



First Step

Start where you are

A mobile-first behavioral productivity app that helps users overcome task avoidance through clarity and micro-commitments

PRODUCT DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT

Project Overview

THE CHALLENGE

Traditional productivity apps focus on organization and tracking, but many users struggle with a more fundamental issue: actually starting. Tasks remain vague ("I should deal with that project"), creating ambiguity that fuels avoidance. The abundance of features in modern productivity tools often adds cognitive load rather than reducing it.

THE SOLUTION

First Step is a mobile-first web application built around a single behavioral insight: starting is easier when the first action is crystal clear and the commitment feels small. The app guides users through a deliberate three-step process to transform vague intentions into immediate action.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Minimal Cognitive Load

Only essential information is displayed at any given moment

Visual Calm

Generous whitespace and soft colors reduce anxiety

Immediate Clarity

Clear
hierarchy with
no competing
visual
elements

Emotional Safety

Language
that's
encouraging,
never
demanding

USER FLOW

1. Acknowledge → Write down the vague task exactly as it appears in your mind

2. Clarify → Identify the smallest possible first step—something concrete to do right now

3. Commit → Set a short time commitment (default 10 minutes) and begin with optional timer

Case Study: First Step

The Problem

Procrastination and task avoidance aren't always about laziness or poor time management. For many people, the real barrier is ambiguity. When a task feels vague or overwhelming, the brain defaults to avoidance as a protective mechanism.

Core Insight

Most productivity apps assume the user knows what to do next. But for those struggling with executive function, ADHD, or simply feeling overwhelmed, the challenge isn't tracking tasks—it's knowing where to start.

Research & Discovery

Through informal research and personal experience with task avoidance, several patterns emerged:

**Vague
Language
Creates
Barriers**

"Deal with that project" or "organize workspace" are too abstract to act on immediately

**Feature
Overload
Increases
Friction**

Complex apps with categories, tags, and priorities add decision fatigue

**All-or-
Nothing
Thinking**

Users feel they need to complete the entire task or not start at all

**Guilt &
Tracking
Backfire**

Productivity metrics and incomplete task lists create shame, not motivation

User Needs

 **Primary User Need**

"I need help transforming my vague anxiety about a task into a clear, small action I can take right now—without judgment, pressure, or the burden of tracking."

Design Process

Design Constraints

To maintain focus on the core behavioral goal, I established intentional limitations:

✓ What's Included

- Single-task focus
- Step-by-step clarification
- Optional timer
- Encouraging language
- Minimal visual design

✗ Intentionally Excluded

- User accounts
- Task lists or history
- Tracking or analytics
- Notifications or reminders
- Gamification or rewards

Key Design Decisions

1

Three-Step Flow: Acknowledge → Clarify → Commit

Breaking the process into discrete stages prevents overwhelm and guides users through a proven behavioral pattern. Each step has a single, clear purpose.

2

Reflect Original Language Back

Showing "You said: I need to deal with that project" validates the user's input and creates continuity between their vague thought and the concrete action they're defining.

3

Default to 10 Minutes

Research shows micro-commitments reduce resistance. Ten minutes feels achievable, and users often continue beyond the timer once momentum builds.

4

Permission to Stop

Explicitly stating "there's no pressure" removes guilt. The goal is starting, not finishing. This psychological safety is critical for users who struggle with perfectionism.

5

No Persistence by Design

Unlike traditional productivity apps, First Step doesn't save history or require accounts. Each session is ephemeral, reducing the cognitive burden of "managing" the app itself.

Impact & Learnings

Project Outcomes

100%

Mobile-
Optimized

Zero

External
Dependencies

3-

Step

User Flow

Key Learnings

Subtraction is a Design Skill

The hardest part of designing First Step was resisting the urge to add features. Every "what if users want to..." idea was evaluated against the core behavioral goal. Most features would have diluted the focus.

Language Design Matters

Changing "What do you need to do?" to "What's on your mind?" significantly reduced the pressure users felt. Small word choices have outsized psychological impact.

The Timer is Optional for a Reason

While the timer provides structure, forcing its use would contradict the "no pressure" philosophy. Giving users autonomy is more important than optimizing engagement metrics.

Designing for Executive Function

Traditional UX often assumes users arrive with clear goals and just need efficient paths. But for users with ADHD, anxiety, or executive dysfunction, the app itself must provide structure and reduce decision points.

What Makes This Different

Most Productivity Apps

- Assume you know what to do
- Track everything
- Show all tasks at once
- Optimize for completion
- Require ongoing management

First Step

- Helps you figure out what to do
- Tracks nothing
- Shows one thing at a time
- Optimizes for starting
- Requires zero maintenance

1

Welcome Screen

First impression sets the tone with calm branding, clear value proposition, and single call-to-action. The custom logo combines cloud elements (calm) with a mountain path (journey/progress).



