Checklist: Backpack Organization

Your backpack is one of the few things you have complete control over. Keeping it organized means you can find what you need, feel less stressed at school, and maintain one area of your life that works—even when home doesn't.

This checklist helps you set up and maintain a backpack system that actually functions.

Note: You may need to store your backpack on a shelf or table if bugs or mice are a problem.

Time Needed

20-30 minutes for initial setup
5 minutes daily for maintenance

When to Do This

Set up on a weekend or evening when you have energy; maintain daily

Initial Setup (Do once at the beginning of each school year)

- ☐ **Empty your backpack completely**
  - ☐ Take EVERYTHING out
  - ☐ Turn it upside down and shake out debris
  - ☐ Check all pockets and compartments
- **Why this matters:** You can't organize what you can't see

- ☐ **Sort everything into categories**
- **TRASH:**
  - Old food wrappers, crumpled papers, broken items
  - Anything expired or unusable
  - ☐ **Action:** Throw away immediately (throw away at school if trash at home is a problem)
- **SCHOOL SUPPLIES:**
  - Notebooks, folders, binders
  - Pens, pencils, calculators
  - Textbooks
  - Library books that need to be returned
  - ☐ **Action:** Keep in a pile
- **PERSONAL ITEMS:**
  - Phone charger, ear buds/headphones, wallet, keys
  - Hygiene items (deodorant, hand sanitizer, etc.)
  - Medications if you keep them with you
  - ☐ **Action:** Keep in a separate pile

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- **BELONGS ELSEWHERE:**
  - Forms that need to be signed
  - Items that belong to friends
  - ☐ **Action:** Put in a "deal with this" pile
- **UNSURE:**
  - Anything you're not sure you need
  - ☐ **Action:** Put in a box; if you don't use it in 2 weeks, you don't need to carry it

☐ **Clean the empty backpack**
  - ☐ Wipe down inside with damp cloth or wipes
  - ☐ Shake out remaining crumbs (outside to reduce pests)
  - ☐ Air it out if it smells
  - ☐ **Modification:** If you don't have cleaning supplies, just shake it out thoroughly

☐ **Assign a pocket/section for each category**
- **Main compartment:**
  - Large notebooks, binders, textbooks
  - Largest items go here
- **Front pocket** (if you have one):
  - Pens, pencils, small supplies
  - Things you need to grab quickly
- **Side pockets:**
  - Water bottle
  - Umbrella or small items
- **Small internal pocket** (if you have one):
  - Wallet, keys, ear buds, phone
  - Valuable items you don't want to lose

☐ **Write down your system:**
- Main pocket = _____
- Front pocket = _____
- Side pockets = _____
- Internal pocket = _____

Daily Maintenance (5 minutes)

Do this at the end of each school day or when you get home

☐ **Empty trash immediately**
  ☐ Food wrappers, old papers, receipts
  ☐ Don't let it accumulate
  ☐ **Why this matters:** Prevents buildup, keeps it from smelling, deters pests
  ☐ **Modification:** If removing trash from your home is a problem, keep it in one pocket of your backpack and remember to throw it away at school, especially food waste

☐ **Remove items you don't need for tomorrow**
  ☐ Books for classes you don't have
  ☐ Completed assignments that were turned in and handed back (save if these will be needed again)
  ☐ Anything extra that adds weight
  ☐ **Why this matters:** Lighter bag = less physical strain

☐ **File or deal with loose papers**
  ☐ Put graded papers in a folder at home (or trash if you don't need them)
  ☐ Put handouts in the right subject folder
  ☐ Forms that need signatures → put these somewhere visible to remember
  ☐ **Modification:** If filing is overwhelming, just keep papers in one folder labeled "papers" and sort them weekly

☐ **Restock supplies if needed**
  ☐ Do you have working pens/pencils?
  ☐ Do you have paper?
  ☐ Are your chargers in there?
  ☐ Keep a small supply stash in your room or locker if possible

☐ **Check the next day's schedule**
  ☐ What classes do you have tomorrow?
  ☐ What homework is due?
  ☐ Do you need any special materials?
  ☐ Pack only what you need

☐ **Put backpack in the same spot**
  ☐ Designate one place (preferably off the floor: hook, chair, corner of room)
  ☐ Use the same place every time = you always know where it is
  ☐ **Why this matters:** Reduces morning stress

Weekly (or Monthly) Deep Check (15 minutes)

Do this once a week—Sunday evening works well. If you will only realistically do this once a month, that's perfectly fine.

- ☐ **Empty the entire backpack again**
  - ☐ Full reset
  - ☐ Check every pocket and compartment

- ☐ **Throw away accumulated trash/junk**
  - ☐ Things that snuck past daily maintenance
  - ☐ Old food, broken items, papers you don't need
  - ☐ **Modification:** Do this at school if getting rid of trash at home is a problem, especially food trash

- ☐ **Reorganize supplies**
  - ☐ Are things in their assigned pockets?
  - ☐ Put everything back where it belongs in your system

- ☐ **Check condition of backpack and supplies**
  - ☐ Are zippers working?
  - ☐ Are folders or binders falling apart?
  - ☐ Do you need to replace anything?
  - ☐ **If your backpack is tearing or breaking:** Ask your school counselor if they have resources for a new one

- ☐ **Wipe down the inside**
  - ☐ Quick clean with wipes or damp cloth
  - ☐ Prevents buildup and smells

- ☐ **Restock supplies for the week**
  - ☐ Pens, pencils, paper
  - ☐ Hand sanitizer, tissues, any personal items
  - ☐ Snacks if you keep them (shelf-stable only)

