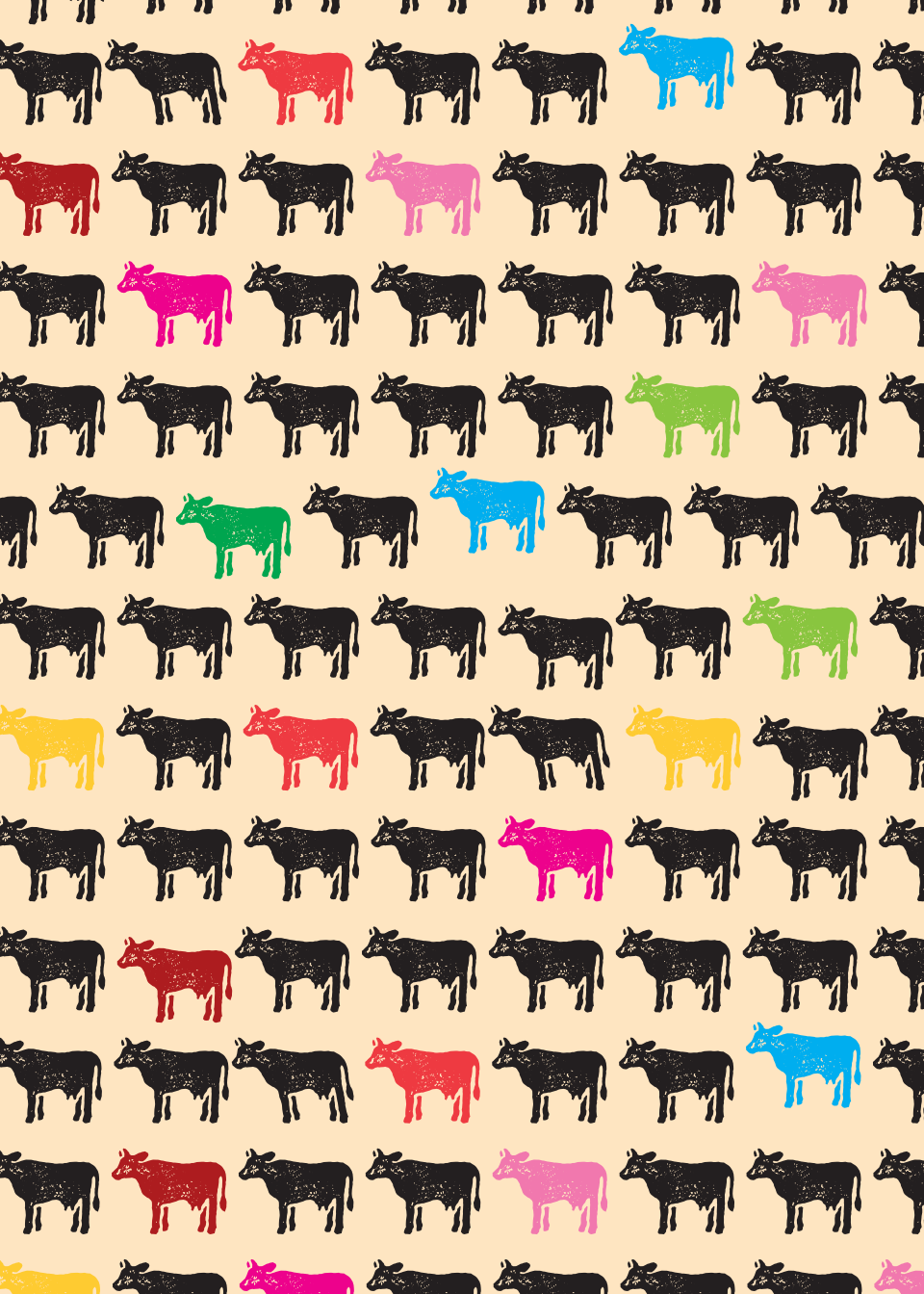




from chaos to
CREATIVITY

*Building a
Productivity System for
Artists and Writers*

Jessie L Kwak





from
chaos to
creativity







*from
chaos to
creativity*

*Building a Productivity System for
Artists and Writers*

Jessie L Kwak

*Microcosm Publishing
Portland, OR*



FROM CHAOS TO CREATIVITY

Building a Productivity System for Artists and Writers

Part of the Good Life Series

© Jessie L Kwak, 2019

This edition © Microcosm Publishing, 2019

First Edition, 3,000 copies

First published September, 2019

ISBN 978-1-62106-160-1

This is Microcosm #209

Cover illustration by Matt Gauck | MattGauck.com

Interior illustrations by Neil Birch

Book design by Joe Biel



For a catalog, write or visit:

Microcosm Publishing

2752 N Williams Ave.

Portland, OR 97227

(503)799-2698

Microcosm.Pub

To join the ranks of high-class stores that feature Microcosm titles, talk to your rep: In the U.S. **Como** (Atlantic), **Fujii** (Midwest), **Book Travelers West** (Pacific), **Turnaround** in Europe, **Manda/UTP** in Canada, **New South** in Australia, and **GPS** in Asia, India, Africa, and South America.

If you bought this on Amazon, I'm so sorry because you could have gotten it cheaper and supported a small, independent publisher at **Microcosm.Pub**

Global labor conditions are bad, and our roots in industrial Cleveland in the 70s and 80s made us appreciate the need to treat workers right. Therefore, our books are MADE IN THE USA and printed on post-consumer paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names:

MICROCOSM · PUBLISHING



Microcosm Publishing is Portland's most diversified publishing house and distributor with a focus on the colorful, authentic, and empowering. Our books and zines have put your power in your hands since 1996, equipping readers to make positive changes in their lives and in the world around them. Microcosm emphasizes skill-building, showing hidden histories, and fostering creativity through challenging conventional publishing wisdom with books and bookettes about DIY skills, food, bicycling, gender, self-care, and social justice. What was once a distro and record label was started by Joe Biel in his bedroom and has become among the oldest independent publishing houses in Portland, OR. We are a politically moderate, centrist publisher in a world that has inched to the right for the past 80 years.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

This Book Isn't About Productivity • 9

Because Chaos • 10

Taming the Chaos • 4

Forget a Productivity System—You Need a Creativity System • 6

This Book Is for You • 7

How to Use This book • 8

How This Book Is Organized • 9

A Note on Tools & Exercises • 10

It's Better with a Buddy • 11

Do This • 11

Planning • 13

How to Plan • 14

Do This • 15

Gathering Your Tools • 16

Tool 1: Corrals • 17

My Corral System • 18

Tool 2: Your Schedule • 19

Tool 3: Project Planning Files • 20

Step 1: Capture the Chaos • 22

Dump Out Your Brain • 22

Find and Streamline Your Corrals • 23

Do This • 25

Step 2: Identify Your Priorities • 26

Tool 1: Your Goals List • 26

Tool 2: Your No List • 27

Tool 3: The Eisenhower Grid • 28

Do This • 30

EXERCISE 1: Write a Goals List • 30

EXERCISE 2: Start a “No List” • 30

EXERCISE 3: Purge the Fluff From Your Inboxes • 30

Step 3: Organizing Projects and Tasks • 32

Defining Projects, Goals, and Tasks • 32

Breakable—and Unbreakable—Projects • 33

Creating Places for Projects to Live • 34

Do This • 35

Interlude: Checking In • 37

Step 4: Schedule Your Tasks • 38

Principle 1: Why You Need a Calendar, Not a To-Do List • 38

Principle 2: Don't Bite off More Than You Can Chew • 38

Principle 3: Focus on Actions, Not Results • 39

Scheduling Your Weeks • 40

Scheduling Your Days • 41

Do This • 42

Rinse, Repeat • 44

Working • 46

Understanding Your Time & Energy • 48

Do This • 50

Exercise 1: Track Your Time • 50

Exercise 2: Find Your Creative Rhythm • 51

Managing a Sustainable Workload • 53

Setting Quotas • 56

Do This • 57

Designing Your Work Day • 59

Designing Your Work Week • 60

Working in Blocks of Time • 62

Do This • 62

Exercise 1: Plan Your Ideal Work Life • 62

Exercise 2: Extend Your Focus • 62

Working Around Life • 64

Do This • 68

Shadow Work and Willpower • 69

Get Ahead of Distractions • 71

Set the Stage for a Productive Day • 72

Schedule a Time to Deal with Loose Ends • 73

Capture Distractions and Move On • 73

Killing Distractions • 74

Delayed Gratification • 74

Find Different Spots for Different Work • 75

Do This • 75

Beating Procrastination • 77

Do This • 79

Dreaming • 80

How to Play • 83

Finding Your Joy • 84

Filling the Creative Well • 86

Do This • 88

Taking Time for Reflection • 89

Get in the Right Environment • 90

Ask Yourself the Right Questions • 90

Be Honest and Take Action • 91

Do This • 92

Troubleshooting Your Creative Productivity System • 93

Your Creative Schedule • 94

How You Collect Incoming Tasks • 94

Your Goals • 94

Your Obligations • 95

Your Network • 95

Your Reward System • 96

Your Passion • 96

Do This • 97





THIS BOOK ISN'T ABOUT PRODUCTIVITY

As a chronic overachiever, I'm drawn like a moth to a flame to any mention of productivity. Call it jealousy of people who seem to have more creative output than I do. Call it fear of not living up to my own potential. Call it the pure terror of dying with all these stories still trapped inside my brain where no one else can hear them.

Whatever it is, productivity articles are a drug to me. I love their sticky, seductive promises: I will 10x my output. I will learn to write 5000 words an hour. All in four hours a week!

