UMAMI

UNIVERSAL · ARTISAN / FERMENT FOUNDATION · STAPLE · LIVING CULTURE

Sourdough Starter — El Nacimiento (Birth & Protocol)

From a jar of flour and water to a mature living culture in ten days. The prerequisite every sourdough recipe assumes you already have. Wild yeast and lactic-acid bacteria in a succession dance — day one is random microbes from the flour, day ten is your own signature microbiome. A permanent pantry citizen if you feed it. A personal ferment stronger than any commercial yeast.

Protein None (naturally vegan)

Serves 1 mature starter (~100 g active) · feeds forever with care

Difficulty Beginner-Intermediate

Active 5 min/day × 10 days (30-40 min total active across the build)

Total 10 days to mature · then permanent with daily or weekly feeds

THE STORY

A Jar Earns Its Citizenship

Every sourdough recipe in this library — *Master Sourdough Loaf*, *Focaccia Sheet-Pan*, the upcoming *Pan de Pueblo*, *Coca de Recapte* rye variant, *Pizza Dough Neapolitan* levain version — assumes you have an active, mature sourdough starter already bubbling on your counter. Pablo has had one for months. But the library has never

taught how to *make* one from scratch. This recipe closes that gap. If you lose the mother, if you travel, if a friend asks for a starter and you want to teach them from zero, this is the protocol.

A sourdough starter is a stable microbial culture. Not commercial yeast, not a probiotic supplement, not a sourdough-starter-powder-kit. It is a self-assembling ecosystem of *wild yeast* (primarily *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* and *Candida milleri*) and *lactic acid bacteria* (primarily *Lactobacillus sanfranciscensis*) that colonize flour-and-water as you feed them on a schedule. The microbes come from three sources: the flour itself (most important), the air in your kitchen (less important than people think), and your hands. After ten days of twice-daily feeds, the starter is stable, predictable, and strong enough to leaven a loaf of bread in four to five hours.

The science is a succession story. Days 1-3 are chaos — *Klebsiella*, *Leuconostoc*, and other bacteria from the flour bloom first, producing hydrogen gas and a funky acetone-like smell. This looks like fermentation but it is a false start. Around day 4 the population crashes because the pH drops below 4 and those bacteria cannot tolerate acid. A quiet period (day 4-6) where the starter looks *worse* than day 3 — this is when beginners panic and throw it away. Do not throw it away. *Lactobacilli* are establishing themselves in the vacuum. By day 7-8 wild yeast arrives and begins outcompeting what remains of the wrong bacteria. Day 9-10, the starter is stable, rising predictably, smelling of yogurt + beer + ripe fruit. You have a mature culture.

From that point: feed once a day if kept at room temperature, once a week if refrigerated. Name it. Keep it. It becomes one of the most satisfying living things in the kitchen — a microbial pet that makes bread for you in exchange for a tablespoon of flour per day.

AT A GLANCE

Specs

YIELD	HYDRATION	BUILD TIME	DIFFICULTY
~100 g active mature starter (the permanent seed)	**`100%` (`1:1` `flour:water` by weight)**	**10 days mandatory · longer only improves**	**Beginner-Intermediate ●●○○○**
ACTIVE TIME	PATIENCE	MAKE-AHEAD	FLOUR MIX
5 min/day × 10 days	**The hard part is not doing anything at day 4-6**	**N/A — this IS the make-ahead for every future bread**	**50% whole wheat + 50% bread flour (Tier A) · 100% freshly-milled heritage grain (Tier B)**
STORAGE	TEST		
Fed daily at room temp, OR refrigerated + fed weekly	**Float test on a spoonful 4-6 h after feed**		

UMAMI ADAPTATION

What Changed & Why

The two-tier question for a sourdough starter is about *flour quality*, not quantity or technique. Both tiers use identical ratios (1:1 flour:water), identical schedule (twice-daily feeds, same dilutions), identical jars and temperature. The 🟡 Tier A (Everyday) uses grocery-store King Arthur bread flour + organic whole wheat — produces a

functional mature starter in 10 days, the one Pablo has been using. The 🔴 Tier B (No-Limits) uses freshly-milled heritage wheat from Anson Mills or direct from a local mill (Flour & Weirdoughs mills on-site in Key Biscayne) — produces a starter with markedly more complex flavor (fruit/wine notes day 10 that the grocery version will not have until month 3). The freshly-milled flour carries a denser native microbial payload, which is what you want. Both versions use filtered or distilled water — municipal chlorinated water kills the yeast and is the most common starter-failure cause. Both versions start in a clean glass jar with a loose lid or cheesecloth top. The difference is in the flour, and the difference is real.

