

HOW TO BE A

# KNOWLEDGE NINJA

STUDY  
SMARTER

FOCUS  
BETTER

ACHIEVE  
MORE



**GRAHAM ALLCOTT**

AUTHOR OF *HOW TO BE A PRODUCTIVITY NINJA*

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*To Roscoe. This one's for you, chief*

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**THANK YOU**

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# **1. THE WAY OF THE KNOWLEDGE NINJA**

The alarm goes off. Your brain slowly remembers that it's not the first time you've heard that alarm this morning. You look at the time. 'I can't have snoozed for *that* long, surely?!' It's Wednesday. You have an assignment due tomorrow. Time is running out and this morning's planned extra hour of reading just became an extra hour in bed, which isn't an ideal start. Oh, and you're probably going to miss the bus now and be late for the start of the class.

You shouldn't have gone out last night. Your friend just said to come round for dinner, but then dinner turned into the whole night. You feel tired and foggy and not quite ready to face the world. As you look at the texts on your phone you remember that you said yes to an extra shift at work tomorrow night (well, you do need the money), but with another deadline looming on Monday, it's going to be a busy few days ahead. A crazy few days. In fact, you already know that these next few days will look nothing like the peaceful and serene plan you created for tackling this term, just a few short weeks ago.

'Why don't things work out like I planned?'

'Why do I always find myself in a mess?'

'Juggling all these things is so damn *hard*.'

These issues are what this book is all about. It's about helping you move from muddling through to becoming a Knowledge Ninja - slaying the enemies of stress, chaos, procrastination and feeling overwhelmed, and creating a sense of playful control and momentum in all that you do.

It's easy to feel like everyone else has cracked it and that you're the only one in a mess. So I'll let you into a little secret - everyone feels like this. From the most powerful

business leaders and politicians to the coolest people on TV to your friends, family and role models - they're ultimately all human beings with their struggles and faults. As human beings we're more prone to mistakes than we like to think: we plan badly, we're not realistic, we're not organized enough to have a good enough view of what's ahead, we struggle with prioritization, we get scared and nervous and oh, how we wish there was an exam for procrastination, because we'd be guaranteed an 'A' for that one (although we'd probably put off that exam until tomorrow, come to think of it!).

That's part of the problem with creating study plans or reading study guides - life isn't perfect and we forget that *we're* not perfect either. We keep finding ourselves in a mess because life is ... *messy*. Yet study books and our own grandiose plans sell us the dream of perfection and we fall for it every time. We dream about this perfect life we can lead and convince ourselves that buying a smart new notebook and some highlighter pens is but the first step on our inevitable journey to awesomeness. Three weeks into the term, those dreams have faded again and we're back to feeling disappointed, flustered, daunted and messy again.

How do I know this? Well, I've spent the last six years coaching and training senior business leaders in how to be productive and successful, and I wrote a bestseller that helps people do that in their work and life, called *How to be a Productivity Ninja*.

And how did that become my job? Because I was spectacularly *bad* at productivity. Because I tried to live the perfection myth too. Because I'm naturally flaky, lazy and disorganized. Because I'd struggled so hard at making myself productive that I found it easy to relate to other people struggling and could help them find solutions.

I was far from a grade 'A' student. You should see my school reports. Oh wait, my mum still has them in her loft. And now I'm reading them again after all these years, they're even less pretty than I remember them. And I have even less of an idea about why she might choose to keep them ...

Lawrence Sheriff School

SUBJECT REPORT

CHEMISTRY of Coordinated Sciences

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Form: \_\_\_\_\_  
Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: November 1984

Mark on weekly work	54%
Average in set	53%
Mark considered satisfactory	53%

Graham's mark here is about average but does not reveal the number of reminders that have been necessary before work appeared. Considering that he is capable of a good grade he has taken up far too much of my time. He has been a little better recently and seems more aware of the self-discipline needed. Regularly establishing the correct priorities will be a key factor to his eventual achievement.

H.P.A.

