Start Before Ready

Solo or team guide

Your job: get a rough first version made by shrinking the clock each round, until there's no time left to be ready — and stop people (or yourself) from using the time to perfect instead of start. It runs solo or with a team in 5–15 minutes, and explains how to hold the "make it bad" discipline the whole tool depends on.

The one line that makes it work: the goal each round is **the worst acceptable version, not a good one**. The moment someone tries to make it good, the timer hasn't shrunk enough — or they're negotiating with the clock. Hold the line: bad, fast, done.

WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

A real task that keeps not-starting — a draft, plan, design, email, first rep — where the block is "not ready yet": preparing, researching, waiting to feel right. You're 'getting ready' instead of starting.

WRONG TOOL

A real constraint just landed and you must decide fast › Decide Under Pressure. You're avoiding owning a decision › Go/No-Go Card. A task that genuinely needs planning first (rare — be honest).

The one test before you start: can you name a first physical action that would take under five minutes? If yes, you're ready enough — the "not ready" feeling is the block, and this is the tool. If the task truly can't be started in any small way yet, it may genuinely need shaping first.

WHAT WILL I LEAVE WITH?

What you'll leave with

WHAT YOU GET

A real first version made — not planned, made. Proof that the version was always enough to start from. And a way to break paralysis any time it returns.

WHY IT MATTERS

The first version appears faster than you expected; the shorter the timer, the less you overthink; and once something exists, continuing feels easy. Readiness follows starting.

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· WHAT DO I NEED?

What you'll need

What	Why it's there
One not-started task	A real thing being avoided. Pick the first physical action, not the whole task.
A visible timer	Phone, clock, or the round cards. The shrinking clock is the mechanism — it has to be seen.
Permission to make it bad	Stated out loud. The goal is the worst acceptable version; without that permission, people perfect instead of start.
A facilitator (team only)	Calls the rounds and shrinks the clock so no one negotiates for more time. Solo: you hold your own clock.

Focus · Get Started · 5–15 minutes · solo or a team. The time is indicative and will depend on the nature of the task.

> **What they actually produce:** participants work directly on the real task, using whatever materials it normally requires — paper, sticky notes, laptop, whiteboard or code editor. Each round makes one concrete thing: one ugly slide, one paragraph, one wireframe, one email draft, one sketch. Not a plan of it — the thing itself.

· HOW DO I RUN IT?

Run sheet

Five steps, 5–15 minutes. The bold part is what you do; the note under it is how to hold the discipline. For a team, the facilitator calls every round aloud.

1. Name the task — and the first action	**1 min**	*"What's the very first physical step?"* Not the whole task — the smallest thing you could actually do. "Write the opening line", not "write the report". If someone names something big ("do the analysis"), push: "what's the first thing your hand does?"
2. Round one — 5 minutes	**5 min**	*"Produce the roughest possible version of that first action before it rings. Bad is the goal. Go."* Say it explicitly: "this is meant to be bad." Don't let anyone set up, research or tidy — only produce. Stop dead when it rings.

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3. Round two — 2 minutes	**2 min**	*"Same thing, or push it forward — in two minutes. Notice what you drop."* The shrink must be noticeable: 5 to 2 should feel slightly alarming — that's the mechanism working. Don't add time back; the clock only ever shrinks.
4. Round three — 60 seconds	**1 min**	*"Sixty seconds. Only the essential. Go."* This is the round that exposes how little "readiness" was ever needed. After the bell, name the reveal (below) — don't skip straight to step 5.
5. Start for real	**2 min**	*"Take the rough thing you just made and keep going from it."* Continue from the draft — don't throw it away and restart cleanly. It's already started; protect that.

Keeping time: 5–15 minutes total, indicative and flexing with the task. The exact times can flex (8/3/1, or 3/1/0.5) but the rule is fixed — each round is radically shorter than the last. The shrinking clock does the work; equal rounds don't. **How many rounds?** Three are usually enough — if the work has genuinely started, stop compressing and continue normally.

THIS IS THE REVEAL — NAME IT

After round three, name **the reveal** — the moment the insight lands: **"you just did in a minute the thing you'd been putting off for days."** Then make it sharper: *notice what changed — the task didn't become easier; you simply ran out of time to avoid starting.* That's the insight, not the timer. The rough version was always enough to start from. Don't skip straight to step 5; let it land.

The facilitator doctrine — praise starting, not quality: never praise how good the rough version is during the activity. The instinct is to say "that's good" — but that quietly tells people quality was the goal, and they slow down. Say "great — you started" instead. You are rewarding the start, every time.

· HOW DOES THE SHRINKING CLOCK WORK?

How the shrinking clock works

Each round gives radically less time than the last. The compression strips the polish and the over-thinking until only the essential first action is left.

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THE SHRINKING CLOCK

each round gives radically less time — until there's none left to be ready



The clock only ever shrinks. By round three there's no time to perfect — only time to start.

The shrinking clock moves you from thinking to moving — that's the mechanism, not a detail.

· SOLO OR TEAM — WHAT CHANGES?