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
TECH	The 'leave a bowl of flour and water on the counter for 2 weeks' method common in old cookbooks	Precise 12-hour feed schedule with fixed 1:5:5 discard-to-feed ratio (20 g seed + 100 g flour + 100 g water) from day 3 onward	Imprecise feeds produce imprecise microbiomes. The 1:5:5 ratio gives yeast enough fresh substrate to double reliably between feeds without producing so much acid it stalls. It is the same ratio mature-starter keeps forever, so by day 10 the starter is already in its permanent-maintenance regime.
ADD	—	Explicit day 4-6 'false crash' guidance — expect dead/flat/bad-smelling starter, do NOT throw it away	This is the #1 reason beginners fail. Books say 'feed daily for 10 days,' beginners see the day-4 crash and conclude the starter died. Writing the crash into the protocol explicitly, with why (pH drop killing early opportunistic bacteria so LAB can take over), keeps people in the game.

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
ADD	—	Water-quality rule — filtered or distilled only, never municipal chlorinated tap	Chlorine and chloramine kill wild yeast and lactobacilli at the concentrations Miami-Dade municipal water runs (~1-4 ppm chlorine). A failed starter 70% of the time is a chlorinated-water starter. Rule is non-negotiable. Leaving tap water out overnight lets chlorine dissipate but not chloramine — so skip the shortcut and use filtered.
ELEV	Discarded starter goes in the trash	Discarded starter goes to discard sourdough pancakes, crackers, or enriched-bread enrichment (brioche, focaccia). No waste.	By day 4+ the discard is still functional — not mature enough to leaven a loaf by itself but perfect for yeast-assisted quick breads, pancakes (baking-soda-activated), or crackers (baking powder + salt, rolled thin and baked 220 °C). A single 10-day build produces ~800 g of discard; a household that cares about waste treats it as a second ingredient.
SKIP	Some recipes call for pineapple juice or orange juice in early days to lower pH artificially	Plain water only. No juice, no vinegar, no yogurt, no commercial yeast.	The juice-trick is a 1990s workaround that pushed pH below 4 quickly to skip the day-4 crash. It works but produces a weaker starter — the natural pH drop is what selects for your signature lactobacilli. Skipping the crash skips the selection. Use plain water, tolerate day 4-6, get a stronger starter.

INGREDIENTS

What You Need

🟢 Everyday

The Grain

- 100 g **organic whole wheat flour** — **Bob's Red Mill Organic Whole Wheat** (Whole Foods, Publix) or **Arrowhead Mills Organic Whole Wheat**. *Organic matters here* — non-organic wheat can be treated with glyphosate at harvest, which may slow microbial establishment. The whole wheat carries the native microbiome (bran + germ = microbe density); use it for the first 3 days exclusively.
- 400 g **bread flour (≥12% protein)** — **King Arthur Bread Flour** (Whole Foods, Publix) — the US chef-default. From day 4 onward the starter transitions to a 50/50 whole-wheat + bread-flour mix.

The Water

- 500 g **filtered or distilled water** — any grocery-store gallon of distilled water works ($1.50). Britta pitcher works. Spring water works. *Chlorinated municipal tap does not.* If filtered is unavailable, boil water 5 min and cool — kills chlorine but not chloramine; filtered is simpler.

Your Kitchen

- One clean **glass jar** (1-quart / 1 liter) with a loose-fitting lid or cheesecloth cover — the culture needs air exchange. A cloth rubber-banded on top works.
- **Digital scale** — reads to 1 g. Volume measurements (cups, tbsp) do not work for sourdough-starter reliability. Mandatory tool.
- **Rubber spatula** — for clean jar transitions during daily discards.

