
UCF Forum

1-3-2018

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Jim Clark

University of Central Florida, james.clark@ucf.edu

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STARS Citation

Clark, Jim, "Keep Your Resolutions Short, Simple, Specific to be Successful" (2018). *UCF Forum*. 286.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/286>

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Keep Your Resolutions Short, Simple, Specific to be Successful

By Jim Clark
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, January 3, 2018

'Tis the season for making New Year's resolutions, a custom that goes back 4,000 years to the ancient Babylonian empire. The Babylonians also gave us New Year's celebrations, although they celebrated in March when they planted their crops.

They had two consistent resolutions: Pay off their debts and return things they borrowed. Obviously, my neighbor is not a Babylonian. And if this timetable had stuck, we'd be playing college football bowl games in March.

The Babylonians were followed by the Romans who created a new calendar and moved the New Year to Jan. 1. January was named for the Roman god Janus, who had two faces. The idea was that one face looked toward the past and one toward the future. Or, you can just see it as being two-faced.

So, millions of us have come up with a list of things we want to accomplish this year. Back in 2000, somebody sold small journals for recording resolutions for the millennium. Figuring an official-looking journal would somehow help me keep the resolutions, and making plans for a thousand years seemed to demand something special, I purchased one and dutifully filled it out.

While recently cleaning out some drawers, I found the journal and looked at what I had planned to do for the next thousand years. To my surprise, I found that I had accomplished most of the 15 things on the list, although some had taken more than a decade to complete, and some of the accomplishments didn't quite turn out as planned—I lost weight, then unlost it; got married, then got unmarried. But I probably would have done them without making a list.

A survey found that one in six Americans make a resolution not to make any resolutions, but nearly half of Americans do make resolutions, whether it is a well-thought-out list, or just a mental note to do one or two things. But nine out of 10 resolution makers are doomed to failure, some of us fail within hours of the start of the year—my low point was failing within 12 minutes of the start of the new year, but I probably should not have been standing so close to a large bowl of M&M's.

But I am not alone; the list of most popular failed resolutions bears a striking similarity to many that I have embraced over the years: lose weight, get fit, spend more time with family, get out of debt, save money, and try something new.

What I have learned after decades of making resolutions is to keep it short, simple and specific. My failures are almost always related to making lengthy lists or vague lists. Promising to eat healthier fits the definition of vague and easy to violate. I could always find a way to fit a pizza or a German chocolate cake into my healthy living (it does contain coconut which is supposed to be healthy). When I made lengthy lists, I usually forgot exactly what was on the list within a couple of days and found it really easy to forget the tough resolutions.

When I have been successful, it came as a result of picking a few—no more than three—things that were priorities, and making sure I could do them.

Resolving to buy a new Ferrari in 2018 may be a great goal, but it is so far out of reach as to be absurd. I break them down into small manageable units. The vague “lose weight” holds little meaning, and the pledge to lose a vast amount of weight is impractical. But setting a goal of losing two pounds a month is doable and easy to follow.

And if you have failed at a resolution year after year, maybe it’s time to move on to new resolutions or restructure the resolution. Perhaps running in a marathon just isn’t in the cards.

So how do your resolutions compare to the top resolutions?

1. Stay fit and healthy
2. Lose weight
3. Enjoy life to the fullest
4. Spend less, save more
5. Spend more time with family and friends
6. Get organized
7. Learn something new
8. Travel more

Good luck with your resolutions and a have great year.

Jim Clark is a lecturer in UCF’s Department of History. He can be reached at James.Clark@ucf.edu.