

## Why You Should Meal Plan and How to Do It

A few years ago, my sister gave me a meal board for Christmas. It was so cute I had to hang it in my house. And having a blank meal board in a kitchen is super tacky, so I had to fill it with meals. This is how I got started with meal planning.



Now it's a weekly ritual in my house. Every Thursday afternoon, I plan dinners for the following week. I only plan dinners because breakfast is generally the same every day and lunch is often leftovers. I always thought weekly meal planning was a standard practice until my friends started asking me for tips on how to do it. A few even asked if they could come over and watch me plan.

### Why I meal plan:

1. It saves money – By planning meals in advance, I can plan based on what is on sale. Plus, I go into the grocery store armed with a shopping list. This keeps me from spur of the moment purchases, which get pricey.
2. It saves time – I know people who grocery shop three or more times a week. I go to the grocery store on Friday and that's it. Because I've planned ahead, I know I have all the ingredients I need for the week.
3. It makes life much less stressful – I don't worry about what's for dinner until it's time to actually make dinner. I thaw my meat in the fridge at the beginning of the week, and then know I have all the ingredients to make a good, healthy dinner for my family.

4. We eat healthier – Meal planning gives me much more control over what my family eats. When I have a plan, we're much less likely to run and get last-minute fast food or pop something frozen into the microwave.
5. It gives me an excuse to sit down and watch TV – This may sound strange, but it's totally true. I love Thursdays because my daughter and I sit on the family room floor, turn on our favorite TV shows and meal plan. It's so nice to have a productive, legitimate reason to sit down once a week. Moms know what a rare treat that is.

If I've convinced you to give meal-planning a try based on my "whys", continue on to my 5-step meal planning process.

### **Step One: Early Preparation**

- Occasionally, when my husband and I are sitting and watching TV in the evening, I'll go through my favorite cookbooks and put small tabs on recipes we haven't had in a while. That way when I am meal planning I don't have to look at every recipe; just the ones I've marked. When I schedule a recipe, I take the tab out. When the tabs get low, I do another recipe-tagging movie night.
- When I find a recipe I like online, I print it off and put it in a binder organized by course (main dish, side dish, dessert, etc). This keeps all my favorite recipes together in one place.

### **Step Two: Marking Ads and checking coupons**

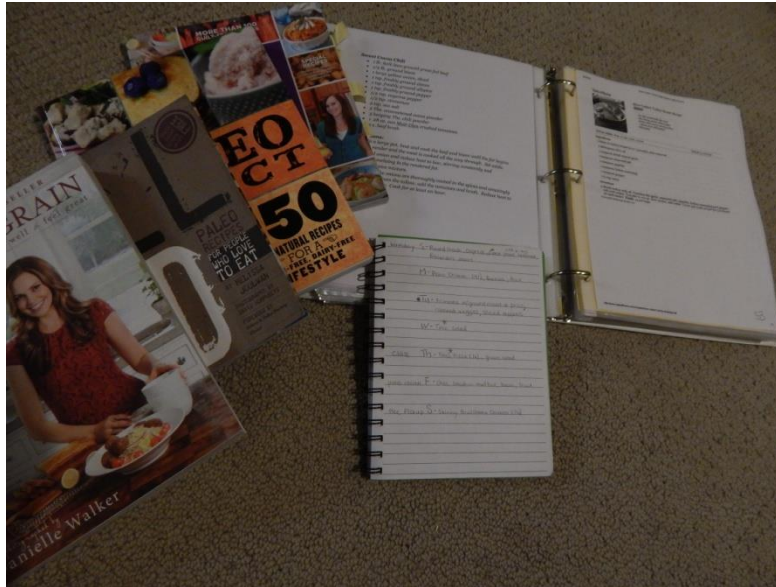
- Our grocery advertisements come on Tuesday. Sometime Tuesday or Wednesday, I go through the ads of the three stores I like and circle on-sale items I want to buy. If you don't get weekly ads in the mail check to see if your local grocers have online ads or stop by the store and pick one up.
- I'm not a "couponer" but I do the basics. Many grocery stores have frequent-shopper cards associated with their stores. These cards track your purchases and the stores will often send coupons based on your buying patterns. Some grocery stores even have apps to load coupons on your shopper card. We have a Kroger grocery chain which has a fabulous coupon app.

### **Step Three: Take Inventory**

- Before I plan meals, I check the freezer and pantry to see what I already have. If I have a lot of one kind of meat, I'll plan around that. If I have something in my food storage close to expiration, I'll find a way to incorporate it into a meal that week.

