

文具盒倒在桌上的那个周六

英语听力考试还有两分钟开始，老师让我们把答题卡填好。我伸手进文具盒摸铅笔，摸到半块橡皮，摸到一把断了的直尺，还摸到一块饼干。铅笔终于被我摸出来了，笔帽却不见了，笔尖在答题卡上划出一道白印子。同桌把他的备用笔推过来，小声说，你用我的。

那天回家，我把文具盒倒在书桌上。倒出来的东西把我自己吓了一跳：七支笔，其中三支写不出字；两块橡皮，一块断成三角形，一块黑得看不清原来的颜色；一把尺子缺了角，一个圆规少了一条腿，还有弹珠、贴纸、两节不知道从哪台遥控器上拆下来的电池。文具盒的夹层早就被撑变形了，拉链拉到一半就卡住。

我妈站在门口说，你这盒子比你的书包还乱。我想反驳，可是手里正拿着那支写不出字的笔。

周六上午，我决定给文具盒来一次大清点。先把所有东西倒在桌上，一支一支试，写不出的、断的、没用的，全部放进一个旧铁盒里准备扔掉。剩下的东西我按用途分开：写字的笔放最前面，改错用的橡皮和尺子放中间，备用铅笔和笔芯放最后的小格子。透明袋里只留第二天要用的那几样。全部放回去之后，文具盒合上，居然扣得上了。

真正想不到的变化发生在三天以后。老师布置周末计划，让我们把要做的事列出来。我列着列着，忽然想起文具盒里的三个格子，就在计划表上画了三栏：明天必须交的，这周能完成的，前两样做完才轮到我的。语文、数学、英语的事分进去，哪一栏空了就看哪一栏。以前我列计划，十件事挤在一起，像以前那个文具盒，什么都想找，什么都找不到。现在三栏分开，先看哪一栏、再做哪一栏，心里一下子清楚了。

这个月的月考，开考铃响之前，我打开文具盒：三支笔削好了排在最前面，橡皮和尺子在中间，答题卡从透明袋里抽出来。文具盒放在桌角，没有发出一点声音。

我以前觉得整理文具盒是小事，浪费学习时间。现在我知道不是。盒子乱的时候，我每找一样东西都要停一下，思路断一下，一天要断几十次。盒子归了位，手不用找，脑子就顾得上题。整理盒子不是学习的全部，可它是把乱日子理顺的头一件小事。

The Saturday I Dumped My Pencil Case on the Desk

Two minutes before the listening exam, the teacher told us to fill in our answer sheets. I reached into my pencil case for a pencil and pulled out half an eraser, a broken ruler, and a piece of cookie. When I finally found a pencil, its cap was gone, and the dry tip left a white scratch on the card. My deskmate pushed his spare pen over and whispered, use mine.

That evening I turned my pencil case upside down on the desk. The pile surprised me: seven pens, three of them dead; two erasers, one broken into a triangle, one black beyond its original color; a ruler with a chipped corner, a compass missing a

leg, plus marbles, stickers, and two batteries from some remote control. The divider inside had long been stretched out of shape, and the zipper stuck halfway.

My mother stood in the doorway and said my case was messier than my schoolbag. I wanted to argue, but I was holding one of the dead pens.

On Saturday morning I gave the case a full inventory. I tested every pen, and everything dry, broken, or useless went into an old tin box for the trash. I sorted the rest by use: writing pens in front, eraser and ruler in the middle, spare pencils and leads in the back pocket. Only the items for the next day stayed in the clear sleeve. When everything was back, the case closed with a snap.

The real change came three days later. Our teacher asked us to list our weekend plans, and as I wrote, I remembered the three pockets in my case. I drew three columns on the plan sheet: due tomorrow, done this week, and only after the first two. Chinese, math, and English tasks went into the columns. Before, my plans looked like my old pencil case, ten things jammed together, and I could never find anything. With three columns, I knew which column to look at first, and everything became clear.

At the monthly test this month, before the bell, I opened my case: three sharpened pens in front, eraser and ruler in the middle, and the answer sheet slid out of the clear sleeve. The case sat in the corner of the desk without a sound.

I used to think tidying a pencil case wasted study time. Now I know it does not. When the case was messy, every search stopped me for a second, and my thinking broke dozens of times a day. When everything has its place, my hands stop searching and my mind can stay on the problem. Tidying the case is not everything about studying, but it is the first small thing that straightens out a messy day.