*'Graham's mark here is about average but does not reveal the number of reminders that have been necessary before work appeared'*  
—Mr Abyss, Chemistry

Lawrence Sheriff School

SUBJECT REPORT  
**FRENCH**

Name: GRAHAM ALLOTT

Form: 112

Date: DEC 1994

Oral	6	CLASS when average is
Written	C	above / below
Listening	C	percentage for the
Reading	6	class.

This term, the group has continued to work on new topics and on the consolidation of all topics and grammar for higher level work. I have stressed the need for detail, variety and accuracy in higher level writing for details, variety and accuracy. These skills are followed up in the higher grades, some competence is followed advice given. The high-achievers, writing revision are most likely to be able to demonstrate their competence in all skills at higher level.

Graham is still satisfied with inaccurate work in his writing. He continues to rush his homework. He is progressing in oral work but wants to be accurate in tense and gender. On the whole he is trying harder this term and with thorough revision he may yet improve his attainment in all skills.

*P.D. Bettany*

*'Graham is still satisfied with inaccurate work in his writing. He continues to rush his homework'*  
 —Mrs Bettany, French

SUBJECT REPORT  
**HISTORY**

Lawrence Sheriff School

Name: Graham Allcott

Form: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: 117

Date: 21/11/96

Exam: \_\_\_\_\_

It is the same old story - Graham can work well in class - but not out of school hours. He is only hanging on his own chance of doing well. If he wishes to do well - he must and effort must be his.

(R)

*'It's the same old story - Graham can work well in class, but not out of school'  
—Mr Cartwright, History*

TUTOR REPORTS  
 Name: G. A. [unclear]  Lawrence Sheriff School  
 Form: G A [unclear] Dated: 27.3.95  
 Form Tutor: H. J. A. [unclear]  
 on time incapable of simply arriving  
 surprised at his morning present problems  
 with coursework if he (problem) fails  
 & quality complete on someone can  
 programme be a bit effective that  
 looking at the results avoid the  
 what a variable results that we  
 about a big effort I hope he  
 low. I.A. Goodes.

Headteacher:  
 It's fair to say that since you came to me or  
 discussed points, the progress he has made has been pulled  
 out of him, and most credit for it goes to others, not  
 himself. A lot of effort has been expended, but his attitude to  
 him. He sees it as a little local difficulty, but his attitude to  
 organized study is in fact a major future problem. Unless he  
 both as there's a problem. I have just seen because the  
 cover down to compare. I have just seen because the  
 having to be sure that he has not done it over. The Point

*'Incapable of simply arriving on time in the morning, I am not surprised at his present problems with coursework'*  
 —Mr Goodes, form tutor

*'The progress he has made has been pulled out of him, and most credit for it goes to others, not himself. He sees it as a little local difficulty, but his attitude to organized study is in fact a major future problem'*  
 —Dr Rex Pogson, Headteacher

What those reports don't tell you is that I was learning loads in those school years, but very little of it was in school. I was editing a music magazine, singing in a band, campaigning for political change, putting on music events, writing a music column for my local newspaper, DJing on a local radio station, as well as delivering newspapers six days a week and working in a bank three evenings a week. But I still look back on some of those school years as a wasted opportunity. If I'd have known what I know now about topics like productivity, attention, psychology, self-control and

motivation, my school days – and my qualifications – would have been very different.

Since those days, I've learned something really important about learning itself, too. Knowledge is power – it's a cliché because it's true. But we've come to see education as a passport to a better pay packet, and as a 'chore' that's necessary for us to reach the next level in life, when really we should see it as a path to a richer life experience. Yes, there's a destination to reach, but why not make the journey richer, more fulfilling and more interesting, too?

This mindset shift happened for me when I was studying for my degree, at the University of Birmingham's famous and pioneering Centre for Cultural Studies and Sociology, set on a beautiful campus in a fascinating multi-cultural city – home of course to the Balti curry, Tolkien, Cadbury's chocolate and, of course, Aston Villa Football Club.