First Step

Start where you are

Turn vague intentions into clear, doable actions. Start small. Start now.

Begin

2 Task Input

Users express their vague task without pressure to formalize it. Example prompts reduce friction and inspire action. Back/Continue buttons provide clear navigation.

What's on your mind?

It doesn't have to be perfect.
Just write it down.

*e.g., I need to deal with
that project...*

Back

Continue

Need inspiration? Try one of these:

I need to deal with that
project...

I should organize my
workspace

I want to start exercising

3

First Step Clarification

The original task is reflected back to validate the user's input. Users define the smallest possible first action and set a low-commitment time frame (default 10 minutes).

You said:

I need to deal with that project...

What's the first small step?

The smallest action you can take right now.

e.g., Open the document and read the first page

How many minutes can you commit?

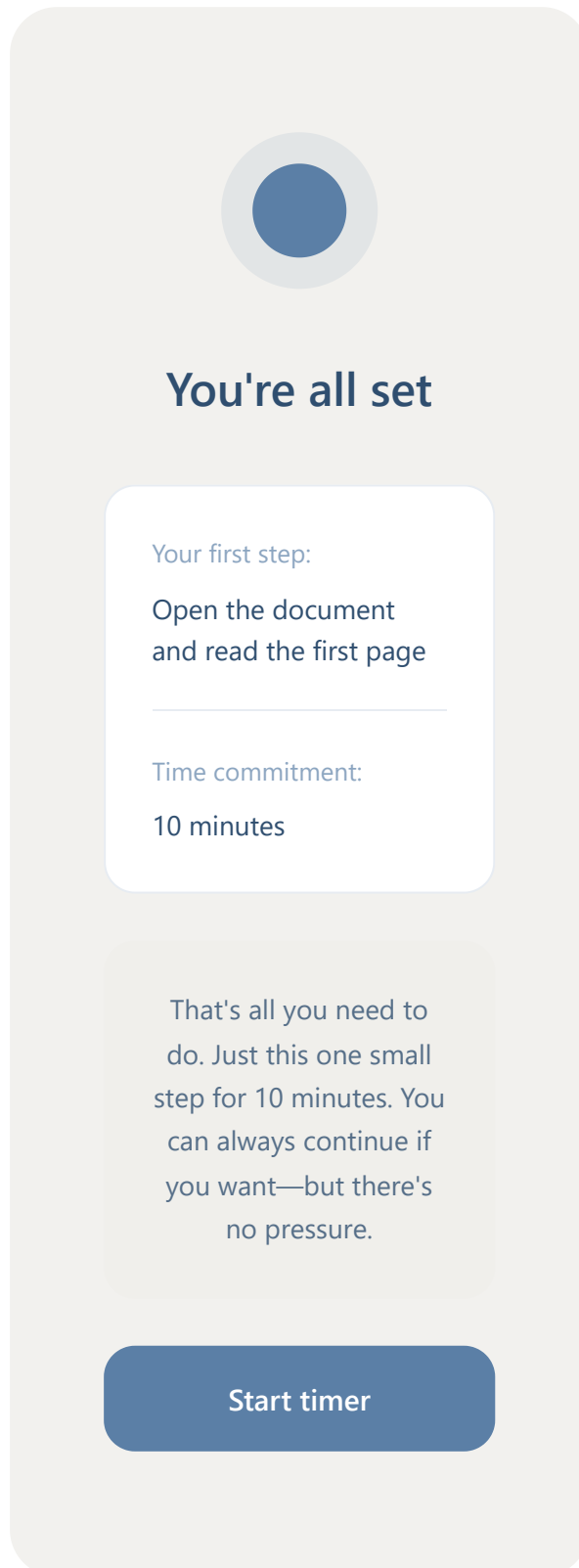
10

Back

I'm ready

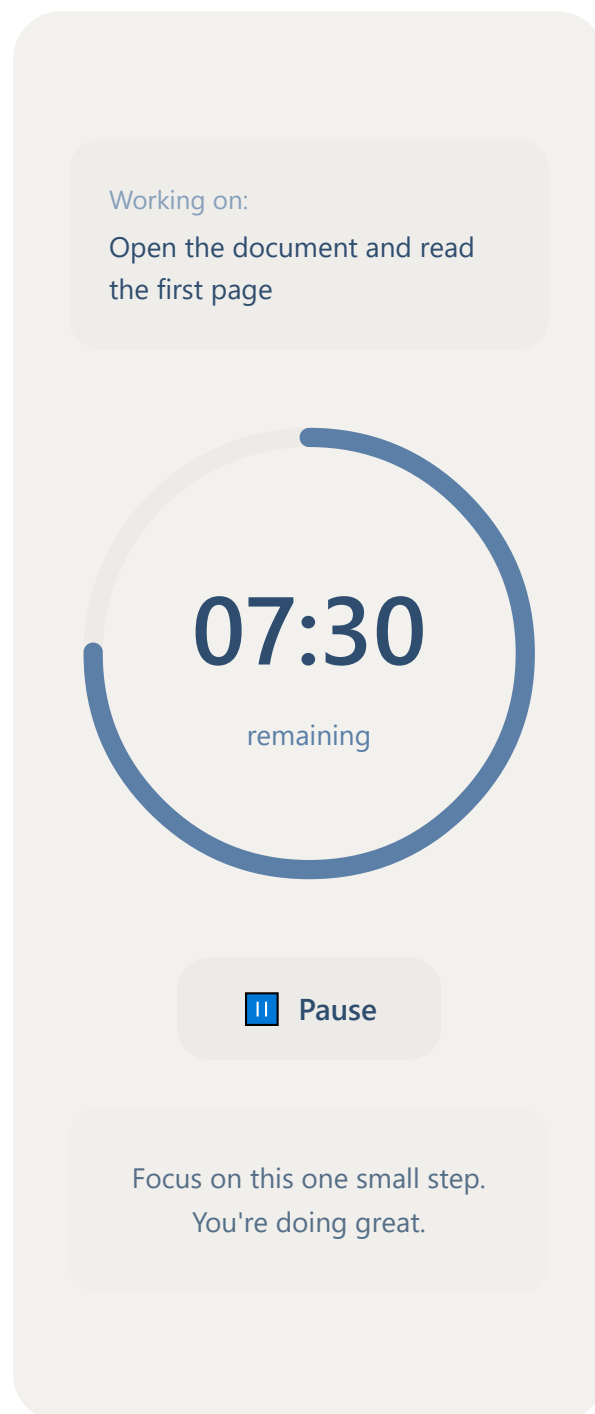
4 Ready to Start

Summary screen confirms the commitment and removes pressure. The encouragement message emphasizes permission to stop after the time commitment—no guilt, no expectations.



5 Timer - Active State

Circular progress indicator provides visual feedback without anxiety. The task reminder keeps users focused. Pause/resume functionality respects user autonomy. Gentle encouragement maintains motivation.



Timer - 6 Completion State

Celebration without pressure. The checkmark provides visual closure, and the message emphasizes that taking the first step is the real achievement—not completion of the entire task.

Working on:

Open the document and read
the first page



Complete!

Well done! You took the first
step. That's what matters.

Start fresh

Design System

Color Palette



Calm Blue #5B7FA6 Primary actions	Deeper Blue #2F4E6F Headings, text	Warm Gray #F2F1EE Background	Warm Gray Alt #EDEBE7 Secondary	White #FFFFFF Inputs, cards