I faithfully click on every link—*Productivity Secrets Of High Performers. How to Write Your Novel in a Fortnight. The One Weird Trick JK Rowling Used To Become An Instantly Better Selling Author Than You.*

The thing is, I want there to be a trick. You probably do, too. I want there to be a silver bullet that fixes my procrastination and gets my novels written more quickly. Just once, I want to click on a link and have the secret of highly successful people be that they sold their soul to the devil at the crossroads and here's how you can do it, too, here's the devil's number. Give him a call, it's easy.

But no. The advice in those articles—and the advice in this book, sorry—is that creative success is hard work. It's taking regular

steps every day. It's setting goals, and making them a priority. It's carving out time and sticking to your guns.

It's just doing the work.

Easy, right?

So why is doing the work so hard?

Because Chaos

After college, I spent some time in Venezuela working as a carpenter for an NGO run by a German expat. When he got flustered by the general lack of efficiency from our motley crew of multinational backpacker volunteers and local Venezuelan contractors—we flustered him a lot—he would complain about the chaos he had to endure.

With his accent, it sounded a bit more like “cows.” Which is how I hear the word “chaos” in my head to this day.

“You must have cows within you to give birth to a dancing star.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche

“Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void but out of cows.”

—Mary Shelley

“In the midst of cows, there is also opportunity”

—Sun Tzu

The funny thing is that although cows aren't actually chaotic in the way that, say, a flock of seagulls are, they're still really good at getting in the way of your progress. They're stubborn. They're kinda dumb. They're prone to inaction. And if you spook a herd of cows you've got a real mess on your hands.

If you're even remotely human, your life probably has its fair share of co—chaos. It comes from all sides: You have family obligations. Work-related responsibilities. Friends calling you up to hang out. Plants that need watered. Trails you want to hike. Dreams you're overdue in reaching.

One hundred thousand thoughts are hovering on the edges of your attention every time you sit down to do something meaningful—waving and hollering to distract you from the task at hand.

Does that sound familiar?

Taming the Chaos

It was Thomas Edison who said, “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.” I used to buy into that wholeheartedly. You need some talent, sure, but mostly you need the self discipline to shove aside the chaos and work hard.

(Because, after all, isn't perspiration mostly just self-discipline?)

Now, though, I'm not so sure. I still agree with Edison that the bulk of creative genius and success is due to hard work rather than talent, but that hard work isn't just the result of self-discipline and willpower.

It's the result of something else: *an effective system and productive environment.*

A productive environment backed by effective systems keeps you focused on your priorities and sets you up to successfully get the work done. You still have to do the work, of course, but a good system helps you filter, manage, and block chaos so you can do it. Because, let's face it. We all only have so much willpower and self-discipline to work with.

- If you want to eat healthier, change your shopping list and keep junk food out of your house.
- If you want to exercise, get an accountability partner and schedule regular exercises sessions.
- If you want to create art, set up a creativity system to help tame the chaos.

I first started searching seriously for a productivity system that worked with my creative brain while I was still working full time. I needed something that would help me manage running multiple side gigs and writing novels alongside working a full-time job. Now that I'm working for myself, I need something to help me manage marketing a freelance copywriting business while keeping up with client work and still making progress on my fiction.

I ran through a series of to-do list apps and calendar systems. I read all the books. I clicked on every productivity link (I still do). Eventually, I read *Getting Things Done* by David Allen. Despite

the corporate vibe of the book, his system of capture, process, and schedule was exactly what I was looking for.

Well, almost exactly.

Allen's deal is to implement a system you trust so nothing is missed, and you can clear space to get things done. A system like GTD is designed to help you power through the chaotic, shallow work like answering emails and paying bills so you can clear up the time—and the headspace—to accomplish deep work.

As much as I loved parts of it, though, the GTD system didn't quite click with my creative mind. The system is task-oriented, focusing on breaking down a project into a series of next actions. Take a whole herd of chaos, plunk each bit into its own neat little stall, then lead each bit of chaos compliantly into a chute to be processed in a perfect queue. Sure, that works for logistical work, but when it comes to more deeply creative work it's hard to slice what needs to be done into such discrete tasks.

When I'm updating my website, my to-do list includes tasks like *add new clips to portfolio*, *rewrite "About" page*, *fix broken links*, *figure out why slider is jacked up*, *update plugins*, *change background image on home page*.

When I'm writing a novel, my list can only be broken down into nebulous commands like *outline the novel*, *start writing the novel*, *throw the novel in a lake*, *finish writing the novel*, *order more wine*, *stare at the void awhile*, *revise the novel*.

None of these items is truly a task to be checked off, except for possibly “throw the novel in a lake” and “buy more wine.” Doing creative work requires a system that’s tight enough to make sure none of the chaos of daily life is slipping through the cracks, but flexible enough to allow for deep periods of non-task-based creative work. It needs to free you from the job of managing chaos so you can focus on your true work of playing, producing, thinking, and dreaming.

Forget a Productivity System— You Need a Creativity System

Accomplishing creative work involves balancing both logical and creative work, managing them both without letting one overtake the other. You can’t always approach your creative work logistically—nor can you approach your logistic work with the mindset you use when doing your creative work, and trying to balance the two without a system is a recipe for chaos.

Most productivity systems, applications, and software are based around the task list. They like to break projects down into discrete items that can be neatly marked off—*check, check, check*. Few of them take into account the bizarre nebulous mass that a creative project is.

To go back to my example of writing a novel, a current project on my to-do list is to write the next book in my sci-fi gangster series. Despite my joking to-do list above, there are plenty of things that

actually can be marked into discrete tasks: *Commission cover art, schedule time with my editor, write an announcement newsletter, decide on the title.*

But a huge bulk of the work simply can't be broken down any further than one line item: *Write the damn book.*

Sure, there are distinct phases of writing that could be broken down a little further: *Create an outline, write character bios.* Or, I could break it down into: *Write chapter one, two, and so on.* But in reality, each of those parts overlap and inform each other in my process. I can write a character bio, but it's never really done until after I've incorporated notes back from my editor. I can start drafting chapter one, but I will end up circling back to it over the course of writing the rest of the book, fleshing out pieces until it's finally finished.

Other creative endeavors like painting, composing music, or developing a business idea have the same pitfalls when it comes to shoehorning them into a productivity system. There may be plenty of discrete tasks, but the bulk of the work falls into this unclassifiable stage that requires you to create deeply and mull things over.

Another problem is that most productivity systems also don't take into account all those productive non-work states like daydreaming and filling the creative well, which are an important part of the creative process. These systems focus on accomplishing as much finished work as possible, not on building in slack so you can take time to stare out the window or go for a hike or watch a

movie—things that are every bit as important to a creative person as the work itself.

Years of hunting for a silver bullet have led me to a personalized creativity system that makes sure (almost) nothing falls through the cracks, without imposing unnatural restrictions on my creative work. It lets me relax in the moment of creation, knowing that what I'm working on *right now* is the most important thing for me to be doing.

(For the most part. I'm not going to lie—as I'm revising this section I'm in a slump, and I feel like a fraud for writing a book on productivity while I flail helplessly myself. But more on testing, iterating, and rebooting your system later in the book.)

I'm not here to teach you how to pack every moment of your day with efficiency and productivity. I'm not here to impart my own prescribed system. I'm here to help you create your own system to de-clutter your brain, manage your time, and make space in your life to create art.

This Book is for You

When I started writing this book, I also launched a “Tip of the Week” newsletter. On the sign-up form, I have a section asking subscribers what their art is—and the responses are all over the board:

Knitting

Building

Lighting design

Spaces and streets

Game development

Providing a platform for women in STEM

Tall tales

Growing teachers

That's why when I talk about creative people, I'm not just talking about artists and writers. I'm not just talking about people who work in so-called creative professions—event planners, graphic designers, children's book illustrators, creative directors.

What's your passion project? What's your art?

Are you satisfied with your creative output? Are you feeling swamped by external obligations, and having a hard time prioritizing? Do you ever feel guilty about doing your creative work because you should be working on other tasks instead

(Or about working on other logistical tasks when you should be doing your art instead)?

It's my hope that this book will arm you with a clear sense of what your priorities are and a plan for streamlining your tasks so you can feel confident that you're working on the right thing at the right time. Together, we can create a system to capture all the chaos milling about your head, build filters to sort and minimize it, and design a work schedule around your rhythms.

Let's do this.





HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

First up, this book isn't a prescriptive guide. If you follow my advice to a T, it won't work for you. That's because you and I have different problems, different personalities, and different work styles.

This book also isn't a collection of productivity tips. Yes, I'll be talking about productivity, and you'll find a lot of familiar advice in here about minimizing distractions and turning off your email notifications and having a good morning routine. But this book isn't meant to be a buffet of tips to try—it's meant to help you design an ideal creativity system that helps you get out of your own way so you can do the work. It's about honing a life that fosters your art.

This book is a guide to help you come up with your own creativity system. I lay out the basic principles here, talking about what works for me and what works for others. Getting something out of this book will require putting in work on your part, but when you're done reading and doing all the exercises, you should have the bones of a creative productivity system that's tailor-made for your life and your art.

Ultimately, this book isn't meant to be read end to end. It's meant to be a guide to help you set up a creativity system of your own.

You'll find exercises throughout to help you hone in on what your priorities are, and on what works for you. If you follow them, you should have the beginnings of your own personal creativity system by the time we're through. The important thing to remember is that your system will be a work in progress. If something doesn't work for you, figure out why, and keep tweaking it until it does.

So grab a notebook and a pen, and follow along.