我的文具盒分家记

开学两个月，我的文具盒已经装不下了。里面有两支黑笔、两支红笔、一支蓝笔、荧光笔、圆规、三角板、量角器、订书钉、一小卷胶带、半包纸巾，还有从各科作业本里掉出来的碎纸角。有一次数学考试要画辅助线，我在盒子里翻了四十秒，全班都在动笔，我还在摸那把三角板。监考老师走过来问我怎么了，我说在找尺子。那四十秒我到现在都记得。

更麻烦的是找东西这件事会传染。找尺子的那四十秒里，我顺手把盒子整个倒在桌上，考完试再装回去，装回去的东西就乱了顺序。第二天找红笔，第三天找订书钉，每一天都要翻一遍。晚上写作业，笔在左手边还是右手边都会影响我什么时候开始动笔。我发现我每天晚上坐在桌前的头五分钟，基本不是在写作业，是在收拾桌子。

十月底的一个周日，我做了一个决定：让文具盒分家。我找出三个透明的文件袋，一个装数学的东西，圆规、三角板、直尺、铅笔都归它；一个装语文英语的东西，黑笔、红笔、订书钉、胶带归它；还有一个只装第二天所有科目都要用的，黑笔两支、橡皮、笔袋里剩下的空间留给它。原来的大文具盒退役了，只装那个共用袋。三个袋子按顺序摞在笔盒旁边，谁用哪个袋子，用完放回原位。

分家第一周，我改作业的时候拿错袋子，把圆规带到了语文作业旁边。第二周顺手了，手伸出去就知道东西在哪。到十一月，我晚上坐到桌前的头五分钟没了，放下书包就摊开本子。

文具分家之后，我发现计划也可以分家。以前我的周末计划是一张纸从头写到尾，数学英语语文混在一起，写着写着就去做最容易的那件事，最难的那件永远排在最后，永远排不完。我照着三个袋子的样子，把计划纸折成三格，数学一格、英语一格、语文一格，每格只写三件事，做完一格划掉一格。哪一格空着，周末就先补哪一格。计划从一长串变成三小块，看着没那么吓人了，做完的反而多了。

现在我的文具盒还是那只旧文具盒，只是它不再什么都装。有人问我为什么上初中还要用这么旧的盒子，我说它现在只干一件事。盒子只干一件事，笔只待一个袋子，我每天晚上只先看空着的那一格。东西各归各位之后，我头一回觉得，脑子里的思路也是各归各位的。

How My Pencil Case Split Into Three

Two months into the new term, my pencil case could no longer close. It held two black pens, a red pen, a blue pen, a highlighter, a compass, set squares, a protractor, staples, half a roll of tape, a pack of tissues, and paper scraps fallen out of every workbook. Once in a math exam I needed an auxiliary line, and I spent forty seconds digging for a set square while the whole class was already writing. The invigilator asked what was wrong. I said I was looking for my ruler. I still remember those forty seconds.

Worse, the searching spread. After dumping the whole case out for that exam, I shoved everything back in no particular order. The next day I hunted for a red pen, the day after for staples. At night, whether my pen lay on my left or my right decided when I started writing. I realized the first five minutes at my desk each evening were spent tidying, not studying.

One Sunday in late October I decided to split the case up. I found three clear file bags: one for math, holding the compass, set squares, ruler, and pencil; one for Chinese and English, holding black pens, the red pen, staples, and tape; and one for things every subject needs, two black pens, an eraser, and the leftover space. The old big case retired to carrying only that shared bag. The three bags stacked in order beside it, and each one went back to its place after use.

In the first week I grabbed the wrong bag and brought the compass to my Chinese homework. By the second week my hands knew where things were. By November, the first five minutes at my desk had disappeared. I dropped my bag and opened my notebook.

After the bags split, I found my plans could split too. My weekend plan used to be one long list, subjects mixed, and I always drifted to the easiest task while the hardest stayed last and never got done. Copying the three bags, I folded my plan sheet into three boxes, one for math, one for English, one for Chinese, three items per box, crossing out a box when it was done. Whichever box stayed empty got filled first. The plan went from one scary list to three small blocks, and I finished more.

My pencil case is still the same old one; it just no longer holds everything. People ask why I still use such an old case in middle school. I tell them it now does only one job. The case does one job, each pen stays in one bag, and each evening I look first at the empty box on my plan sheet. Once everything had its place, I felt, for the first time, that the thoughts in my head had their places too.

