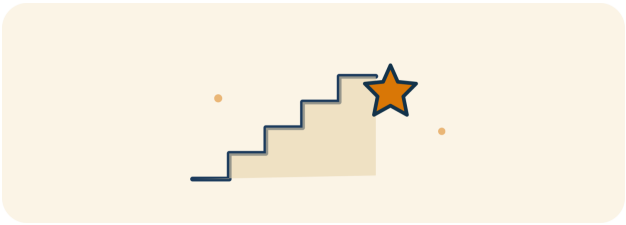
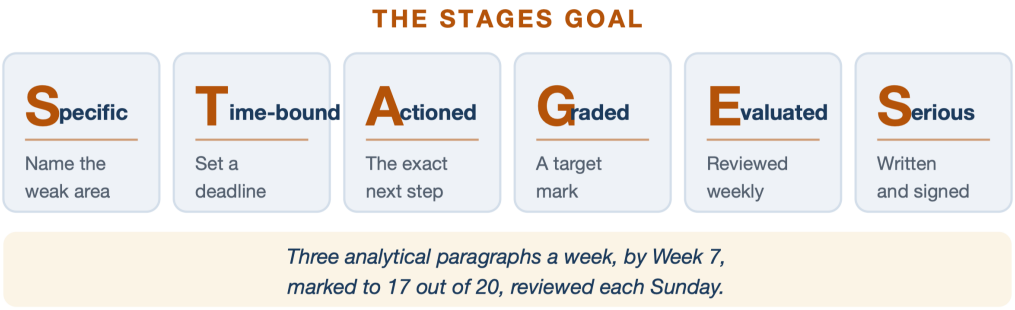
The STAGES Formula

Turn a vague wish into a goal your brain will act on



THE STUDY LAB
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01 Why vague goals fade



"Do better at maths" is decoration, not a goal. It sounds like direction and gives none, because at 4pm on a Tuesday, when the choice is study or the phone, it tells the brain nothing about what to actually do. Vague goals produce vague actions, and vague actions lose to whatever is easier in the moment. This is why the goal written on the wall in January is invisible by March. The page did not fail. The goal was never specific enough to act on.

The reason a strong goal holds is that it removes decisions. Motivation can start something, but motivation fades, and a goal that depends on feeling motivated collapses the first flat week. A well-built goal replaces that feeling with structure, so that when motivation is gone you still know the exact next action, the deadline, and the standard. The STAGES formula is a checklist for building that structure into a goal deliberately, one property at a time, so nothing is left to mood.

The core idea

- **Vague goals give vague actions.** "Do better" cannot survive contact with an actual Tuesday afternoon.
- **Structure outlasts motivation.** The goal has to work on the days you do not feel like it.
- **A goal is a set of removed decisions.** The more it decides in advance, the less willpower it costs later.

Why writing it by hand and signing it matters

The final property, treating the goal seriously, sounds soft and does a lot of work. Handwriting a goal, signing it like a contract, and putting it somewhere you cannot avoid it all raise what psychologists call commitment. We behave more consistently with things

we have publicly and physically committed to, even to ourselves. A goal typed into a notes app and never seen again asks nothing of you. A signed page on the wall you walk past every morning keeps holding you to it, and that friction is the point.

02 Build the six properties



1. Specific. Name the actual weakness, not the vague wish. "Losing marks for weak analysis," not "improve English." The goal has to point at something you can actually change.
2. Time-bound. Give it a concrete deadline. "By Week 7." A goal without a date is a wish that renews itself forever.
3. Actioned. Define the exact plan. "Three scaffolded paragraphs, three times a week." The action is what you will do when motivation is absent.
4. Graded. Set a target mark and a floor you will not drop below, so you can measure the goal instead of feeling your way through it.
5. Evaluated. Reassess every week. Are you ahead, behind, or is the goal no longer the right one? A goal you never review drifts.
6. Serious. Handwrite it, sign it, and put it where you cannot avoid seeing it. Treat it like a commitment, because that is what raises the odds you keep it.

In practice. One rule beats the whole formula: run one or two goals at a time, no more. If you have ten goals floating around, you effectively have none, because none of them gets the protected attention it needs. Cut eight and give the survivors proper weight.

A worked example

Say your weakness is analysis in English essays. A STAGES goal reads: I am losing marks for description instead of analysis, so by Week 7 I will write three scaffolded analytical paragraphs a week, aiming for a mark of 17 out of 20 and never below 14, reviewed every Sunday. You handwrite it, sign it, and stick it above your desk.

Now the Tuesday-afternoon choice is one named, dated, gradable task against YouTube, and that named task is far harder to talk yourself out of than a vague wish to "do better".

03 Do not stack goals



Watch out. The most common mistake is stacking goals, because setting them feels productive. Ten goals spread your attention so thin that none of them gets what it needs, and people who finish things almost always run one or two at a time. Adding a new goal before the current one is holding is how both fade out. Protect the one that matters before you let anything else onto the page.

Build one goal through all six properties before you close this page, then handwrite and sign it tonight. A goal that stays in your head has skipped the two properties, actioned and serious, that make it hold.

Build one STAGES goal

Cover the guide and fill these from memory. No marks, just recall.

Specific (the weakness, named):

Time-bound (the deadline):

Actioned (the exact weekly plan):

Graded (target mark and floor):

Evaluated (the day each week I will review it):

Serious (where the signed page will live):

Make it stick. Come back in two or three days and redo the exercise from memory, without looking. The gap between attempts is what fixes it.

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