How This Book is Organized

This book is organized into four parts: **Planning, Working, Dreaming, and Testing**

In **Part One**, we'll build a system to capture and prioritize everything that you need to accomplish. This is a critical part of achieving creative peace of mind. If you don't know what needs done and what's most important, you'll constantly be stressed about the unknown things you're letting slip through the cracks.

Part Two is all about accomplishing the work. How to work optimally in order to get your best creative work done when you're at your peak, and how to create systems around your work day to help keep you on task. The goal here is to get the planning stage so streamlined and the working stage so focused that you can spend time dreaming deeply and enriching your art, which brings us to the next part.

In **Part Three**, we'll take a left turn from most productivity guides and talk about something very specific to creatives: the need to

mess around. After all, we don't just need to create—we need to schedule time for reflection, for dreaming, for filling the creative well.

In **Part Four**, we'll also talk about how to iterate your creative productivity system so that it continues working for you. Sometimes you may just need to tweak a certain element, sometimes your work may change, which requires a new system. Sometimes you may just grow out of your system, or get bored with it. Sometimes you need to totally reboot everything. That's all okay.

The ultimate goal isn't to lay a patented system over your life, then struggle to meet it. It's to design a life where you feel relaxed, knowing that your cows are all in a row so you can accomplish the creative work you know you were meant to do.

A Note on Tools and Exercises

I'm a tool fan, so you'll find references to multiple apps, websites, books, and gadgets throughout this book. Don't worry about trying to remember them all or take notes—I've listed them out in an index at the end.

One tool I talk a lot about is Evernote, a free note-taking app that syncs between your laptop, phone, and other devices (it has a lot of similarities with Microsoft OneNote). Without Evernote my life would crumble into dust, but I also know lots of people who can't make it work for them. Throughout the book I give specific

examples about how I use it, but if it's not for you, don't worry. I include alternate tools and methods throughout the book.

You'll also find exercises scattered throughout this book. As I mentioned above, it's best to do them as you go along, but if you're not in a place to do them (or just like reading books through first), never fear. You'll find an index at the end listing out all the exercises.

There's a lot to think about in this book, and my goal is to help you feel less overwhelmed, not more. If you're starting from zero when it comes to creating a creatively productive life, don't worry—you don't have to do everything in this book in order to see real changes. In fact, I'd prefer if you don't try to go from zero to ninety overnight!

Instead, work on one small thing at a time. I find that a few of the exercises are especially good for getting yourself back on track if you're stuck in a rut or overwhelmed by chaos. I've highlighted those in particular, since you may want to revisit them from time to time—and if you're at your rope's end right now, you may want to flip back and see if any of them help before reading on.

It's Better with a Buddy

If you're serious about reshaping your life to accomplish your creative work, I encourage you to find an accountability buddy to help keep you on track.

I've been a member of several accountability groups—one for over seven years—and I can't say enough about how helpful it is to share your goals with someone else and know they're rooting for you to meet them. It's great if you have questions, or just need someone to check in and keep you on track.

How can you find that person or people?

1. Work through this book with a friend. Who do you know who's been wanting to get their creative life in order? Maybe your partner, a family member, your BFF, or your book club. Commit to working through these exercises together, or to having a regular coffee date and talking about your insights as you go along.
2. Join the *Chaos to Creativity* Facebook group. You'll find other creative types looking to get a better handle on their creative productivity. There, you can find accountability partners, or just post about your own insights and struggles.

We're all in this together!

Take Action

Answer this question: If you could free up time to accomplish one big creative project this year, what would it be?

Write this down in the middle of the first page in your notebook, with stars and arrows and stickers. Put it on a sticky note and slap it on the cover of this book. Write it in eyeliner on your bathroom mirror like you're in a teen movie from the 90s.

Just put it somewhere where you can see it.

This, my friend, is why you're reading this book. So that by building your own creativity system, you can accomplish not only this goal, but also goals you have yet to dream of.

As you work through this book, remember that you're not just learning productivity tips or implementing an off-the-shelf system, you're building your optimal environment and schedule in which to create art.

Let's get started.

"To invent your own life's meaning is not easy, but it's still allowed, and I think you'll be happier for the trouble."

— Bill Watterson



WHERE
IS THIS
GOING?



PLANNING

“The only people who achieve much are those who want knowledge so badly that they seek it while the conditions are still unfavorable. Favorable conditions never come.”

— C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

When was the last time you stopped what you were doing and truly made some plans for the future? Really took a look at what’s going on in your life and helped it take shape, rather than going with the flow?

Maybe you answered that you’re too busy. If so, I get it. When life feels like an endless merry-go-round, sometimes it takes all the energy you have to still hold on. When I’m in panic mode, self reflection and planning are generally the first things to get jettisoned. If you’re committed to taming the chaos and setting up a creative life, however, planning is your cornerstone.

The way I look at, if you are not planning your own life, you’re letting someone else do it for you. Your kids. Your boss. Your parents. Society.

In 2012, my husband and I were both working desk jobs—and both hating the inflexibility of our schedules. I was working as

a copywriter for a catalog company and he was working as an inside sales rep for a bike brand, both jobs which had us chained to our desks. We wanted to travel more, to go camping more. I hated our commute, and I hated that the best hours of my day were being taken up with someone else's work.

I know a lot of people feel the same way about their jobs—mostly because of how many people tell me they wish they could have my husband and my schedules today. My husband and I didn't fall into this new lifestyle by accident. We knew we wanted more flexibility, so we sat down and made a plan. I would start taking on freelance clients on the side, building up my business even though it meant working late in the evening after coming home from my day job. He would say yes to every opportunity that led to a position with his company as an outside sales rep, even if it meant working long hours, traveling, or us moving away from Seattle.

Within a year of our decision, we were both free. But it didn't happen by accident.

We didn't wish for it. We made plans.

On the recommendation of my fabulous editor, Elly Blue, I picked up Shonda Rhimes' book *Year of Yes: How to Dance It Out, Stand In the Sun and Be Your Own Person*. She doesn't hesitate to call out every person who sits around wishing their dreams into reality rather than taking concrete action to get there. “[D]reams do not come true just because you dream them,” she writes, quoting her

Dartmouth Commencement Address. “It’s hard work that makes things happen. It’s hard work that creates change.”

As a woman of a thousand dreams, it was a convicting read.

People make wishes a lot when it comes to their art. “I wish I could write a novel,” someone will tell me. Or, “I wish I could learn to play an instrument.” Personally, I wish I could travel more, have more time to write fiction, and spend more time with my family.

It’s as though we’re all hoping that someday time will magically open up so we can paint, or our fingers will suddenly know a series of chords, or our overblown spending habits will suddenly transform into a travel saving fund. But those things will never happen if we’re not making plans for how they will actually come about.

Wishing without doing is no longer a problem for you, though.

You’re reading this book.

You’re making plans.

How to Plan

There are two types of planning:

The first is the day-to-day strategizing, where you stop frantically fending off your to-do list and start taking a bigger picture look at what your priorities are and how to effectively accomplish them.

The second is long-term planning, where you get serious with your goals and dreams and figure out how to shape your life into what you want it to be.

In this section, we're going to tackle the first type of planning—because it's tough to see the big picture until you feel clear-headed in your day-to-day work. Later on, we'll talk about building reflection and long-term planning into your creative life.

But first, we're going to harness the power of regular planning to construct the foundations of your creativity system.

The creativity system planning process has four steps:

1. Capturing the chaos
2. Setting priorities
3. Sorting the chaos
4. Scheduling the work

When you're first getting started, you'll need bigger chunks of time to sort and organize things. But once you have your creativity system set up properly, it should run on its own. Because I have a system set up to capture everything that needs done and process it as I go along, I normally only take about 10-15 minutes on a Friday afternoon or Sunday evening to get my co—chaos in a row for the next week.

In this section I'm going to take you through the process of how to create a planning system that keeps you on track without too much effort or willpower on your end. To get through the four steps above, you'll need some tools to help you capture, prioritize,

sort, and schedule. In the next chapter we're going to talk about those.

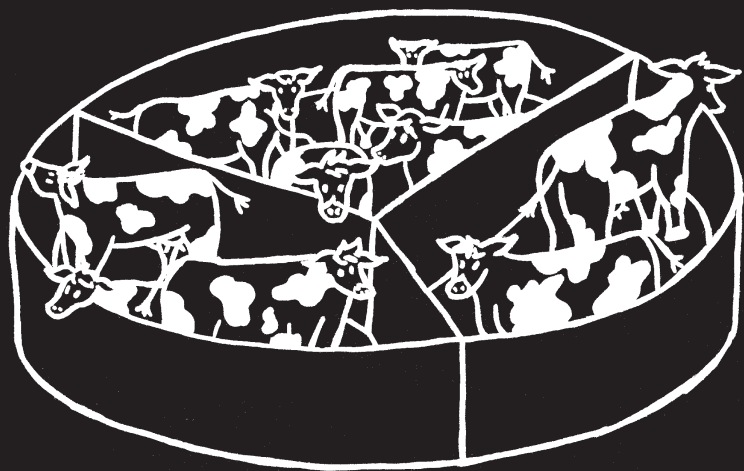
Let's get started.

Take Action

I know it's tempting to just read this book all the way through and continue about your life, but I encourage you to set aside some time *this week* to work through the planning section.

Do this now: Open up your calendar and schedule in two sessions of at least an hour each this week. This will give you time to really dive deep into what you want to accomplish and come up with strategies to do so.

The reason I suggest two shorter sessions rather than one long one is that it gives you time to marinate on the things you thought about the first session and have more clarity in the second one (plus, it's easier to carve out time that way).