Running it solo vs with a team

SOLO

You hold your own clock — set it and don't touch it once it's running.

Say "this is meant to be bad" out loud; it works even alone.

The objection to watch: "I'll just get set up first" — that's the paralysis; start the timer instead.

The facilitator calls every round and shrinks the clock — no one negotiates time.

Everyone works at once, in parallel — not watching each other.

Share rough versions after round three; seeing others' "bad" versions normalises it.

The clearest sign it's working: the hand starts moving before the person feels ready — and the shorter the timer, the faster the work comes. If someone is still "setting up" in round two, the clock isn't shrinking enough, or the "make it bad" permission didn't land.

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· WHAT OBJECTIONS WILL I HEAR?

The objections you'll hear — and your move

These are the lines that stall the run (your own, if solo). Each has a one-sentence answer that keeps the clock moving.

What they say	Your response
"I just need to set up / research first."	"That's the paralysis. Start the timer — set-up is round one."
"It's no good though, it's rough."	"Rough is the goal. You've started — that's the win."
"Can I have a bit more time?"	"No — the clock only shrinks. That's what makes it work."
"Let me just redo it properly now."	"Continue from it, don't restart. Restarting is paralysis returning."

· WHAT DOES A RUN LOOK LIKE?

A worked run — talking it through

"Write the project update." Avoided for three days — kept "getting the structure right first."

WORKED RUN — "WRITE THE PROJECT UPDATE", AVOIDED FOR THREE DAYS

First action: not "write the update" — "write the opening sentence." The smallest thing the hand can do.

Round 1 (5 min): writes three rough sentences, deletes two, keeps fussing over wording.

Round 2 (2 min): no time to fuss — a rough paragraph. "Huh, basically fine." Nobody'd call it finished — but it exists.

Round 3 (60 sec): "you just wrote in a minute the thing you'd avoided for three days."

Starts for real: keeps writing from the rough paragraph — the update is half-done in ten minutes.

The compression did what willpower couldn't — it removed the time to perfect, so the rough version got made, and the rough version was always enough to start from. The tell it worked: something rough actually got made, the person felt that the shorter the clock got the less readiness they needed, and they continued from the rough version instead of restarting.

TEAM EXAMPLE — A SPRINT RETROSPECTIVE

Round 1: everyone writes three terrible improvement ideas. **Round 2:** everyone expands one. **Round 3:** everyone writes the first action. Thirty minutes of circular discussion becomes six minutes of work — and the team leaves with real first actions, not a list of intentions.

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· HOW DO I KNOW IT WORKED?

Done well vs a hollow run

DONE WELL

A rough first version exists; each round was visibly shorter; the person felt the “two minutes vs three days” gap; they continued from the rough version instead of restarting.

A HOLLOW RUN

The timer ran but the version stayed “careful”; rounds were the same length; nothing rough got made; the person admired it then said “now I’ll do it properly” and re-stalled.

· HOW DO I MAKE THIS A HABIT?

The habit to take away

THE HABIT

When you catch yourself “getting ready”, set a 2-minute timer and produce the worst acceptable version.

Readiness follows starting, not the other way round. The 2-minute timer is portable — the tool is really teaching the reflex, not finishing this one task.

Appendix · Reference

You should not need this while you run it. Read it before, or use it if a run goes sideways.

· WHAT GOES WRONG MOST OFTEN?

Common mistakes

Mistake	Why it fails the run
Rounds that don’t shrink	Equal rounds don’t work — the compression is the whole mechanism; each must be radically shorter.
Skipping the “make it bad” permission	Without it stated out loud, people perfect instead of start.
Restarting cleanly at step 5	Admiring the rough version then “doing it properly” is paralysis returning — continue from the mess.
Naming a target that’s too big	“Do the analysis” stalls; “write one bad sentence” moves the hand.

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· WHAT IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?

Edge cases

What happens	What to do
Person keeps polishing inside a round	The clock isn't short enough, or "make it bad" didn't land. Shrink the next round harder and restate: bad is the goal.
"I genuinely need to plan first"	Test it: name one 5-minute first action. If one exists, it's paralysis. If truly none does, the task may need shaping — but this is rare; most "planning" is avoidance.
The rough version is thrown away at step 5	Stop it: continue from the rough version. Restarting cleanly is paralysis returning in disguise.
Team member freezes while others work	Shorten their target, not the clock — "just write one bad sentence". Parallel work means no one's watching; reassure them of that.
It worked, but won't stick	Give them the habit: the 2-minute timer is portable. The tool is really teaching the reflex, not finishing this one task.

· WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

What's stuck	Use this
you keep not-starting a task that's ready to begin	**This tool — Start Before Ready.** Breaks paralysis with a shrinking clock.
a real constraint just landed and you must decide fast	**Decide Under Pressure** — a fast, structured call under pressure.
you're avoiding owning a decision that's already ready	**Go/No-Go Card** — separates real information gaps from avoidance.

Rule of thumb: Start Before Ready is for "I can't begin" — the block is producing a rough first version. If instead the block is a hard decision, reach for Decide Under Pressure or Go/No-Go Card.

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