🔴 No Limits

The Grain (Tier B — Heritage)

- 100 g **freshly-milled heritage whole wheat** — **Anson Mills Red Fife** (ansonmills.com) or **Anson Mills Rustic Red Fife**, shipped within 30 days of milling. Alternative: **Flour & Weirdoughs** (19 Harbor Dr, Key Biscayne, 305-361-9000) mills on-site — ask for whole-wheat or rye, bought within the last week. Heritage wheat carries 3-5× the native microbial density of grocery whole wheat.
- 400 g **bread flour, heritage-grain-blend** — **Anson Mills Carolina Antebellum Coarse Graham** for a 20% wheat-germ blend with KA bread flour, or 100% **Cairnspring Mills Organic Trailblazer** — a PNW heritage wheat blend with exceptional starter behavior. Both ship fresh (within 3 weeks of milling).

The Water (Tier B)

- 500 g **spring water** — **Mountain Valley** (glass-bottled, pH 7.8, low mineral) or any glass-bottled spring water. Not plastic (BPA affects some yeast strains over long timescales). Tier B spring water gives a slightly more rounded pH profile during the acid phase.

Your Kitchen (Tier B)

- **Weck 742 (1-L tulip jar)** or **Le Parfait 1-L terrine** — glass, wide-mouth, easy to scrape. Replace when the starter hoop-stains the glass permanently (~2 years).
- **Chenab Impex Silicone Banneton Liner** (optional, comes in later for the bread, not the starter itself).
- **Thermapen Mk4 probe thermometer** — confirms dough temp 24-27 °C during feed windows (matters more for the breads this starter feeds than for the starter itself).

EQUIPMENT

Your Kit

- [ ] Digital scale (1 g resolution) — mandatory
- [ ] Glass jar, 1-quart / 1 liter, wide mouth
- [ ] Rubber spatula or silicone spoon
- [ ] Cheesecloth or loose-fitting jar lid (not sealed tight)

- [ ] Rubber band (if using cheesecloth)
- [ ] Elastic marker or rubber band to track rise (put around jar at starter level after each feed)

MISE EN PLACE

Before You Start

- [ ] Kitchen temperature 20-26 °C (room temp). Below 18 °C slows to 3-week build; above 30 °C risks off-flavor development.
- [ ] All ingredients weighed on the same scale, to the gram, every feed.
- [ ] Jar + spatula cleaned with hot water only — no soap residue, which can kill LAB.
- [ ] Filtered water ready in a measuring pitcher — bring to room temp if refrigerated.
- [ ] Set a 12-hour alarm on the phone (7 AM + 7 PM is the Pablo-default schedule that survives weekends).
- [ ] Accept the protocol as-is for the first starter. Tinker only after you have run it to completion once.

MAKE-AHEAD

Timeline

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METHOD

The Cook

1 Phase 1 · Day 1-2 · The First Breath

1. Weigh 50 g whole wheat flour into a clean glass jar.
2. Add 50 g room-temperature filtered or distilled water. Stir with a silicone spatula until no dry flour remains (paste consistency, like thick pancake batter).
3. Scrape down the sides so the surface is clean. Cover with cheesecloth + rubber band, or loose-fitting lid.
4. Mark the level with a rubber band around the jar, or masking tape + pen.
5. Leave at room temperature (20-26 °C) for 24 hours. Do not disturb.
6. Day 2 at 7 AM: Check. You may see small bubbles, a subtle sour-milk smell, or nothing visible — all normal. Add another 50 g whole wheat + 50 g filtered water. Stir. Mark the new level. Cover. Wait 24 hours.
7. Day 2-3 evening: You may see more bubbles, a slight rise. The smell may shift to something acetone-like or sour-cheese. This is the opportunistic-bacteria bloom. Expected.

🔬 WHY THIS WORKS

The first 48 hours is about hydrating the flour and letting dormant microbes wake up. Whole wheat is mandatory in this phase because the bran surfaces carry far more microbial load than refined bread flour. The stir is gentle — you are not developing gluten, you are just making sure the water-flour ratio is uniform. Bubbles or no bubbles on day 2 mean nothing diagnostically; the active fermentation is still 48 hours away.