At the end of those three years, I was given a degree and I was happy that within weeks of graduating, I got a job doing something that I cared deeply about. Conventional wisdom is often for people to abandon the thought of education or personal development at this point. Why would you need to keep learning when you've reached the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? But the thing that university gave me – that was much more important than the piece of paper I could use to inflate my salary expectations – was a deep sense of curiosity, a thirst for knowledge and understanding about how the world works, and excitement at finding out what makes people tick, what principles or politics are worth fighting for, how the world and society should develop. I'd finally learned that there is nothing as exciting as asking big questions, knowing full well that you're unlikely to get a simple answer.



So, dear reader, whether you're studying for your GCSEs or A-levels, your degree, or your French class after work, my hope is that this book ignites within you a passion for learning as well as giving you skills, techniques, tips and tricks from the world of business and productivity that mean you can take your learning to a new level. If there's a destination you have in mind - a qualification, a life stage, an achievement - then I would be delighted to be your guide on that journey, and I promise we'll get you there in good shape.

But my aim will be to go further: my real aim will be to give you the gift of playful curiosity that my three years studying at the University of Birmingham gave me. Whether you're learning for school, for college or university or just for the fun of learning, my intention here is to show you the way.

You have a reason for wanting to learn. Perhaps it's to make your parents happy, perhaps it's to advance a career or perhaps it's for the sheer unadulterated pleasure of learning new things. It could be a combination of all of the above, or something else entirely. But let's be honest, there's also plenty of reasons not to learn, too. It could be that amazing new series on Netflix, it could be the distraction of the football scores or the Xbox, it could be your family or a great book. All of these are enemies of progress, because you're human. As much as we all like to feel we're above such distraction, and as much as we beat ourselves up at our regular lapses into spectacular bouts of procrastination, it happens. We're human. We know it's not good for us. We do it anyway.

For the past decade or so, I've been obsessed with productivity. I became obsessed with it because I was fed up of watching myself fall for bad habits, struggling to find ways of being organized and in control and realizing the sheer inefficiency of so many of my approaches to work and

life. Ever since I started my company, Think Productive, and started teaching productivity at some of the best-known companies in the world, one of the most common things people have said to me is: ‘I wish they taught these kinds of skills in schools.’

I quite agree: I was lousy in school. I had no awareness of how to study well, I struggled to hold my attention on things for long enough to do great work (by the way, this never changed, I just developed better ways around this!) and I never really felt I hit a groove until well into my degree – and only then because I felt so totally engaged and inspired by the subject matter, which I’m realistic enough to know is a luxury in itself.

What wins on a rainy Tuesday? Is it the passion to study hard and get ready for those exams or assignments that we know have gloriously far-away deadlines that feel like some kind of distant island on the horizon? Or is it laziness, distractions and socializing?

*‘Get over the idea that only children should spend their time in study.  
Be a student so long as you still have something to learn, and this will  
mean all your life’  
—Henry. L. Doherty*

Do you want to change this so you can be more disciplined, memorize facts better, develop critical thinking skills and write better essays? Of course you do. So how do you change all this and more? You learn to think like a Ninja, harnessing nine key characteristics that will focus your mind and revolutionize your learning.

## ***HOW TO USE THIS BOOK***

This book is split into three main sections. First, we will focus on creating the mindset and habits that are conducive

to studying: the way of the Knowledge Ninja, mental approaches to your studies that will have you seeking out the shortcuts, maximizing your learning time and feeling more in control and less chaotic. We'll look at what it means to be a learner and discover the style of learning that suits you. Essentially, the aim of this section is to prime your brain to receive and retain knowledge in the most efficient way possible, and remove some of the obstacles to doing so.

Then in the middle chapters, we'll use this newfound Knowledge Ninja mindset to approach the key tenets of learning, playing to your particular learning styles and strengths: general study, note-taking, group work, writing, revision and exams.

Finally, we'll look at a subject that is close to many a student heart - reducing procrastination. But I want to also focus on what we can replace procrastination with: increased momentum, overcoming your fears and developing a childish curiosity that will make learning fun and help you learn for the rest of your life.

