them working together to do something useful. But we *also* need that useful result to be *repeatable*.

A system isn't really a system until you can predict what happens when you use it. If all the parts work together to create something useful, but the end result changes every time, you don't have a system.

A tree is a system because the way its parts work together to sustain itself is the same every time. The roots absorb moisture and nutrients while the leaves absorb sunlight and turn it into energy that the bark transports around to the branches and trunk.

It's predictable and it works the same way every time.

Just like your toothbrush, floss, and mouthwash serve the same role to keep your mouth clean every time. You know what each tool does, and you use it the same way every time, usually in the same order.

Those three elements are what make a system:

1. A series of parts all working together...
2. To create a useful result...
3. In a predictable way.

Systems can be extremely simple or extremely complex. And systems themselves can be one part of a bigger system, just like an engine is a system of many parts and pieces and also one piece of the overall system that is your car.

There is no size limit to a system. As long as it has those three pieces, a system it is!

Now, let's go over routines.

You might wonder why I'm differentiating between systems and routines. Aren't they the same thing?

You could certainly make that argument, and you wouldn't necessarily be wrong. But when it comes to building personal systems that improve and streamline your life in some way, I find it helpful to separate them.

When we talk about routines, we'll be talking about a "series of actions" that you'll complete. These are the actions that make the system work. A routine is what provides the energy that makes a system function.

Think of it like this: A system is a thing that you *have*, and a routine is a thing that you *do*. You *have* a car—that car is a mechanical system—and you *do* a routine—the routine of getting in, turning it on, checking your mirrors, pressing the accelerator, and steering it in the direction you want go. Hopefully in that order!

And a routine is made up of three of its own distinct parts:

First, there's a trigger: That's the thing that causes you to begin the routine. Then, there's an action or a series of actions. That's the work of completing the steps of the routine. Finally, there's a result. The result is a signal that the routine is complete and it's time to move onto the next one.

When you design a great routine, the trigger is highly motivating, the action is nearly automatic, and the result is clear and unambiguous.

In this way, you can think of your routines as a "special" part of your systems. They're intertwined, and one isn't really useful without the other.

If you have a system, but no routine to operate it, you won't get any useful result. And if you have a routine to follow, but no system to apply it to, you're kind of operating without any direction.

As you go through this course and discover the things you want to apply the lessons to the most, you might find you have a lot more control over your routines than you do over your systems.

In many areas of life, especially at work, you might be plugged into systems that you don't have much influence over. They're created by someone else, they've been around forever, and it would take an act of God to change them.

But even in these cases, you can often build your own mini-systems for the parts of the larger system that you operate in. Remember, systems can exist within other systems. You're never totally helpless.

And you're almost always in control of your routines.

This is why it's helpful to remember that a system can be as big or as small as you can imagine, and there can be an infinite number of levels within it. Some that you control, and others that you don't.

Now, we could have a long and philosophical debate about whether or not this is the perfect and most academic definition for a system or a routine, but what's important is that we establish an understanding so that, as you complete the rest of the lessons in this course, you'll know what I'm talking about when I use those words to give you instructions for how to proceed.

Hopefully we've established that baseline of communication, and we'll continue to build on it as we work through future lessons.