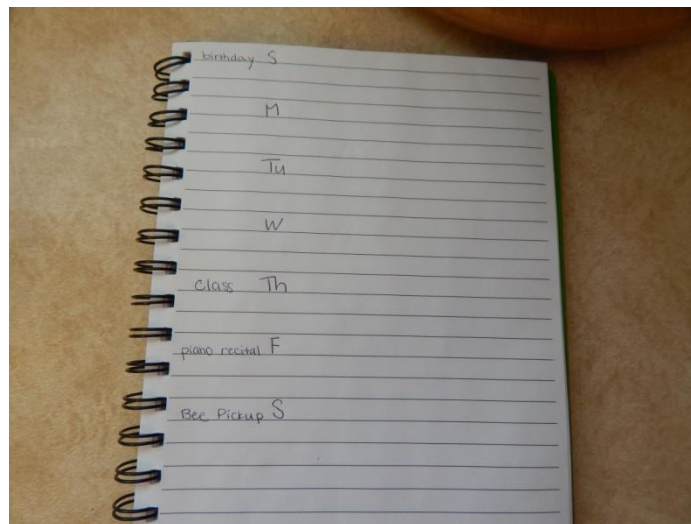
## Step Four: Set Up

- I pull out my four favorite cookbooks, my recipe binder, my meal-planning notebook, the weekly ads and my shopping list. This all gets spread out on the floor of the family room and the planning begins.



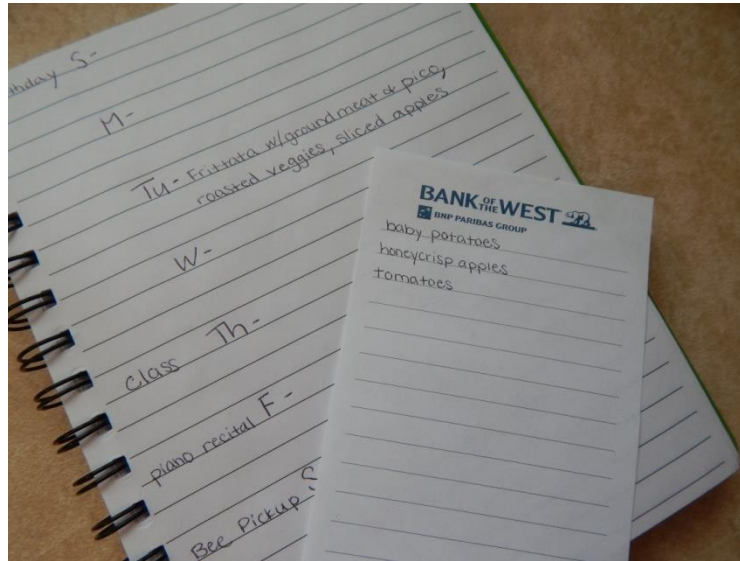
## Step Five: The Planning

- I start by making a list of the days I need to plan meals for.
- Then I look on my calendar and see if we have anything scheduled in the evenings that may affect our meals. I write those conflicts to the left of the day.



- I always like to have patterns. We always have breakfast for dinner on Friday and we only have dessert on Sundays.

- When I pick meals, I try to schedule a variety. I try not to serve chicken two nights in a row, or Mexican dishes two nights in a row.
- I also try to coordinate my ads into the meals. If pork chops are on sale, I'll plan on pork chops one night.
- After I choose a meal, I add ingredients to my shopping list for my Friday grocery shopping trip.



- Consider adding meals with similar ingredients so you can prep several meals at once. If I have two meals with chopped carrots, I'll chop all the carrots at once and store the extras in a plastic zipper bag for the next meal. If two recipes call for browned ground beef, I cook it all at the same time and store part for another recipe.
- I then add staples to the list (eggs, apples, bananas, milk, etc) and any other on-sale items I've circled in the weekly ads.





- Because I do most my shopping in the produce section, I put a small dot next to each produce item on my list. This makes it much easier to sort through. If it helps you, you can even organize your list by department. I don't do this because if I have a last-minute item to add to the list, it throws off my groove if I don't have room to write it in under the right department. If I'm making a long list (for Christmas or other big events), I usually make my list on the computer and then sort it by section.

Meal planning makes me feel like I have much more control over my life. I feel more prepared and less stressed in general. Life is stressful enough without having to worry about what to make for dinner every night. Now I can stress about more important things like how to remove Sharpie from a living room wall.

You might consider getting started by downloading one of our premade meal plans. We have already put these together with the recipes, shopping lists, etc.

→ [Click here for our meal plans](#)