It's a book that I hope you will choose to read cover to cover, but I know that you may not have time for that! So before we get started, if you've picked up this book in a panic, over on the next page there's a map so that you can cut straight to the chase, whatever today's chase may be.

### ***'I AM SO STUPID!'***

We've all uttered those words as we look back with regret on the times we wasted and look forward at the deadline hurtling towards us at startling velocity, ready to smack us in the face. We wasted time and now we're rushing. How stupid of us. Do you ever wish you could just turn back the

clock, rewind all those hours of TV and movies and games that in hindsight were pretty pointless (though fun!)? The temptations we face are what make us human. We can't simply decide one day to become a superhero, immune to such distractions and such sloppy and lazy working practices. But we *can* learn to think like a Ninja. Ninjas are human beings with a great mindset, good tools and the ability to overachieve. And let's face it, everyone loves a Ninja.

So here are the nine characteristics of the Knowledge Ninja. All of these things can be learned with a little practice. They are ways to approach your learning, ways to think about the world around you, ways to promote your own self-discipline and banish some of the negative habits that keep you feeling down. So, my Ninja apprentice, let's dive right in.



1. THE WAY OF THE KNOWLEDGE NINJA



2. GETTING ORGANIZED



WANT TO GET ORGANIZED?  
GO TO CHAPTER 2



WANT TO MAKE BETTER CHOICES?  
GO TO CHAPTER 3



3. MASTERING NINJA BALANCE



WANT TO LEARN SIMPLE MEDITATION TECHNIQUES TO CHILL YOU OUT?  
GO TO CHAPTER 5



IF YOU NEED HELP GETTING OUT OF BED  
GO TO CHAPTER 5



4. HOW YOU LEARN



5. LEARNING DAY BY DAY:  
GENERAL STUDY

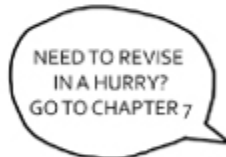


IF YOU NEED TO PLAN AN ESSAY,  
GO TO CHAPTER 6

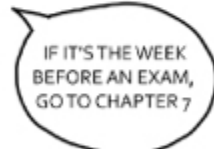
6. WRITING



7. MEMORY



NEED TO REVISE IN A HURRY?  
GO TO CHAPTER 7



IF IT'S THE WEEK BEFORE AN EXAM,  
GO TO CHAPTER 7

8. EXAMS



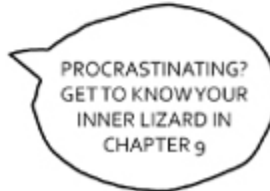
KNOWLEDGE NINJA!