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Typography

Font Family:
System (SF Pro, Segoe UI, Roboto)

H1: 32px / 600 weight

H2: 24px / 600 weight

Body: 15-16px / 400 weight

Small: 13-14px / 400 weight

Spacing & Layout

Border

Radius: 12-16px (buttons), 24px (cards)

Padding: 16-24px (cards), 32px (sections)

Gaps: 8px (tight), 16px (normal), 32px (loose)

Max Width: 360-448px (mobile-first)

Key Design Decisions

Gentle Haptics

10-20ms
vibration + 600-
800Hz sound on
interactions

Fade Transitions

400ms ease-out
animations
between screens

Auto-focus

Text inputs
focused on load
for immediate
typing

Generous Whitespace

48-64px vertical
spacing reduces
cognitive load

Technical Implementation

Technology Stack



React
18.3
UI
Framework



TypeScript
Type Safety



**Tailwind
CSS 4**
Styling



**Web
Audio
API**
Sound
Feedback



**Vibration
API**
Haptic
Feedback



Vite
Build Tool

Key Features



**Intentionally
Limited
Scope**

No user
accounts, task
lists, or
tracking—
purely focused



**Mobile-
First Design**

Optimized for
360-448px
width, scales
gracefully to
desktop

on the
moment of
initiation

Privacy by Default

No data
persistence,
no external
tracking, no
cookies—
ephemeral
sessions only



Accessible

Semantic
HTML,
keyboard
navigation,
WCAG AA
contrast ratios



Lightweight

Client-side
only, no
backend
required,
instant
loading



Multi- Sensory Feedback

Gentle
haptics, subtle
sounds,
smooth visual
transitions

Architecture Highlights

State Management: React useState
hooks for simple, predictable state
flow

Component Structure: Modular Timer
component, single App.tsx
orchestrates flow

Audio Implementation: Web Audio
API with oscillator nodes for
synthesized tones

Styling Approach: Tailwind utility classes with custom CSS variables for brand colors

Animations: CSS keyframes for fade-in transitions, CSS transitions for hovers

Timer Logic: setInterval with cleanup, pause/resume state management

Start fresh