GATHERING YOUR TOOLS

Enough rah-rah talk—it's time to get into the nitty-gritty of building a creativity system that will help you harness the chaos of your life and turn it into creative gold. But first, a caveat: As you read through this section, don't get sidetracked trying a bunch of new apps or running out to the office supply store for a new set of Sharpies and Post-Its. This section is meant to give you an overview of what you'll need to create a creativity system. We'll get hands-on later in this chapter.

There are three major components to a rock-solid system:

- **Corrals**, where you capture every bit of chaos that swirls into your life
- **Your schedule**, where you keep track of your appointments and tasks
- **Project files**, where you store project-specific notes, to-do lists, and materials

What each of these components looks like in real life will vary according to your specific system. I'll talk about how I've set them up, and give examples from other creatives along the way, but

you'll probably have to tweak things a bit to find a system that works well with your lifestyle and personality.

The main reason productivity systems fail for people is because they don't fully trust the system. After all, if your neighbors are constantly calling about your cows tramping through their fields, you'll eventually stop trusting your corrals.¹ That's why it's important to build a strong system of collection and implementation that's customized to your specific art and life.

I'd suggest creating a centralized location for your creativity system—whether that's a dedicated notebook or a series of digital or physical files and folders. Title it anything you like: Command Center, Creativity System, My Life, whatever. Mine is called The Conn (as in “Mr. Sulu, you have the conn”).

Speaking of nerds, let's geek out about this question for a minute: Is digital or analog better?

It depends.

Do you like tech? There's a ton of great apps out there to delight the savviest tech-head. Are you a total Luddite? Knock yourself out with a Moleskin notebook and an entire rainbow worth of Post-Its.

On the one hand, I find most apps to be either too constricting or bells-and-whistle-y to allow for a truly flexible creative productivity system. But on the other hand, a purely analog paper

¹ When I was growing up, we owned an escape artist llama named Laurens. Fortunately he was one of very few llamas in the Lower Yakima Valley, so whenever he got loose it was only a matter of time before we got a call asking, “Hey, is this your llama in my yard?”

system can be cumbersome and messy. Plus, if you travel a bunch like I do, it can be hard to keep track of a paper system.

I used to use an entirely analog system, but if I wasn't sitting at my desk (which I never was), I wouldn't see all my reminders and calendars and gaily colored Post-It notes. Now, my system is mostly digital—a combination of Evernote, Google Calendar, and the occasional spiral bound notebook. It works well for me because everything syncs between my phone and laptop so I can access everything I need while I'm traveling.

Throughout the book, I'll talk about both digital and analog methods, but choosing which works for you is really a matter of personal preference.

Tool 1: Corrals

Some productivity systems talk about “inboxes,” which to me conjures up the image of an overflowing pile of papers and tasks foisted onto you against your will. I prefer to think in terms of corrals. Corrals are the physical (or digital) places where you herd all incoming thoughts, questions, epiphanies, and tasks for later processing.

Having a few good corrals is *absolutely foundational* to having a good creativity system. Their job is to capture all those pesky-fascinating-worrying-brilliant ideas that float into your brain throughout the day, so you're not spending valuable brain energy keeping track of them.

In *Getting Things Done*, David Allen uses this analogy: Your short-term memory is like a computer's RAM. If it gets too cluttered with open loops (things you're trying to remember), your thought process won't run at its most efficient. Your brain doesn't prioritize between all the thoughts being stored in its short-term memory, so it treats them all as Priority Numero Uno—which means that renewing your passport and vacuuming the floor will all seem equally important as spending time on your art.

In other words, *if you're trying to hold everything in your mind when you work on your art, you'll be too busy worrying about all the things you should be doing to truly focus.*

But if you train yourself to shake all those thoughts out of your brain and into a corral for processing, it's easier to spend time working deeply on the things that matter. Your brain knows “buy floss” is written down somewhere where it'll get done, so it stops yelling at you about it.

Of course, simply writing things down doesn't make them go away—it just gets them out of your brain so you can think about them effectively. “[W]hen you get all that out of your psyche, it doesn't relieve you of the personal executive responsibility to then say ‘Okay, how do I allocate my attention and my focus right now?’” Allen told *The Atlantic*.² “But what it does is it frees you up to be doing that with your intelligence.”

² [TheAtlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/10/david-allen-on-how-to-fix-your-life/263883/](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/10/david-allen-on-how-to-fix-your-life/263883/)

My Corral System

You probably won't have a single, lonely corral. Rather, you'll have a system of places where you track incoming thoughts, obligations, and tasks. That's fine, so long as you're systematic about using and checking your multiple corrals during your planning process. Otherwise, you'll start to miss things, which leads to your brain distrusting the system, which leads to you regressing to trying to remember everything inside your head, which leads, obviously, back to stress and chaos.

You can use any number of things as a corral:

- A pocket notebook
- A physical file folder
- The notes app on your phone
- A file in an app like Evernote or OneNote
- Your email inbox
- Texting yourself voice memos
- Post-It notes stuck on every available surface in your home
- Notes scrawled on the back of your hand
- A sophisticated to-do app

The point is that it doesn't matter where you write things down, just that you do. You're putting them in a bucket for processing

later, and the only requirement is that you systematically check each and every corral when you sit down to plan.

I have four corrals:

- **For random thoughts**, I have a file in Evernote titled Brain Dump. Because it syncs to my phone, I can just jot things in it throughout the day whenever I think of something that needs done.

- **For emails**, I use my email inbox. I'm a stickler about archiving old messages and deleting trash, which means every single message in my email inbox that is waiting on some action from me. Sometimes that action is simply to record the information in it—once I've recorded that in the proper place, I archive the email so it's no longer milling about the corral.

- **For physical paperwork** (bills, notices, checks to deposit, etc), I have a pile on my desk where I throw things to deal with all at once.

- **For appointments and deadlines**, I use Google Calendar. I also jot down time sensitive reminders that are more than a few weeks out in the future, such as “follow up with client about X” or “start knitting Mom's birthday present.”

- **Temporary bonus corral!** *(Occasionally, I'll also jot notes in my physical notebook—especially if I'm working away from my computer and phone to avoid distraction. In that case, I transfer any action items to my Brain Dump folder as soon as I can.)*

When I do my weekly planning, I check those four places to gather up my loose ends from throughout the week and make sure they all gets filed, scheduled, or otherwise taken care of.

Tool 2: Your Schedule

You'll notice that I haven't included "To-Do List" as one of your creativity system tools. That's because it works better to have your tasks scheduled out, rather than listed. I'm also using the term "schedule" as deliberately separate from "calendar," because whereas your calendar should track dates, your schedule should track tasks.

I used to keep a sprawling to-do list that I would work through every day, only to watch in dismay as each item I crossed off spawned three more, Hydra-like. Now, I jot each of the week's to-do items onto the day I plan to do them.

That keeps me focused and calm, since each day I only need to focus on the things assigned to that day. If other things show up, I either jot them down on the day they need done, or throw them into my Brain Dump corral for processing if they don't need to happen this week.

You could use a physical calendar if you like—maybe one of those big desk calendars, or an agenda book. You could also use a digital calendar or a date-based to-do app like TeuxDeux or Nozbe.

I prefer to use Evernote. I have a folder with two notes:

- **This Week**, with sections in it for every day's deadlines, appointments, and to-dos
- **Next Week**, with things that I need to do in the future. I jot those down here according to the time period they need done in. (Like, "Week of Feb 3" or "July".)

The screenshot shows an Evernote interface with a notebook titled "Jessie's Productivity System". The notebook is organized into several sections:

- This Week**: A section for recording daily time-sensitive appointments, deadlines, and to-dos.
- Brain Dump**: A section for writing down everything on your mind, no matter how big or small.
- Next week**: A section for planning the next week, including dates, deadlines, and to-do items.
- How to use this notebook**: A section explaining the system, including how to use the notebook to keep track of tasks throughout the week.
- Yearly**: A section for planning ahead for the next year, including follow-up reminders, scheduling long-term projects, and general thinking ahead.
- Someday**: A section for listing projects that need to happen someday but don't need to be thought about today.

On the right side, there is a daily task list for Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday:

Day	Meetings:	Deadlines:	To Dos:
Monday	10a Dentist	<input type="checkbox"/> Client 1 Case Study	<input type="checkbox"/> Call mom to say happy birthday <input type="checkbox"/> Invoice Client 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Draft Client 3 Blog Post
Tuesday	3p Interview with SME 4p Call with Client 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Client 3 Blog Post	<input type="checkbox"/> Fix broken website links <input type="checkbox"/> Talk to R about
Wednesday	8a Skype with freelance group	<input type="checkbox"/> Submit Draft of Novella to Editor <input type="checkbox"/> Personal blog post	<input type="checkbox"/> Email So-and-so about Sekrit Project
	2p Hike with k		

Evernote example (Copy and use a public version at Microcosm.Pub/Evernote)

I used to schedule to-do items in my Google calendar (using the Tasks function), but it was just too visually overwhelming for me, so I stopped using it. When a system creates more stress than it relieves, it's time to change it. Now I use my actual calendar only for scheduling appointments and tracking deadlines.

Whatever you use, the trick is to find something that works best for you, letting you get your work done without spending too much time on the nitty-gritty of your system.

Tool 3: Project Planning Files

If you have multiple big projects (and as a creative person, you probably do), you need a place for them to live separately. Start a folder for each to be a general bucket for collecting ideas and housing project-specific to-do lists.

Along with creative project folders, you can also create folders for things like “Books to Read” or “Around the House.” Remember, you’re creating a system to help manage *everything* in your life and sort through the chaos of things you’re always trying to remember. If you are regularly finding ideas or action items in your corrals about a certain subject (for me it’s “Future Sewing Projects”), start a folder and file them away.