9. PROCRASTINATION



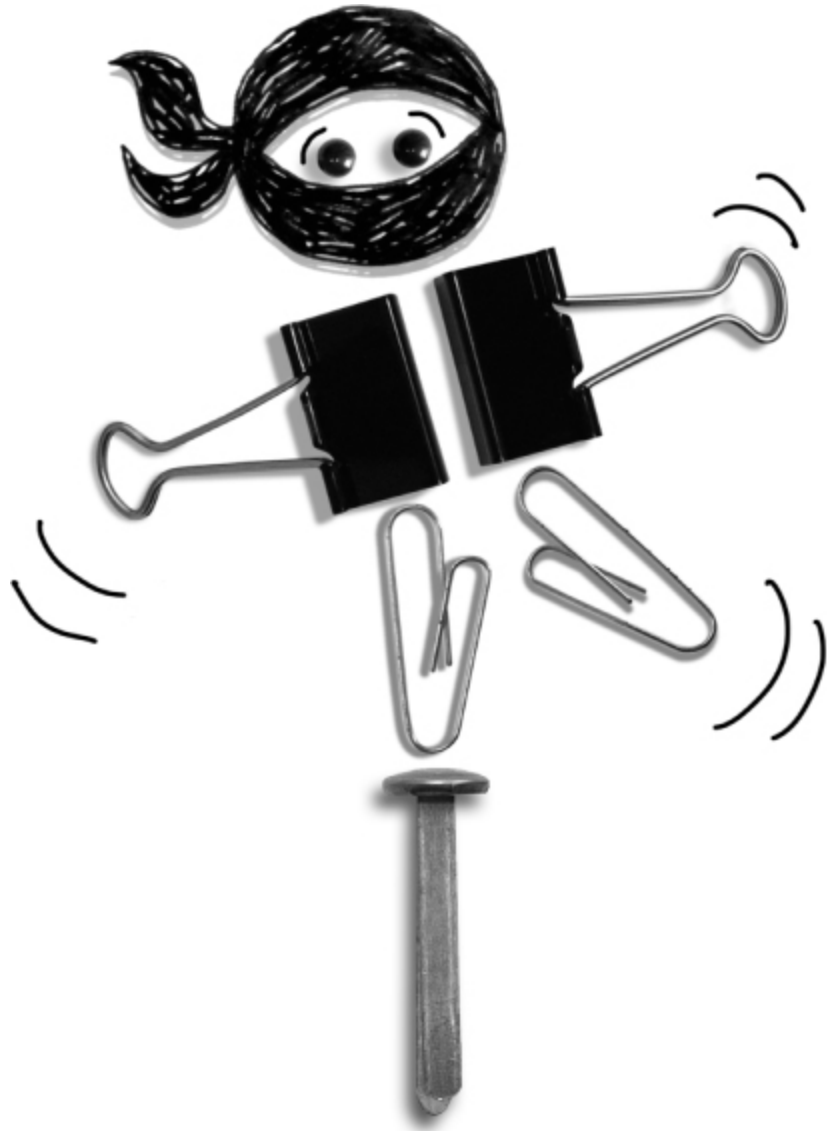
10. CURIOSITY & CHILDISHNESS



PROCRASTINATING?  
GET TO KNOW YOUR INNER LIZARD IN  
CHAPTER 9



# BALANCE



## THE NINE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KNOWLEDGE NINJA

### 1. BALANCE

A Ninja needs balance in their life. Learning is just one of many priorities. It might not be your top priority and striking the balance is about fitting in the learning so that you have time for the things that truly matter. Alternatively learning might be the thing you most want to do, but life is getting in the way.

## ***JUGGLING***

The older you get, or the deeper you get into your studies, the more potential there is for 'everyday life' to get in the way. It can be overwhelming. Making space for studying or writing is half the battle. Feeling good about it is the other half! There are several ways in which approaches to productivity and learning are similar, not least in terms of building structures and 'scaffolding' that enable you to juggle everything going on in your life without getting overwhelmed or forgetful.

'Scaffolding' consists of the structures and systems that you need to have in place to engender good habits and to feel in control of your decision-making. Developing a great to-do list so that you know what your options are and don't feel stressed by all of those nagging things to do is one of the most important things you can do to alleviate stress. A great to-do list becomes like a second brain: a brain that's actually better than your real brain, because once things are written down, it doesn't forget them.

Getting into great routines requires more than just having the thought that it would be good to have a routine! To change your habits and develop great routines that stick, you need to think about the scaffolding again. Do you keep meaning to check your email or get round to that big chunk of reading, but it never happens? Do you keep telling yourself you need to be making progress on that essay, yet you're watching Netflix instead? Those are not just problems

of willpower or decisions, those are problems of scaffolding! So later in this book we'll be focussing on self-management techniques that will leave you procrastinating less and doing more.

## ***RELATIONSHIPS***

'I can't break up with her this week, she's got her A-level exam on Thursday.' We've all heard sentences like that uttered by friends, or even said them ourselves! Relationships take time to nurture and offer another powerful pull away from study. Whether it's the early days of lust and love, the relationship with a parent or sibling or a strong friendship, these things really matter. There is also a lot made of the concept of 'work/life balance', and if you're studying for a qualification, it can often feel like you have no study/life balance. And if, like I did all the way from the age of fourteen to the end of my degree, you're studying alongside trying to have a life AND holding down a part-time paid job, it can often be a big challenge. Work/life balance implies two things, when in reality we're all juggling three, four, five or more major areas of commitment in our lives.