2 Phase 2 · Day 3 · The First Discard (Transition to 50/50)

1. Day 3 at 7 AM: Grab a fresh, clean glass jar.
2. Weigh out 20 g of your existing starter into the fresh jar (discard the rest — use it for pancakes or crackers, see DISCARD SECTION below, or compost).
3. Add 50 g whole wheat flour + 50 g bread flour + 100 g filtered water to the 20 g seed. Stir until smooth.
4. Mark the level. Cover. Wait 12 hours (7 PM).
5. Day 3 at 7 PM (evening feed): Repeat the same discard-and-feed. 20 g seed from today's morning jar → fresh jar + 50 g WW + 50 g bread flour + 100 g water. Mark, cover, wait 12 hours.

🔬 **WHY THIS WORKS**

Day 3 transitions to the twice-daily 12-hour feed schedule that will continue through day 10. The flour mix shifts from 100% whole wheat to 50/50 whole-wheat + bread flour — the bread flour adds starch for yeast, the whole wheat continues providing microbial density and bran nutrients. The 1:5:5 ratio (20 g seed : 100 g flour : 100 g water) is dilute enough that acid does not accumulate between feeds, strong enough that yeast has enough substrate to multiply.

3 Phase 3 · Day 4-6 · The Crash (DO NOT PANIC)

1. Day 4 at 7 AM: Check. The starter may be flat, barely risen, smell slightly worse than yesterday. Feed anyway using the same 20 g seed + 100 g flour + 100 g water protocol.
2. Day 4 at 7 PM: Evening feed same protocol. Starter may still look flat.
3. Day 5 at 7 AM + 7 PM: Starter looks WORSE than day 3. Less bubbly, possibly smells acetone-ish or sour-milk sharp. This is the correct behavior. Feed anyway.
4. Day 6 at 7 AM + 7 PM: Starter still flat or barely rising. By day 6 evening you may see the first real bubbles returning — this is lactobacilli taking over from the opportunistic crash-phase bacteria. Keep feeding same protocol.

> 🔬 **WHY THIS WORKS**
>
> By day 3 the accumulated lactic and acetic acid has dropped the starter's pH from ~6.5 to ~4.2. This is lethal for the Klebsiella, Leuconostoc, and similar enterobacteria that bloomed in phase 1. They die off. The starter enters a quiet period — the fast-growing bad bacteria are gone, the slow-growing wild yeast and LAB are still establishing. Visually this looks like the starter died. It didn't. The succession is happening silently at the microbial level.

4 Phase 4 · Day 7-10 · The Awakening

1. Day 7 at 7 AM: Feed as usual. By Day 7 evening or Day 8 morning you should see real activity — the starter rises visibly between feeds (50% rise in 8-12 h is typical).
2. Day 8-9: Rising reliably. Smell shifts from sharp/acetone to yogurt-yeasty-fruity (a good sourdough smell — think mild beer + ripe apple + sourdough bread).
3. Day 9-10 at 7 AM: Do a FLOAT TEST 4-6 h after morning feed. Drop a small spoonful in a glass of water. If it floats, the starter is mature. If it sinks, feed once more and check 12 h later.
4. Day 10: Starter should rise 2× between feeds, pass the float test, smell like bread-fermentation. You have a mature starter.

> 🔬 **WHY THIS WORKS**
>
> The yeast population (primarily Saccharomyces cerevisiae and Candida milleri, depending on your flour) has reached enough density to produce visible CO2 within 4-6 hours of feed. The LAB (mostly Lactobacillus sanfranciscensis) are producing lactic acid in a stable ~3.8-4.2 pH range. The ecosystem is in equilibrium. The rise is yeast CO2; the flavor is LAB acids.

5 Phase 5 · Day 11+ · Forever Feeding (Maintenance)

1. ROOM TEMPERATURE (daily baker): Feed once a day at the same time, using 1:5:5 ratio (20 g seed + 100 g flour + 100 g water). The starter will reliably double between feeds.
2. REFRIGERATED (weekly baker): After a fresh feed, cover with a tight lid and refrigerate. Feed once a week. Before using for a recipe, take it out 24-36 h ahead, feed once at room temp, wait for full rise, feed again, wait 4-6 h — then use.
3. TRAVEL / LONG BREAKS: Starter survives 2-3 weeks refrigerated without a feed. For longer, dehydrate — spread thin on parchment, air-dry to cracker-thin flakes, seal in an airtight jar. Dried flakes revive in ~3 days of feeds.
4. NEVER: Feed with chlorinated water, store in metal containers (reactive), use starter that smells of nail polish + won't rise even after 2 feeds (contaminated — compost and restart).