This could be a physical file folder system, digital folders on your computer, or a separate journal. You could also start a Pinterest board, or grab a shoe box to fill with related materials.

Each project’s folder is a good place to put a project-specific to-do list. That way when it comes time to work on this project, you have your next action steps—but they’re not cluttering up your daily to-do list.

As a writer, I use Evernote folders as a general catch-all for information about business and writing projects—at least until

a writing project gets developed enough that I'm working on it regularly. Then I dump almost everything related to it into the Scrivener file (Scrivener is a word processing software) for the project. I still keep project-related to-do lists in Evernote, because that makes it easy to find them when I'm ready to take the next steps. We'll talk more about handling project tasks in Step Three of the next chapter.

Now that you're familiar with your creativity system's tools, let's move on to Step One.





Step #1 CAPTURE THE CHAOS

“And how, as a human being, does one face infinity? How does one attempt to grasp the incomprehensible? Through lists, through catalogs, through collections in museums and through encyclopedias and dictionaries.”

— Umberto Eco³

The chaos in your life is made up of everything that is vying for your attention: obligations to family, friends, and work; unfinished projects and dreams; physical clutter; advertising messages (both the kind that make you want to buy something, and the more insidious kind that nag you about your imperfections as a human being); the news; social media.

As you’ve probably guessed by now, we’ll be using the various corrals we talked about in the last section to capture the chaos. As your creativity system gets up and running like a well-oiled machine, this process will happen fairly naturally. But at first, you’re going to have to do some deep searching to figure out where your chaos is currently hanging out, then optimize those places so you can find it all without tromping through the back forty with a lasso.

³ [Spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/spiegel-interview-with-umberto-eco-we-like-lists-because-we-don-t-want-to-die-a-659577.html](https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/spiegel-interview-with-umberto-eco-we-like-lists-because-we-don-t-want-to-die-a-659577.html)

We'll be capturing chaos bits from two places: your brain, and your current corrals.

Dump Out Your Brain

We're going to start by transferring the swirling noise in your brain into a physical space so you can deal with it. I call this dumping out my brain.

When I interviewed Jill Pickering and Kate Rapier of the country music duo Jill and Kate, Kate told me that she uses the "brain dump" method as a daily practice, jotting down all the things she's thinking about in a planner right before bed. "It's a good way for me to detox my brain and not carry everything to bed," she said.

My friend, writer Elizabeth Mitchell, also uses lists as a methodical way to get life out of the way so she can work. "It takes the chaos out of my brain so I can be creative," she told me. It works so well, in fact, that she sometimes writes lists of things just so she can throw them away. "Sometimes you just need to visualize the words that say, 'I will get to this. I can do this,'" she said. "Sometimes you have to shake the letters out of your head that are stressing you out so you can pay attention to the letters you need to write."

Do This Now: Grab a blank sheet of paper, a page in your notebook, or open a new file on your computer. Write down every single thing you can possibly think of that you need to do now, want to do in the future, or are thinking about.

Don't censor yourself—no one else has to see this. Just jot down every tiny thing that's contributing to the overall chaos in your brain, no matter how small or ridiculous. You'll sort through it later.

The types of things that will likely end up on this list:

- People you need to email/call/text
- Upcoming deadlines
- Stuff you want to check on
- Events you might go to
- Chores that need done
- That conversation you've been putting off having with your friend or partner
- Ideas for a future project
- Grocery staples you've run out of
- Beautifully deep thoughts that might change the world
- Regrets you can't shake

When your creativity system is running at full steam, you'll capture a lot of these thoughts in the moment and either put them in the right place within your system, or toss them in one of your corrals. But even if you do maintain a running list, it can still be helpful to dump out your brain when you sit down for your regular planning sessions.

Pro Tip: This is also a really helpful exercise to do if you're feeling overwhelmed—I use it whenever I'm feeling too stressed out to concentrate on work. It frees up mental bandwidth to get everything out on paper, and helps me see that most of the chaos cluttering up my brain consists of super low priority things like “hem the curtains.”

Find and Streamline Your Corrals

What are the buckets in your life that naturally collect to-dos?

Make a list of every place you currently capture incoming tasks. This list will live inside your creativity system folder so you always know where to check during your planning periods. Flip back to the “Gathering Your Tools” section for a refresher on where those places may be.

Got it? Great! Now, is there any way you could make this list more efficient? Either by streamlining the number of inboxes you have, or creating additional inboxes to handle certain overlooked times of your day. (Like shower and bicycling epiphanies, or while you're at the day job.)

As a reminder, my current list has four items:

- Email inbox
- Brain Dump file
- Google calendar
- Incoming paperwork stack on my physical desk

What's efficient for you will be highly personalized. I've settled on these four corrals over the years by slowly eliminating other places that weren't as effective for me. I used to jot things down in notebooks and on scraps of paper all over the house, but I inevitably lost them or threw them in a pile that I never checked. Though I may sometimes still jot something on paper, I always transfer it to my Brain Dump file by the end of the day.

One area where I still struggle is messages that I need to deal with outside of email, like texts, Facebook Messenger, voicemails, etc. Because I can't use the same inbox zero method of remembering to deal with a message on other platforms that I can with email, I often forget to reply unless I either respond as soon as I read it, or jot it down on my schedule.

You can get highly technical to track your corrals, if that's your jam. Jen Mayer runs the creative agency Kitemath with her husband, Chris Jennings—though I first learned about her when a mutual friend gifted me her delicious CSA subscriber cookbook, *24 Boxes :: 1 Book*.

Creating efficient systems to manage both the business and the creative sides of the agency—along with her many creative side projects—is one of Jen's passions. Jen and her team have used many of the tools available to them as designers to create a custom system of corrals. "We have a program that we used to create site maps for client websites," she told me, "and we actually realized it's a useful tool to make a site map of your inboxes." It gives them a visual way to see where all their incoming information is kept, and is a good way to spot redundancies.

At the beginning of every planning session, you'll gather chaos from each of your corrals, and decide to either deal with them now or schedule a time to deal with them. The point is that you know where to look, and you have a system that keeps them from getting lost amid other things (like junk mail) that aren't as important.

When you sit down to plan, process every bit of chaos in your system. Every time you empty out your corrals, be sure to really clean them out, rather than leaving lingering items there hanging about. That way when you sit down for your weekly planning, you can see at a glance what tasks are new or outstanding.

I'm one of those "squares-notebooks-with-the-edge-of-the-desk" sort of people, so my approach may be a bit overkill for some people. For example, I aim for inbox zero—which means that anything currently sitting in my email inbox needs dealt with. I'll archive it as soon as I've dealt with it.

My husband, on the other hand, has something like 7,800 unread emails in his inbox

My blood pressure rose just typing that sentence.

But unlike me, he's not using his email inbox as a to-do list. He makes sure things get done by either answering the email as soon as he reads it, or jotting it down as a to-do in his trusty notebook. It doesn't matter what's buried further down the inbox because it's already been noted—or it can be safely ignored.

However you choose to record the chaos, keep a list of your corrals so you know where to check each time you sit down to plan. If you don't you'll stop trusting your system, and you'll revert back to keeping track of things in your head.

There's no wrong wrong way to do it, except that having 7,800 unread emails is clearly the wrong way.

But you do you.

Take Action

Put this book down right now, and do these two things: dump out your brain, and gather all the items from your corrals.

Now you should have a whole mess of chaos that needs to be sorted in physical form. It may seem overwhelming to see everything in front of you, but believe me, it's a whole lot better than having it hovering around your psyche unaddressed.

We'll sort it out in the next section.





Step #2 IDENTIFYING YOUR PRIORITIES

“Concentrate all your thoughts upon the work in hand. The Sun’s rays do not burn until brought to a focus.”

— Alexander Graham Bell

Now that you’ve gathered everything that possibly needs your attention into one overflowing to-do list, you probably feel like panicking. But our next step is to create a set of tools to help you cull out the fluff and prioritize the rest.

Remember: efficient productivity isn’t figuring out how to fit 17 hours worth of junk into an 8-hour day—it’s figuring out how to get those extra hours of junk out of your life for good.

Tool 1: Your Goals List

As a writer who both runs a copywriting business and writes novels, I’m often torn about what I should be doing at any given moment. Should I be prospecting new clients, or working on my novel? Should I be blogging about content marketing, or prepping for my fiction book launch? Should I be pitching guest posts, or emailing review bloggers? Unsure of what’s best, I then hit up my list of blogs, podcasts, and books to get inspiration—only to learn about another dozen marketing tactics or writing activities I

should be doing. Suddenly my list of possibilities has mushroomed into alarming proportions.

No matter what I'm doing, there's a nagging voice telling me I should be doing something else. Sometimes I get so caught up in trying to figure out which is more important that I basically grind to a standstill, getting nothing done.

Analysis paralysis, you could call it.

It sucks.

The best way I know to cut through the chaos is to consult my current goals list. What am I planning to accomplish this month, this year, this decade? What are the actions I should be taking at any moment to push myself closer to those goals? When I do that, my priorities suddenly become crystal clear.

Just knowing your goals and putting the list in front of you will help you align your day-to-day activities with what really matters to you. I know I said we were only going to talk about short term planning in this section, but in order to make the best use of your time each day, you need to have an idea of where you're headed. This is the year you're going to launch your app. Record your album. Sell your house and become a digital nomad. Start your brewery. Sign up for baking school. Bike across the U.S.