## ***SOCIALIZING***

And of course alongside all the serious stuff that requires your commitment and focus, there's the *even more* serious stuff like drinking, dancing and cavorting, especially if you're at uni. Some schools or universities will try to set limits on how much their students should be socializing, but I don't know that I've ever met a student of any age or institution that has been keen to obey such rules. In fact, it seems to me that this only encourages more socializing in order to achieve a requisite level of rebellion. And of course, if you're a mature student, with a social life spent well-away from a campus, or prefer to spend your relaxation time doing other things, such guidelines seem even more



alienating. There's also peer pressure at play here - we want to feel accepted and avoid the 'FOMO' feeling (fear of missing out).

In addition to having a life outside of the campus and outside of your own four walls, we all have a life online. This is often more complicated and 'bitty' than the socialising we might do on a designated night out. In fact, it's often so second nature these days that we even forget that it's happening or that we can do something about it! But think about how much time you spend on your phone, or on the internet. Personally I know there are times when I need to make sure I've switched this stuff off and got it out of the way. But equally, there are times when a few minutes of social media diversion can be a healthy thing that leaves me feeling refreshed for a task - and other times when a full-on Facebook binge beats going out too!

To study successfully, you don't need to abandon the idea of socializing. In fact, there are academic studies that suggest socializing actually helps with the retention of key information. But there are times to strike the balance, and in particular, we'll look at the 'cross-over' between the two. For example, scheduling in revision study time the morning after a big night out when you're tired and not at your best is very unlikely to lead to academic prizes, yet we kid ourselves that such behaviour strikes a good balance. But actually, being prepared to write off the whole of Sunday in advance is one of the most sure-fire ways to enjoy your Saturday night without guilt. So let's be real about the best approaches to achieving balance, rather than falling for the pretences that make us feel virtuous, but that, if we're honest, are very rarely effective.

## ***BACKGROUNDS AND SPOTLIGHTS***

How we deal with Balance has a lot to do with where we choose to put our attention and focus (more of which later!). One of the best ways to achieve a sense of Balance is 'backgrounding'. Learning to push things into the background until we're ready to shine the spotlight back on them is an important skill. So there are times when relationships take centre stage, and times when we should 'maintain' them with the least possible effort. There are times to hit the socializing hard and times to put it to the background. More subtle things, like the 'life maintenance' of bills, shopping or fixing things can easily feel like they need constant spotlight, yet they're things that often need some 'backgrounding' if you're going to really focus on what matters.

### ***BALANCE COMES FROM PURPOSE***

Finally, let's start with the biggest question of all: why?

Why do you study? What are you learning *for*? What's your intention? I often think that starting with the big, profound question of 'why' and really thinking about what's motivating you is an inspiring and empowering thing to do. As a culture, we're not encouraged to be curious or question things - in fact, I would even go so far as to argue that, wrapped up with all the learning, education in this country often deliberately attempts to brainwash us never to question our assumptions or intentions.

We're taught to go to school, get good grades, follow an academic path or get training, get a job, get a pay rise, buy a house, have children, retire and go on a cruise ship around the Caribbean ... And perhaps achieving all of those things, in that order, *is* exactly why you're learning. But it's almost certainly not. You might just enjoy being clever and smart. If so, admit it! In my case, a big motivation behind wanting to go to university was because I would be the first person

from my family to go, and having been to a ridiculously good school where it was an expectation, I felt confident about breaking the mould. And once I got to university, I was learning because I wanted to be like the academics in my department who had their words published in journals and even in the *Guardian* newspaper. And they liked drinking grown-up coffees and wore badly fitted cardigans and it all just seemed quite romantic. Yes, the motivation for many of the hours spent in the university library was dreaming that one day I too could wear ill-fitting knitwear.

I know this sounds like I'm asking you to think about the meaning of your life (and in a way I am), but I do think it's important to know at least some of the reasons you feel that learning is important to you. After all, you do have choices. You could put this book down, quit your course and spend the rest of your life deliberately learning nothing.

