

Chapter 1:

Taking the Leap: Simplify—and Sometimes Let Go

When you think about organizing your home, you get dizzy and your eyes roll back into your head. You envision a world of school-marmish rules. An environment where you can't lay a paperback book down on the coffee table without setting off an alarm. A house where robotlike family members reorder the cans in the pantry every hour on the hour. I know you fret about these things—not because I am psychic, but simply because you are reading a book called *How to Cheat at Organizing*. You want to have an orderly home you can be proud of—but you don't want to work too hard for it.

Lucky you. When you cheat at organizing, the physical work is actually minimal. The big challenge is mental. If you shake loose a few ingrained habits and attitudes, the battle is won. In the chapters that follow, we will examine specific shortcuts for organizing your living areas, clothing, kitchen, office, family, finances, automobile, and more. Here, we're going to talk about the broad strokes—some ways of thinking about organizing and some simple techniques that will turn you into a cheater of the highest order, as they say.

Keep it simple. Don't make a new organizational system any more complex than is absolutely necessary. If you have to dive into minutiae every time you use the new system, you're going to dread using it, and things will drift back into disorder. Filing is an example. Start out with one folder marked "Insurance." Later, you can break that folder down into subcategories such as "Insurance—Car," "Insurance—Home," and "Insurance—Medical"—but only if that folder gets so bulky that you can't find the papers you need.

Keep it going. Organization is an ongoing process, not a finite project. Clustering all of the soup cans on one pantry shelf is not enough. When you buy more soup, those new cans have to go in the same spot, and you have to keep those pesky little cans of beans from getting mixed in. So every time you bring order to a part of your home, don't just stand back and admire—envision how you're going to keep it that way.

Memorize the S's. The S4 technique is a simple four-step approach to bringing order to any chaotic corner of your home, whether it's as small as a junk drawer or as big as the garage. This is a strategy you will use again and again, so memorize the four S's, write them in ink on the tips of your sneakers, or laminate the License to Cheat (found in this chapter) and stick it in your wallet. You need the S4 technique mentally at your fingertips just the way you need your car keys and cell phone. Here's how it works:

Strip: Start by stripping every object out of the space. While you have that drawer, shelf, or room empty, give it a quick cleaning. It will be years before you see it free and clear again.

Scrap: Throw away everything that's out of date, in poor repair, or otherwise nonfunctional.

Sort: Cluster like things together so they will be easy to find in the future. In the bathroom, for instance, extra toothbrushes, toothpaste, and dental floss are a natural grouping.

Store: Find a container that's the right size for each group of objects and find the right home for that container, keeping in mind how often you need to use the stuff inside...