> 🔬 WHY THIS WORKS
>
> Maintenance is about feed-interval matching temperature. Warm = more metabolic activity = faster consumption = more frequent feeds. Cold = slow = less frequent. Dehydration pauses the metabolism; yeast + LAB survive in spore/stasis form up to years if kept cool and dry.

QUICK REFERENCE

Timing Cheat Sheet

STEP	TIME	CUE
Day 1 create	Day 1 · 7:00 AM	50 g whole wheat + 50 g water, mix, cover, wait
Day 2 feed	Day 2 · 7:00 AM	Add 50 g whole wheat + 50 g water to existing
Day 3 discard-feed AM	Day 3 · 7:00 AM	20 g seed → fresh jar + 100 g 50/50 flour + 100 g water
Day 3 discard-feed PM	Day 3 · 7:00 PM	Repeat morning protocol

STEP	TIME	CUE
Day 4-6 twice daily	Day 4-6 · 7 AM + 7 PM	THE CRASH — keep feeding, do not panic
Day 7-8 activity returns	Day 7-8 · 7 AM + 7 PM	Starter rising, smell improving
Float test	Day 9-10 · 4-6 h after feed	Spoonful in water — floats = mature
Maintenance begin	Day 11+	Once-daily feeds at room temp, or weekly refrigerated
First bread use	Day 11 morning feed + 5-6 h	Use active starter for master-sourdough-loaf levain
Long-term backup	Every 3 months	Dehydrate a jar, seal airtight, store cool/dry

TROUBLESHOOTING

Emergency Protocols

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DEEP DIVES

Technique Notes

🟢 Universal: The Float Test

SOURDOUGH FUNDAMENTALS · DIAGNOSTIC

Drop a small spoonful (~5 g) of starter into a glass of room-temperature water 4-6 h after a feed. If it floats, the starter is at peak activity — CO2 bubbles have made the mass less dense than water, indicating the yeast population is at its peak ferment moment. If it sinks, it is either not yet mature OR past peak (collapsed). This is the single best diagnostic for 'is my starter ready to bake with?' — more reliable than visual rise, which can be deceptive depending on jar geometry.

🟢 Universal: The Rubber-Band Mark

SOURDOUGH FUNDAMENTALS · MEASUREMENT

After every feed, immediately put a rubber band around the jar at the starter's current level. This gives you an undeniable before/after visual for how much it rose between feeds. A mature starter should hit 2× the band level within 6-12 h at room temperature. Without the mark, you cannot tell a 50% rise from a 200% rise at a glance.

🟡 Universal: The Discard Economy

SOURDOUGH FUNDAMENTALS · WASTE MANAGEMENT

Over 10 days you will generate ~800 g of discard. Useful for: SOURDOUGH PANCAKES (150 g discard + 1 egg + 1 tbsp sugar + 1 tsp baking soda + pinch salt + 1/2 cup milk — cooked on a hot pan), SOURDOUGH CRACKERS (200 g discard + 1 tbsp EVOO + 1 tsp salt + herbs — rolled paper-thin, baked 220 °C, 10 min), SOURDOUGH FOCACCIA ENRICHMENT (stir 100 g discard into the focaccia dough — the commercial yeast still drives the leavening; the discard adds flavor depth).

🟡 Fermentation Core: pH Succession (The Why Behind the Crash)

SOURDOUGH FUNDAMENTALS · MICROBIOLOGY

The day 4-6 crash is a real ecological event. In days 1-3, microbes from the flour (Klebsiella, Leuconostoc, coliforms) bloom fastest — they grow well at neutral pH and produce the early bubbles. As they metabolize they produce lactic acid, acetic acid, and CO2, dropping the pH from 6.5 → 4.5. Below pH 4.5 most of those bacteria die. A quiet period follows because the lactic acid bacteria (L. sanfranciscensis, L. brevis) and wild yeast (S. cerevisiae, C. milleri) are slower-growing but acid-tolerant — they take over the empty ecological niche starting around day 5-6. By day 8-10 the new stable community is established. The crash is the selection pressure that produces a real sourdough starter rather than a quick-ferment.