I'd like you to think now about what it is that drives you. What's it all for? Is it really about getting good grades, or do the grades matter because they make your mum smile, or contribute to a bigger life plan of yours? Take a few minutes to figure it out.

---

## **EXERCISE: PURPOSE**



Write down the reasons you really want to study, and why you want to get better at it below:

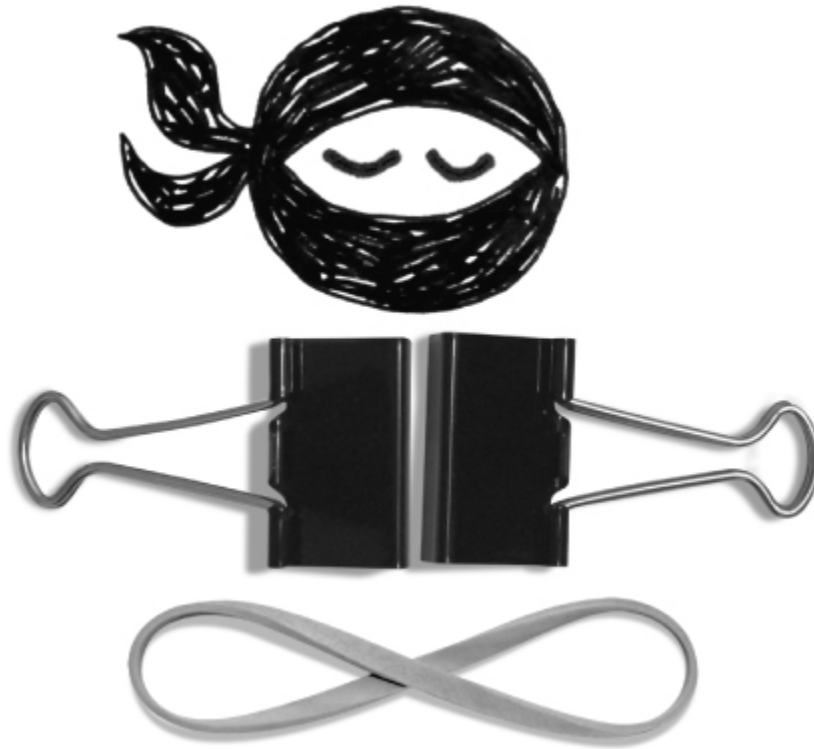
I am learning because I want to ...

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. \_\_\_\_\_

I want to be a Knowledge Ninja because ...

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
  - 2. \_\_\_\_\_
  - 3. \_\_\_\_\_
  - 4. \_\_\_\_\_
  - 5. \_\_\_\_\_
-

# ZEN-LIKE CALM



## 2. ZEN-LIKE CALM

A Ninja is calm, present and 'in the moment'. OK, a quick warning. Things are about to get a little bit 'hippy'. But stay with me here, because the first secret of success is coming your way here.

You will often hear people say they work at their best when they're on a tight deadline. They feel like the deadline makes them more productive. This is a half-truth. The deadline forces you to get going and make progress. And in those final hours before the deadline, as you struggle to get everything finished, you have no decisions to make about what you should be spending your time on. You stop thinking about Facebook updates or gossip websites or football scores as you work away, blissfully in the moment. In the middle of the panic of that deadline is a calmness, because all choice has been removed. There isn't the time anymore to procrastinate or even work on something else: meeting the deadline and working like a Trojan to get there requires all of your attention.

It's not the deadline itself that makes you productive, it's that feeling of being totally focussed on that moment. Time stands still. You forget the worries of your life; you might forget to eat; you might even struggle to remember what day of the week it is. This is a version of what Buddhists call 'Zen'.

We spend so much of our lives living in anything but the present moment. We plan our futures, we strive for pots of gold at the end of the rainbow instead of marvelling at the rainbow itself, we agonize over bad choices we might have made, or mourn things that we've lost. And with our work,