Be specific. If your art is writing fiction, your current priority in that area may be to improve your craft, or to finish a draft, or to market your novel. Your current family priority may be to spend more quality time with your partner, or to take care of an ailing

parent. Another way to identify your biggest priorities would be to ask yourself this: If you could only do a single thing on your list right now, what would move you closest to that one goal?

I want to encourage you to dive deep, and try to get to the soul of what you want out of life. What we're trying to do here is not just implement a productivity system to help you do more busywork—we're trying to create a system for your life that cuts out the fluff and makes time for you to accomplish what really matters.

My fiction business relies on having books for my audience to read. It doesn't matter how well I network and market myself—without books there is no business. That means my most important thing every day is to work on the next book.

Of course, I can't completely ignore marketing and networking. Otherwise, how will I find readers to enjoy my books? As my friend, knitting designer Andrea Rangel put it when I tried to get her to identify one single Most Important Thing for her business, "All my work is so interdependent. It's vital that I create new work, but that's all pointless if I don't have excellent marketing."

And along those same lines, building up a great creative business doesn't mean much if it means sacrificing your health or your relationships. The week I was writing this section, I felt behind on my writing deadlines. But when my grandmother asked me to come spend a night with her on the Oregon Coast, I said yes without thinking.

Tool 2: Your “No” List

In his book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, Greg McKeown writes, “You cannot overestimate the unimportance of practically everything.” In other words, 90 percent of the stuff milling about your corrals is junk—you just haven’t realized it yet.

Knowing your goals will help you identify which tasks, ideas, and thoughts are the most important. But you need a filter to help you identify which bits of chaos shouldn’t even be getting into your corrals in the first place.

I’m a huge fan of having a No List. It keeps you from taking on the wrong opportunities, because those prevent you from saying yes to the *right* opportunities later.

It’s like a spam filter for your life.

Mine spans both my personal and professional lives. It contains types of projects I don’t do, types of clients I don’t work for, and the tasks I outsource. When I started my writing business, I used to say yes to almost anything. But these days I have a pretty specific set of projects I’ll take on, and fairly strict guidelines for the types of clients I’ll work for. It’s saved countless hours of considering projects that aren’t right for me, or getting into negotiations with clients who won’t pay my rates.

In my personal life, changing my own oil is on the No List. I can—my dad taught me one summer, and then made me change the oil in every single old car we owned, on three tractors, and then on the engine that runs the pivot sprinkler. It was a point of pride for

me that I knew how to change my own oil. But now I live in the city. I don't have a garage, I don't have a driveway, and it costs me \$60 and 15 minutes to have somebody else do it for me.

I also didn't transcribe any of the interviews I did for this book myself. I've done it in the past, and know that it takes me about 3x as long as the interview itself. My transcriptionist costs me cash, but she's so much faster than I am, which means I not only can do something better with those hours, I also get the transcription done sooner.

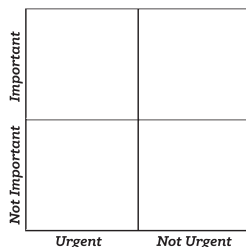
The reason that having a No List works is that it saves you time by reducing the amount of decisions you need to make. If a new client contacts me out of the blue and asks if I would be interested in a seven-month in-house contract opportunity, I don't even have to think about it. I just say no and move on.

Tool 3: The Eisenhower Grid

The Eisenhower Method of time management (championed by Stephen Covey in his book, *First Things First*) has you categorize tasks into a 2x2 matrix based on whether they are urgent/not urgent and important/unimportant.

Are they fires to be put out? (*Urgent! Important!*)

Or are they seeds to be sown so you can have something to eat over the winter? (*Important, but not so urgent. Yet.*)



Here's an example, based on my brain dump for today:

- Turning in a white paper to my client is both **urgent and important**—it's due today, and it's critical to our working relationship that I meet my deadlines.
- Watering the plants is **urgent, but not really that important** in the scheme of things—they're looking thirsty, but it's not the end of the world if I kill them.
- Working on my novel is **important, but not urgent**—no one's giving me a deadline, but if I don't write it, I'll never fulfill my dream of seeing it published.
- Hemming the curtains is **neither important nor urgent**—I am literally the only person in the universe who thinks they're too long.

You don't have to categorize every single thing on your list—I never do—but it does help to have that framework in mind as you work through your list.

I first heard of the Eisenhower Method for setting your priorities from fantasy writer Ken Scholes, when he invited me over for tasty breakfast burritos one summer morning. I'd taken several writing workshops with him over the years, and while his actual writing advice is fantastic, what always struck me about him was his deliberate approach to living a thoughtful, balanced life as a creative person.

As a teacher, his lessons are filled with idea-sparking creative exercises—along with reminders that our brains are organs,

our bodies are fragile, and our lives are meant to be lived, not overcome. Over coffee in his book-lined Den of Ken, he told me how prioritization helps him stay more-or-less on deadline while dealing with life's tragedies, uncertainties, and the joyful chaos of raising twin daughters. Starting with the super important and super urgent, like meeting the deadline for his next novel or finishing revisions, he pours his energy into his priorities.

"If we focus on the more important things we'll find we have plenty of time for the rest of it," he said. "Then we'll feel better because we're not sitting around feeling guilty over not having taken care of the more important things we need to do. And the other stuff, other people can take care of it—or maybe it's just not that important."

However, one area of his life has the ability to rearrange his priorities in a heartbeat. "People come first, regardless of where I am in a book or a deadline," he told me. "If my kids need me, if my friends need me, or my tribe needs me, people are always more important than work for me."

Take Action

EXERCISE 1: Write a Goals List

Take ten minutes and free write about your goals for the future. These can shift over time, so even if you're fairly certain of them, do this exercise anyway. Where do you see yourself in five years? At the end of this year? At the end of this month?

List them out and put that list somewhere you can see it.

If writing a goals list right now is hard, that's fine. This isn't meant to be your Definitive List for the Rest of Your Life. Just take a few minutes to free write about what you really want out of life.

EXERCISE 2: Start a "No List"

In your journal or in a separate computer file, start a list of things you don't do.

(Don't just assume you'll remember—I actually want you to start a physical list. And don't cheat by writing things that never come up, like "I don't accept offers to perform at the Super Bowl halftime show"). Choose things that actually come up in your life, and preemptively shut them down.)

Start by writing down ten things. That may seem like a lot, but I guarantee you'll be able to think of them if you put your mind to it.

Your No List will be a work in progress, so in this exercise, we're just laying the groundwork. Every time you revisit your Goals List, check in with your No List and see if you're staying true to it, and if there are any new things you want to add.

EXERCISE 3: Purge the Fluff From Your Inboxes

Armed with your Goals List, your No List, and the Eisenhower Grid, it's time to clear the fluff out of your inboxes.

Toss out the magazines you aren't actually going to read. Delete the emails advertising online courses you're not going to take,

and unsubscribe from newsletters you never open. Cross off tasks like “hemming the curtains” and “send thank you cards from Christmas four years ago” that you’re seriously never going to do.

Some items can just be scrapped, but some—like tell Client X you’re going to stop working for them—may require additional action steps. Add those steps to your Brain Dump list for now.

You’ll probably find some things that don’t belong on your plate at all. Are you managing someone else’s life? A spouse, a child, a parent, a business partner? It’s time to hand back what you can.

You’ll probably find some things that you can delegate. Is it worth paying your cousin to update your website? Is it time to hire a virtual assistant? Is it time to teach your kid to handle her own oil changes?

Repeat after me:

Just because it’s in your brain doesn’t mean it needs to get done.

Just because you’ve always done it doesn’t mean you need to continue doing it.

Just because you said yes before doesn’t mean you can’t say no now.

Throw your un-important, non-urgent tasks onto the scrap heap and enjoy the giddy freedom of having fewer things to do.

The only items remaining in your inboxes now should be things that truly require your attention.





Step #3

ORGANIZING PROJECTS AND TASKS

Now that you've gotten all the fluff out of your inboxes and know your priorities, the next thing we're going to do with all of that stuff in your inbox is to organize it into a manageable shape.

At this point you should have a nebulous list of things you need to do, ideas you've had, emails you need to respond to, articles you've been meaning to read, and research notes. You've already crossed out things that aren't important and thrown out what doesn't align with your priorities, so everything that remains should be stuff worth doing and keeping.

Every single item on that list will fall into one of four categories:

- stuff that needs to happen now
- stuff that needs to happen within a specific timeframe
- stuff that you should maybe do someday
- ideas to remember/come back to

Let's get it organized.

Defining Projects, Goals and Tasks

A lot of the things in your inbox will be tasks. “Call mom,” for example. But some will actually be *projects*, which we’re going to treat differently. Let’s talk for a minute about the difference between projects and tasks. I know you know all this, but it never hurts to do a quick refresher.

Basically, **a task** is something you can do without any other steps, whereas **a project** will take multiple steps to complete.

As an example, you’ve landed a show at a local coffee shop for next month’s art walk. But “Prepare for my art walk show” isn’t a task—it’s a full-blown project. You need to arrange things with the coffee shop owner. You need to paint a bunch of stuff. You need to hang your paintings. You need to write an artist’s statement. You need to plug the show on social media.

To accomplish the entire project, you need to break each section down further and further until you have a chain of discrete tasks—but don’t worry about that for now. Just keep an eye out for which are which.

Along with creative projects, you may have a number of life projects that are creating tasks in your inbox:

- An upcoming trip
- Household projects

- Your day job
- Your side hustle
- Your kids
- Random life tasks

And some of these *projects* will actually be *goals*.

Let's talk about the distinction between projects and goals for a second. All goals are projects, but not all projects are goals. To follow along with the above scenario, "Prepare for my art walk show" is a project. But "Show my work in a local gallery" is a goal.

