

# Creating a Meal Prep Structure

In this section, we're talking about MEAL PREP, namely- how the heck you're supposed to get it done when you have zero time.

And trust me, lady: I get that! I've got no time, either- between school and work and schedules and, even but also especially, my solo ME time to recharge my batteries, meal prep can sometimes feel like a huge, avoidable chore.

And yet, the payoff is immeasurable! Trust me on this one. I can spend anywhere between 20 minutes and 1 hour getting a few items prepared for the week, and what I wind up with is MORE TIME as the week goes on. It's also a money saver, since the urge to order or pickup takeout is especially strong when my fridge is full only of plain ingredients and nothing has been prepped.

## What's a Meal Prep Structure, you ask?

A Meal Prep Structure is the *detailed breakdown of how a particular meal prep session is going to go*. It's looking at the meals you've got planned for the week, then seeing what you can do ahead of time to make the preparation of those meals easier over the next 5 to 7 days.

A Meal Prep Structure can be detailed and work through an entire week's worth of meals- or it can be basic, covering the necessities, what it takes for you to quickly get through the week's cooking each night.

Most weeks, I know I can squeeze in at least 20 minutes to prep a few items once the groceries are in the kitchen. If I can fit in an hour- even better! But 20 minutes is usually enough to get the ball rolling on the week.

A great help is starting on your meal prep as soon as those groceries arrive in your kitchen. Whether you've bought them at the store yourself or ordered grocery delivery, taking the time to prep ingredients as you put the groceries away means things get done in a fell swoop.

## Here's how I create a Meal Prep Structure, Step-by-Step.

**Step 1:** First, take a look at your meal plan. Below, I'm using a dummy one I put together for the purpose of showing you how I create the structure.

For ease, in my family, we typically eat a rotation of the same things at breakfast, with more effort put into the meal on the weekends. Lunch is either leftovers or 2 or 3 quickly made items. Snacks rotate, too (although we're not big on snacks). With dinner, I change it up depending on what we have going on that week.

Breakfast: waffles with natural peanut butter, yogurt, granola and milk, hardboiled eggs

Lunch: leftovers thrown on rice or salad, sandwiches

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Snacks: pretzels and cheese, cottage cheese with fruit

Monday: Chicken Parmesan with pasta, salad on the side

Tuesday: Crockpot pot roast with mashed potatoes and roasted green beans

Wednesday: leftovers

Thursday: Sweet and Sour Couscous Chicken with Sweet Potatoes and Red Onion, salad on the side

Friday: Homemade pizza and sweet potato fries

Saturday: out with friends

Sunday: Steaks on the grill, corn on the cob

**Step 2:** Then, write a short list of all the things you could conceivably prep ahead of time. Don't just write down what you think you can get done- write down *everything* that can possibly be prepped and stored in the fridge until cooking day.

**Step 3:** Re-write that list in the order of longest cooking/prep time to shortest. We want to maximize our time here, so multi-tasking is important. You want to be prepping vegetables while a sauce cooks, or something bakes, so that you're filling your time as efficiently as possible.

**Step 4:** Figure out what you can conceivably prep in the next 20 minutes. Expand that into 40 minutes if you have an hour free- I find that I often will underestimate the time it takes me to do things in the kitchen, although you'd be amazed at what you can get done in just 40 minutes.

## Here's the Meal Prep List I made from my meal plan:

- Hardboiled eggs
- Marinara sauce, saving some of that to be used as pizza sauce later in the week
- Ready the pot roast
- Roasted Green beans
- Slice and slice sweet potatoes
- Salad dressing

## Here's what takes the longest to cook- which means it gets done *first*.

- Marinara
- Hardboiled eggs
- Roasted Green Beans

## If there's time, I'll add:

- Prepping the pot roast in a bag so I can just dump it in the crockpot.
- Slicing and dicing the sweet potatoes
- Mixing the salad dressing

**Let's begin!**

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First, preheat the oven to about 350°F. We'll need it nice and hot for roasting the green beans.

**10 minutes for marinara:** The marinara I make is super basic- just diced onions and garlic cooked first in a little olive oil until they start to soften, then add 1 or 2 cans of crushed tomatoes and a little tomato paste and a tablespoon of dried oregano. Simmer at medium-low on the stovetop til the onion is cooked through and the whole pot smells amazing.

So before anything else gets prepped, I'll chop the onions and garlic and get that going on one corner of the stove.

**5 minutes for hardboiled eggs:** Once the marinara ingredients are in the pot, I'll add the eggs to a pot of cold water, cover it, and bring it to a boil. Turn off the heat and let the eggs sit about 5 minutes (that's it!). If it's already out on the counter or easily accessible, I'll cook the eggs in my Instant Pot.

**5 minutes for green beans:** If necessary, snip the ends off the beans. Toss the green beans in oil and salt, then spread them on a sheet pan. When the oven is hot, place the pan in the oven for 8-10 minutes or until the beans have begun to brown.

At this point, we're roughly 20 minutes in. You're ahead on breakfast, marinara for the chicken parm and pizza, and green beans for the pot roast. You're doing great!

**Got more time? Let's throw the rest of the list together.**

**15 minutes for pot roast:** Peel and chop the carrots, onions, and potatoes that'll be going in the pot roast. Add them to the bottom of a gallon-size ziplock bag. Rub the roast down with oil, salt, and pepper, then add it to the bag with any other seasonings. Place the bag in the bottom of your fridge until you're ready to add it to the crockpot.

**10 minutes to prep sweet potatoes:** Peel 4 or 5 sweet potatoes, then dice half (for the sweet and sour couscous chicken) and slice the other half (for fries).

*A quick aside:* Does your grocery store sell prepped produce? Mine does, and it's a gamechanger. I buy my sweet potatoes already peeled and diced if I can- don't feel guilty doing this!

**5 minutes for salad dressing:** In a small container with a tightly fitted lid, combine equal parts olive oil and apple cider vinegar, a little whole grain mustard, and your favorite spice. Secure the lid and shake it up- you've now got salad dressing that'll keep in your fridge for up to 6 weeks.

It's about 50 minutes in, and you're good! If anything, you might be a little under on time. If you're over, you're still good! It's been less than an hour and you've saved yourself time for later in the week.

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## **What if I literally don't have an hour to prep?**

If I can't squeeze in an hour, then I try to break the meal prep up over a few days- 10 minutes here, 15 minutes there. This is easiest if you're already cooking- try to do one small thing for prep to be used the next night, and the results will stack up over time.

**Next Action Step:** Take your meal plan for the week and break it down into a meal prep structure. See what you can get done in 20 minutes, and expand that into 40 minutes to an hour if you can.