🔴 Advanced: The Heritage-Grain Starter

SOURDOUGH FUNDAMENTALS · TIER B ELEVATION

Freshly-milled heritage grain flour (Anson Mills Red Fife, Cairnspring Trailblazer, or a local mill's output within 30 days of milling) carries a denser native microbial payload than grocery whole wheat. Starters built on heritage grain develop more complex flavor earlier (the fruit/wine notes that would take months on commercial flour can appear at day 10), ferment more aggressively, and are more resistant to contamination. Worth the cost if you plan to bake weekly with the starter. For Pablo: Flour & Weirdoughs in Key Biscayne mills on-site; ask for the most recently-milled whole-wheat or rye. The difference is perceptible on day 10.

🔴 Advanced: Maintaining Multiple Starters

SOURDOUGH FUNDAMENTALS · ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT

Serious bread bakers keep 2-3 distinct starters — one white-bread-flour-maintained (for clean-flavored baguettes, brioche), one rye-maintained (for dark loaves, rye breads, pumpernickel), one heritage-grain-maintained (for flavor-forward country loaves). Each has a slightly different dominant microbiome and produces distinctly different breads. Maintenance cost is ~5 min per starter per feed; flavor payoff is real. For the Umami library, a single starter built on 50/50 whole-wheat + bread flour covers all the bread recipes in the corpus well.

PAIRING

What to Drink

🔥 Application · Master Sourdough Loaf

After day 10 maturity, use 1 tbsp (15 g) of active starter to seed the levain for master-sourdough-loaf

This is the primary recipe your starter will feed. The master loaf recipe assumes you have exactly this mature starter. The day-10 completion here unlocks the whole bread library.

🔥 Application · Focaccia Enrichment

Stir 100 g of discard into focaccia-sheet-pan dough — the commercial yeast still drives leavening; starter adds depth of flavor

The focaccia recipe is yeast-leavened but benefits from a spoonful of sourdough complexity. Classic hybrid approach used by Italian bakeries that want reliability + character.

🔥 Application · Kamado Pizza (Natural Leaven Option)

Substitute 100 g active starter (minus 60 g flour + 40 g water from the recipe) in kamado-pizza dough for a longer, more complex-flavored pizza fermentation

Pizza dough made with only sourdough starter (no commercial yeast) requires a 24-36 h cold ferment and yields a chewier, more flavored crust. A project for a Saturday-pizza Sunday.

📚 Reference · The Classical Libraries

Two classic baking + fermentation reference texts — one on the canonical 75% hydration country loaf, one on the microbiological depth of wild fermentation

This recipe is the bridge between them — the microbiology of succession + the bread application. Both sit in the library as companions; the starter is what links them.

CONTEXT

Menu Ideas

Day 11 — First Bread

Use the mature starter at day 11 morning feed to build the levain for master-sourdough-loaf. By day 12 evening you have a baked loaf. The starter's reward for 10 days of patience.

Weekly — Saturday Pancakes

Every Saturday morning, use the discard from the Friday PM + Saturday AM feeds (~200 g) to make sourdough pancakes. 150 g discard + 1 egg + 1 tbsp sugar + 1 tsp baking soda + pinch salt + 60 ml milk. Hot pan, butter, 2 min/side. Maple or Sobrasada-Honey Butter from sobrasada-honey-butter.

Monthly — Focaccia Variant

Stir 100 g discard into focaccia-sheet-pan dough for a deeper-flavor variant. Serve the focaccia as the opener to a paella-valenciana Sunday dinner.

Quarterly — Backup Dehydration

Every 3 months, spread 50 g of active starter paper-thin on parchment, air-dry 36-48 h to cracker crisps, crumble into a sealed jar, label with date. Insurance against losing the mother (travel, fridge failure, accidents). Revives in ~3 days of feeds.

Year-One Anniversary

At year one, the starter has developed its own signature — a stable microbial fingerprint unique to your flour, water, and kitchen. Share a jar with a friend. Teach them this recipe. Let a good thing propagate.

YOUR NOTES

Cook Log

Session Notes

Date: _____ · Serves: ____ · Rating: __ / 5

Use this space to record what you changed, what worked, and what you'd do differently next time. Your future self will thank you.