- ☐ **Check for stuff that needs to come out of the backpack**
  - ☐ Forms that need to be signed
  - ☐ Things borrowed from friends

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What to Keep in Your Backpack

ALWAYS (keep stocked if you need these things):

- ☐ Working pens and pencils (at least 2)
- ☐ Paper (loose leaf or notebook)
- ☐ Folders for each subject (or one "everything" folder)
- ☐ Planner or way to track assignments
- ☐ Phone charger
- ☐ Student ID (if applicable)
- ☐ Emergency contact info written down
- ☐ Any daily medications
- ☐ Hand sanitizer or wipes
- ☐ Small pack of tissues
- ☐ Hair tie/clip (if you have long hair)
- ☐ Feminine products (if applicable)
- ☐ Small snack (granola bar, crackers—non-perishable and kept in sealed container if pests are a concern)

OPTIONAL (if your space and budget allow):

- ☐ Small first aid items (band-aids, pain reliever)
- ☐ Deodorant (in case you forget at home)
- ☐ Gum or mints
- ☐ Extra pair of socks (this can be a life-saver if you step in a puddle)
- ☐ Ear buds or headphones
- ☐ Personal book
- ☐ Backup mask (just in case)

DAILY (as needed):

- ☐ Today's homework
- ☐ Textbooks for today's classes
- ☐ Lunch, if you take one
- ☐ Water bottle
- ☐ Jacket or hoodie
- ☐ Gym clothes (if you have PE and don't store them at school)

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Folder Organization Systems (Choose what works for you)

System 1: Color-Coding

- Each subject gets a color
- Red folder = Math, Blue = English, Green = Science, etc.
- Pro: Easy to grab the right materials quickly

System 2: One Big Folder with Dividers

- Everything goes into one large accordion folder
- Has sections for each subject
- Pro: Good if you don't want to carry multiple folders

System 3: Binder with Sections

- One binder, tabbed sections for each subject
- Papers go in immediately, stay organized
- Pro: Heavier but very organized

System 4: Folders and Separate Notebooks

- Folder for loose papers in each subject
- Separate notebook for notes in each subject

Pick the system that fits:

- Your organizational style
- How many classes you have
- What you can afford/access
- What actually works for your brain

My system is: _____

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Troubleshooting

"My backpack gets messy again within days."
- Lower your expectations: just removing trash daily is a win
- Set a phone alarm reminder for daily 5-minute maintenance
- Make it easier: Use fewer folders or sections so there are fewer decisions

"I lose things constantly even with organization."
- Use one big "catch-all" folder/pocket for everything
- Attach important items to your bag (keychain for keys, clip for ID)
- Keep duplicates of important items at home or in your locker
- Use bright colored folders that stand out

"I don't have money for supplies or folders."
- Ask your teacher or your school counselor—most schools have supplies for students who need them
- Repurpose old spiral notebooks by tearing out used pages
- One folder for everything is fine

"My backpack is broken/too small/falling apart."
- Talk to your school counselor about resources
- Check to see if local churches or community centers do school supply drives
- Use a reusable shopping bag as backup until you can get a new one
- Free and reduced lunch programs often know about backpack programs

"Executive function makes this impossible."
- Simplify: Just keep the trash out daily. That's your only rule.
- Use external reminders: Phone alarm, sticky note on your door
- Body double: Do this with a friend on video chat
- Get help: Ask a teacher/counselor to check in with you weekly

"I'm too tired/overwhelmed to maintain this."
- On low-energy days: Just throw out trash. That's it.
- Let it go for a few days if needed, then reset
- Lower your standard: Organized enough = you can find what you need

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Accessibility Considerations

Backpack organization assumes certain physical and cognitive abilities. Adapt as needed: If lifting/carrying a heavy bag is difficult, use a rolling backpack or keep textbooks in your locker. If executive function makes organization hard, use the simplest possible system (one folder for everything, just focus on removing trash daily). If memory issues make it hard to remember what to pack, take a photo of your schedule and check it daily, or keep everything in your bag all the time. If fine motor skills make zippers/folders difficult, use bags with magnetic closures or large openings. If sensory issues make certain textures uncomfortable, line your bag with a soft cloth. The goal is a functional system for YOU, not achieving someone else's idea of "organized."

Important Reminders

- **Your backpack is one thing you CAN control.** It's yours. Defend it.
- **"Organized enough" is the goal.** Not Instagram-perfect. (That's crap.) Just functional.
- **It's okay to reset multiple times.** Organization is ongoing, not one-and-done.
- **This is practice for managing your own space.** These skills transfer to your future home.
- **A well-organized backpack makes school easier** and gives you one less thing to stress about.

Real Talk

Keeping your backpack organized might seem trivial when your home is chaos.

But here's the thing: **Your backpack goes with you everywhere.** It's your mobile base. When home is unpredictable, your backpack can be reliable.

Being able to find your homework, having a working pen, knowing where your phone charger is—these small things reduce daily stress. They give you a sense of competence and control.

Your backpack is practice.

Practice for keeping your space organized. Practice for maintaining something over time. Practice for building systems that work.

When you eventually have your own apartment, you'll already know how to:

- Assign homes for your belongings
- Maintain organization daily
- Do resets at weekly or monthly
- Keep clutter from building up

You're learning these skills now, in a backpack.

You can apply these organization skills in your room whenever you're ready. Later, you'll apply them to an entire home.

Keep your backpack organized. It matters more than you think.

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