Author and speaker Michael Hyatt defines it like this:⁴ "Projects are about maintenance, or at best incremental improvement," Hyatt writes. "By contrast, goals are about leapfrog innovation and dramatic improvements that require us to step outside our day-to-day tasks."

Put another way, projects are already within your grasp, while goals are what you're reaching for next. For the purposes of accomplishing goals, however, we're going to treat them the same as projects. You still need to take consistent, strategic steps if you want to get there.

⁴ michaelhyatt.com/goal-vs-project.html

Breakable—and Unbreakable— Projects

The thing most productivity systems will tell you to do is to start breaking a project into its parts, identify each next step, then tackle them in order. And *voilà!* You have accomplished creativity. The problem is that it's harder to break down certain projects—particularly creative ones. And most creative work won't get done simply by working your way down the checklist.

In my case, “write a novel” is a project—but it's also the central task to accomplish the project. If I do that task enough days in a row, eventually I will have have finished the project of writing a novel.

Sure, I could totally make myself a to-do list that says “write chapter 1, write chapter 2, write chapter 3,” and so on. If you like making the kinds of lists, knock yourself out. It's your creativity system. But that's also where a lot of creative types swear off systems entirely and go back to letting the chaos rule their lives. Just remember—the system is all about containing and reducing the chaos, to give you space for the vaguer needs of your creative work.

Instead of making myself a to-do list of chapter titles, I prefer to schedule in time to “make progress on the project.” Yeah, it's pretty nebulous, but for me giving myself a task of “write for an hour minutes” is more helpful than “write chapter 1.”

Of course, there are other tasks associated with the project of writing a novel: *Hire a cover designer. Reserve time with my editor. Bug beta readers for feedback.* But so much of the work of writing a novel is cyclical and thoughtful, rather than production-oriented. The project of creating a novel simply isn't easily broken down into linear steps—at least not for me.

Your art may be a little different. That's why I encourage you to get as granular as you like. As an example on the opposite end of the spectrum, let me point you to my friend Andrea Rangel, the knitting pattern designer. We both share a love of talking about productivity, and a penchant for obsessive organization when it comes to running our businesses. But whereas my projects are each their own brand of nebulosity, Andrea's tend to follow a set template of steps. She uses the app Nozbe to check off each step in the process for every design in her queue. The steps are so consistent that she's created a project template within the app that she can use each time she starts a new design.

The important thing is to recognize that your project organization system needs to be flexible enough for creativity.

Creating Places for Projects to Live

Which items in the current chaos cloud in your inboxes are actually projects? It's time to create project folders where everything related to each one can live. Remember, this can take

whatever form you like. It could be a digital folder on your hard drive, or it could be a network of Pinterest boards, playlists, and even physical cardboard boxes, like choreographer Twyla Tharp.

Whenever she starts a new dance piece, she takes a cardboard box and writes the project name on the side. As the piece progresses, she adds her research, her notes, her inspirations—all the items that helped it take shape: videotapes of her dancers, or her solo work in the studio, CDs, photographs, news clippings, whatever.

“The box makes me feel organized, that I have my act together even when I don’t know where I’m going yet,” Tharp writes in her book, *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*. “It also represents a commitment. The simple act of writing project name on the box means I’ve started work.”

For writing projects—both fiction and client work—I use a combination of Evernote and Scrivener. Every piece of research, every thought, every scrap of dialogue related to any writing project either lives in an Evernote folder, or in the Scrivener file for that project. Generally, my Evernote folders contain more logistical thoughts: project-specific to-do lists, thoughts on how to market a piece, research notes, etc. If I’m on the go and think of a good piece of dialogue or worldbuilding note, I’ll also toss it into the Evernote file on my phone. But when I’m next back at my laptop I’ll transfer any story-related Evernote notes into the project’s Scrivener file.

I also store project-related to-do lists in their respective folders. These are lists of what needs to be done, though not necessarily

at this moment. That allows me to capture the things that are outstanding on a project, and keep them out of the way until I'm ready to tackle them.

Some of these to-do lists may become templates, like Andrea Rangel's knitting pattern checklist, or my book launch checklist. You may also have multiple checklists for different categories, like a list of revisions to your novel, or design tweaks for a website.

The important part is to make sure each of the items in your inbox has a place to live by the end of this whole process—whether in a project folder so you can come back to it later or written into your schedule to accomplish soon.

When I say projects need a place to live, I don't mean that you have to print out all your emails and put them in the right folder, but it's important is to note where to find that information.

My friend Nalisha Rangel, an artist and dancer, wrangles high-maintenance consultants as part of her day job. Rather than having a separate file for the many projects she has going on, her system is to note three things about a project in her ongoing projects notes: the deliverable, when it's due, and where to get more information about it. For example, if information about an event is in her Gmail, she'll write "find info in Gmail" rather than re-recording the information with the note about the project.

I have an Evernote folder titled Fiction Marketing, where I've compiled notes, inspirations, and resources. In that folder, I have a list of marketing tasks for promoting my novels titled "Fiction Marketing To-Do." If I've scheduled myself an afternoon of

marketing, I can simply put “Fiction Marketing” on my schedule, then right-click on my “Fiction Marketing To-Do” note, click Copy Note Link, and past the link into my schedule.

Just be sure you’re consistent, or your system will create more chaos than it solves.

Take Action

Once you’ve decided what your project boxes will look like, sort through all the items in your inbox and toss them into that folder. Not everything will fit into a project—that’s fine, don’t force it. The goal here is to broadly categorize the things that are currently cluttering up your brain.

Start to-do lists for specific projects—both creative goals, and logistical projects. For example, I have a folder called “Life” where I keep a running grocery list and around-the-house project list, so that when I’m ready to tackle one of those things, I can just open up the file and see what needs done—and I’m not worrying about it when I’m working on something else.

Throughout this process, you’ll come across things that need to happen right away. Start a new *temporary* list for urgent things that need taken care of right away. Jot down any items with a next step you need to take now. For example, filing a business license may technically go into your business project box, but if you were supposed to do last month and it’s urgent, don’t sweep it away and forget about it again.

(Technophiles may like the app Nozbe for this, since you can tag tasks both for a specific project, and as “priority.” That way they’re front and center whether you’re sorting through your list by project or by what you need to do next.)

By the time you’re done with this section, all the bits of chaos should be organized into one of four categories:

- Unimportant, non-urgent things to be tossed in the dust bin.
- Research, notes, and other inspirations filed in with the correct project.
- Upcoming but not urgent tasks noted down on the correct project to-do list.
- Urgent and important tasks noted down in a *temporary* master to-do list.

Save time in the future by filing incoming items directly into your project folders, rather than letting them accumulate in your inboxes to be dealt with later. Interesting article related to your craft? Pop it in your professional development folder. Recommendation for a plumber? Jot it down in your household management folder. Great idea for your work-in-progress? Note it in your work-in-progress folder.

That way, you’ll get in the habit of capturing things where they need to be, and never lose track of a great idea.





INTERLUDE: CHECKING IN

How are you feeling?


At this point I hope you're feeling a bit more in control of the swirling to-do list you've been holding in your mind. Writing things down and taking ownership of them can be powerful.

On the other hand, you may also feel more stressed out now that you're standing at the foot of a ginormous mountain of better-defined aspirations and goals. I often get a combination of super excited and dizzily overwhelmed after a period of intense planning.

If that's you, it's OK to go chill out and come back to this when you're ready to tackle this again. In fact, if you're feeling stressed I'd encourage you to do so. Go for a bike ride, binge watch your favorite show, bake cookies, hit the climbing gym, call a friend—whatever it takes to unwind so you can come back to this project with clarity. You'll have way better results than if you try to push through your feelings of overwhelm.

If you're working through this book with an accountability partner, now's a good time to check in.

Ready to forge on? Time for Step Four.

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
WORK 	hike grocery shopping	WORK 2pm YOGA call Dad	WORK lunch with Alex WORK	Clean house + laundry Paint!	WORK * movies 7pm	RELAX!



Step #4

SCHEDULE YOUR TASKS

Next we're going to talk through how to get your next action steps off that temporary master to-do list and into your schedule. But first, three principles.

Principle 1: Why You Need a Calendar, Not a To-Do List

I used to have a running to-do list that I would work through over the course of a week. I would take stabs at it all day long, adding to the bottom while crossing things off the top. It was like one of those fundraising thermometers you see in elementary schools, only rather than distance left to goal it measured my current state of anxiety. The longer the list, the more overwhelmed I became.

Some productivity gurus will advise you to put your tasks on a calendar rather than a to-do list; others will tell you to keep your calendar for appointments only. I wholeheartedly recommend scheduling your weekly to-do list out on the days it needs done. You could use a digital calendar like Google's Task feature, a date-based to-do list app like TeuxDeux or Nozbe, a physical planner with room for daily tasks, or a series of files in Evernote. Basically, whatever allows you to easily batch similar tasks together on a

specific day, rather than picking your way through a never-ending to-do list.

Jen Mayer of Kitemath uses a scheduling app that syncs between her desktop and mobile device, where she schedules time-sensitive tasks. She's looked at a number of other applications, including Evernote, an assortment of list-making apps, and Google Calendar—but checking in on a calendar simply doesn't work for Jen.

“Maybe technically these tasks should be in my to-do list or calendar,” she told me. “But if it doesn't have a scheduling capability, I can't use it. It has to have that thing that pops up as a reminder.”