科学实验室的那张长桌

上周三的科学课，老师宣布做电路实验。她走到讲台边那张长桌前，手没有停过：左手掀开盒盖，右手取出电池盒、灯座、三根导线，全部摆到桌面左上角，前后不到三十秒。她说，器材提前分好类，实验时间才够你们试错。

我盯着那张长桌看了很久。每个零件有自己的小格，导线按长短排开，备用电池竖在一边。我脑子里想的却是自己的文具盒：昨天美术课要水彩笔，我在里面摸到的是圆规的针尖，扎了手指；前天数学课要量角器，我翻出来的是一张揉皱的草稿纸，量角器压在盒子最底下，和半块橡皮、三节电池、一沓贴纸搅在一起。我的文具盒里，所有东西都平等地挤着，谁也不认识谁。

那天放学路上，我把科学课那张长桌在脑子里放大，决定照着它重整我的文具盒。回家我找了个带格的首饰盒当内胆，塞进文具盒里。格子按上课的顺序排：第一格放当天第一节课要用的笔和本子标签，第二格放数学工具，第三格放语文英语要用的红笔和订书钉，最后一格放备用电池和备用笔芯。每样东西只许有一个格子，多出来的东西要么扔掉，要么留在书桌上不进盒子。整理用了一个多小时，可是从那以后，我闭着眼睛都能摸到量角器。

变化是从科学课第二次实验开始的。老师要求按步骤记录数据，别的小组边做边找导线，我们组的时间全花在接电路上，老师说的数据一个没记全。我们组四个人商量，把步骤单贴在实验册封面，先照单子把器材摆齐，再动手。那次我们记全了数据，还多试了一个串联的接法。

我把这个办法搬回了自己的学习计划。以前我的计划写在便利贴上，贴满书桌前的墙，十几张纸条互相盖着，哪张在最上面就做哪件事。现在我在笔记本首页画一张流程单：放学后完成的事排最前，晚饭后必须完成的排中间，弹性任务排最后，每张单子不超过五项。做计划的那个晚

上，我把墙上十几张便利贴全撕下来，合并到流程单上，撕完发现墙上空了，桌子前也空了。

这个月我晚自习回家，坐下就翻开流程单，从第一项开始做，笔从第一格拿，尺子从第二格拿。我妈说我最近像换了个人。其实没有换人，只是我的文具盒终于像科学实验室那张长桌，而我的计划终于像那张步骤单。东西排顺了，思路跟着排顺了，这是我上科学课之外，从那张长桌上学到的最大一课。

The Long Table in the Science Lab

Last Wednesday in science class, our teacher announced a circuit experiment. She walked to the long table by the podium and her hands never stopped: her left hand lifted a lid, her right hand took out the battery holder, the lamp socket, and three wires, arranging them at the top-left corner of the table in under thirty seconds. She said that if the equipment is sorted in advance, there will be enough time for trial and error.

I stared at that long table for a long time. Every part had its own compartment, the wires lay arranged by length, and spare batteries stood to one side. What I kept thinking about, though, was my own pencil case. The day before, in art class, I had reached in for watercolor pens and touched the point of a compass instead, pricking my finger. The day before that, in math class, I had pulled out a crumpled draft sheet while my protractor sat crushed at the bottom, tangled with half an eraser, three batteries, and a stack of stickers. In my pencil case everything crowded together as equals, and nothing knew anything.

On the way home that day, I enlarged the image of the lab table in my mind and decided to rebuild my pencil case after it. I found a compartmented jewelry box to serve as an insert inside the case. The compartments followed the order of my school day: the first held the pen and notebook tags for the first class, the second held math tools, the third held the red pen and staples for Chinese and English, and the last held spare batteries and pen refills. Every item was allowed exactly one compartment; anything extra was either thrown away or left on the desk, never in the box. The reorganization took over an hour, but ever since, I can find my protractor with my eyes closed.

The change showed up in our second lab. The teacher asked us to record data step by step. Other groups hunted for wires as they went and missed half the numbers, while our group spent all our time connecting the circuit. The four of us agreed to tape the procedure sheet to the front of our lab book, lay out all the equipment according to it, and only then start. That time we recorded every number and even tried one extra series connection.

I carried the method back to my study plans. My plans used to live on sticky notes covering the wall by my desk, a dozen notes overlapping, and I did whatever happened to be on top. Now I draw a flow list on the first page of my notebook: tasks due before the end of school come first, must-finish-after-dinner tasks in the middle, flexible ones last, never more than five items per day. That evening I peeled all the sticky notes off the wall and merged them into the list. When I finished, the wall was bare, and so was the space in front of me.

This month, when I get home from evening study hall, I sit down, open the flow list, and start from item one, taking my pen from the first compartment and my ruler from the second. My mother says I seem like a different person lately. I am not. It is just that my pencil case finally resembles that long table in the science lab, and my plans finally resemble the procedure sheet. Once the things fell into order, my thinking followed. That was the biggest lesson I ever took away from that table, bigger than anything in the textbook.