Principle 2: Don't Bite off More Than You Can Chew

I'm a member of an accountability group with two other freelance writers, and it seems like the most valuable thing we do for each other is to look at each others' goals lists and say, “Um, don't you think that's a bit much for this week?” All three of us are over-ambitious when it comes to our careers and our lives—and we're all learning not to bite off more than we can chew.

As you work on your creativity system, you'll develop a feel for how much you're biting off, and whether or not it's too much. That's another reason I recommend using a calendar to schedule your tasks, rather than working off a never-ending to-do list. It

gives you a visual way of seeing if you're trying to get way too much done on a certain day.

I recently started using a spreadsheet derived from freelance writing coach Ed Gandia's capacity planner⁵, which lets me estimate the amount of time a certain project will take, and automatically adds up the hours. I coded the cells of a certain day to turn red if I go over 10 hours (including personal appointments, fiction, and client work). Now when a client comes to me with a project, I can easily give them an estimated turnaround time and not swamp myself with work.

Find a visual way to keep your tasks in check. But if you keep having trouble, I highly recommend finding an accountability partner or two.

Principle 2: Don't Bite off More Than You Can Chew

Principle 3: Focus on Actions, Not Results

After five years of setting regular goals with accountability groups, I noticed a pattern. I would get some of them done, but continuously put others off—especially things like marketing, pitching guest posts, or updating my website. Things that are fairly central to running a freelance writing business, but don't necessarily bring in the cash. I would get all my client work done, but the big picture, long-term goals would never quite get met.

⁵ <http://b2blauncher.com/organizing-your-week/>

Until I started switching the way that I set my goals.

Instead of writing that I was going to pitch guest posts to 10 different blogs (which I knew wouldn't get done), I began writing that I would spend one hour a week pitching guest posts. Instead of saying that I would update my website, I started saying that I would spend half an hour over lunch working on the website. Previously I was setting myself a goal but not setting myself a schedule, and I just never found time for it. Once I scheduled that time into my calendar, suddenly I was getting results.

It works the same with deadlines. If I want to finish the draft of a novel by the end of the month, it does me no good to just write that on my calendar. It also doesn't work to say that I need to write 1500 words every weekday. What actually works is saying that I will write for an hour every morning before I check my email.

Not only does it get those tasks off your to-do list and onto your schedule—but it also decreases the amount of pressure you're putting on yourself, while normally achieving the same (or better) results. What do I mean? You know that panic feeling you get at an approaching deadline? Even if it's one you set yourself, you get in the cycle of set a deadline, miss the deadline, be disappointed in yourself, said another deadline—only this time with even less hope of achieving it, and even less faith in your ability to do your art. Setting a schedule takes away that pressure. There's no deadline *whooshing* by, there's only the regular practice of your schedule.

If you're serious about designing a system that works for you, focus on the actions you take, rather than the results you achieve.

Scheduling Your Weeks

OK—now we're ready to actually schedule out the tasks on the temporary master to-do list you made in the last section.

We'll do this in three steps:

1. Schedule in obligations
2. Block out creative time and deadlines
3. Write in remaining tasks

The following is my method. You're welcome to try it—or try some method that works best for you. If you like analog, grab a day planner, whiteboard, or desk calendar. If you prefer digital, try Google Calendar's Tasks function.

I use Google Calendar to manage my overall schedule, but keep track of my weekly priorities and to-dos in an Evernote file. The file has a space for every weekday, divided into three sections: Appointments, Deadlines, and To-Dos.

First, I look at my calendar and jot down my appointments for the week on my schedule. Next, I note where any deadlines are (when client work or other projects are due). After that, I work backwards from my deadlines to make sure I schedule in time to work on those projects and make sure any required tasks are written on the day they need done. (This includes blocking off time to work on longer-term creative projects that aren't due this week.)

Lastly, I schedule in all the random to-do list tasks around the important work. If I have a lot of household management-related tasks, I might group them on a Thursday when I know I'll have a light workload, for example. Over the years, I've developed a sense of how many things I can feasibly do in a day, and I can tell at a glance if I'm overbooking myself for a certain day.

Some people like to literally schedule the tasks, like from 2:30-3:00 next Thursday I'll answer emails. I just use my schedule to assign tasks to different days, and then tackle each day as it comes (more on that below).

Often, there are some tasks that don't really need done this week. I put those in an Evernote file titled "Next Weeks." That way I can keep them on my radar without them derailing my attention.

At this point I just have a list of tasks that need done on certain days this week. The next step is to schedule out tomorrow.

Scheduling Your Days

One of the best ways to make sure you always get your most important work done first is to the plan your tomorrow the night before.

I use one of those palm-sized spiral notebook—the same kind that servers use. They're the perfect size for sticking in your apron pocket, and also the perfect size to fit a day's worth of activity.

(I also have dozens left over from my years waiting tables.)

In his wonderful book, *Productivity for Creative People: How to Get Creative Work Done in an “Always on” World*, author and poet Mark McGuinness gives readers a tip I love: If it won't fit on a Post-It, it won't fit in your day. He prefers the 3” x 3” square Post-it. “Because my day is a limited size, I figure it makes sense to limit the size of my to-do list,” he writes. “If I can't fit the day's tasks on the Post-it, I'm not likely to fit them into the day.” He reserves the top left corner for the One Big Task he needs to accomplish that day, and starts the day by devoting his creative energy to that list.

At the end of every workday I take a look back through my day's goals, making sure everything is either checked off, or transferred to tomorrow's list if I haven't gotten to it yet. Then I take my little spiral bound notebook, write the name of the day for tomorrow, and block out my time.

I tend to schedule myself in five blocks:

- 8am-10am: Most Important Project (generally a deadline or fiction)
- 10am-12pm: 2nd Most Important Project (generally a deadline)
- 12pm-1pm: Lunch
- 1pm-3pm: Drafting something for next day
- 3pm-5pm: Drafting another thing for next day

Sometimes these blocks get combined if I have a lot of work to be done in one area. Sometimes I go for a walk in the afternoons, and schedule that as draft dictation time. Sometimes I schedule one of those blocks as a visit to the climbing gym. Sometimes I have interviews or lunch dates, and I block off preparation and travel time.

Scheduling everything ahead of time helps for two reasons. First, it makes sure that I have enough time to accomplish everything during the day, without being rushed or forgetting to build in things like preparation time. Second, and most importantly, it gives me the peace of mind I need during the times that I've scheduled for creative work. If I know that the time from 8am to 10am is set aside to work on my novel, I don't stress about answering client emails or working ahead on client projects. That's scheduled for later today.

Of course, sometimes the night before I see that I won't have enough time to work on everything on my to-do list, so I rethink my priorities. Scheduling keeps me from forcing myself to do more than is possible in one day.

The more you try this, the better you'll get at scheduling yourself. At first, you may not allocate enough time to accomplish various tasks. But you'll get the hang of it as you understand how long it takes you to do things, and what chunks of time you like to work in.

One last tip: although you don't want to cram too many things into your schedule, beware of giving yourself too much time. Parkinson's Law states that work will increase to fill the amount of time available for it. If you give yourself three hours to do a project that will only take one, I guarantee it's going to take three hours. That's why I recommend blocking yourself in two-hour chunks. It's enough to keep you moving at a reasonable pace, while still allowing enough stretches of time to work creatively.

Of course, you'll find the optimal amount of time that works for you. That's the point of this whole book—to help you find and tweak your own creative system.

We'll talk more about designing your work week in the section on Working.

Take Action

Grab your scheduling system and get started figuring out next week:

- Go through your calendar and write down your appointments.
- Note down your deadlines for this week and write them on your schedule.
- Work backwards from those deadlines to schedule in the work you'll need to do to meet them.
- Consider far-out deadlines and ongoing creative projects that aren't due this week, and schedule in time to do that work.
- Sort through the rest of the items on your temporary to-do list and schedule them on the right days.
- Write an hourly schedule for tomorrow.

Remember to group like tasks together, whether that's by *theme* (household, launching your business) or by *type* (phone calls, errands, emails). If things don't need to be done this week, add them to a reminder file to come back to later, or jot a note on your calendar to review the item on a certain date.

Congratulations, you've just performed the first round of your creative productivity system!





RINSE, REPEAT

“**W**hen the work takes over, then the artist is enabled to get out of the way, not to interfere. When the work takes over, then the artist listens.”

— Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*

If you've been following along, you should have the bones of your creativity system in place:

- A calendar system with next week's tasks assigned to specific days
- A navigable system of project-specific folders
- Reference files:
- A list of all your corrals
- A list of your goals
- A “no list” of things you don't do
- A reminder file to track actions that need to be taken at a later date

I know building your creativity system took a while, but if you keep on top of your corrals by doing this every week, it should only take you about 15 minutes to get yourself set up for the next week. Don't worry if it feels a bit clunky. We're going to talk about how to refine it and make it perfect for you later on in the book.

You can save more time by funneling chaos into the correct place throughout the week. Every time you have a thought you need to capture, whether it's an obligation like "pay rent" or an epiphany like "the murderer in this story is actually a were-lion," jot it down in one of four places:

- The proper project-related folder
- On the day it needs done
- In your reminder file to be done at a later date
- In a corral for processing during your weekly session

The point is to get in the habit of filing away the chaos as you go, shooing it into your schedule, a to-do list, a project folder, or a corral for further processing. That way you're never wondering what you're missing, and you can relax because you always know what your biggest priority is while you're working.

Of course, having a well-oiled machine isn't the end. You still have to do the work.

Time to talk about that.





WORKING

“Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.”

— Theodore Roosevelt

There’s a certain fetishization around artist rituals. Wordsworth’s long walks, for example, or checking into a hotel with a legal pad, thesaurus, and a bottle of sherry as Maya Angelou was said to do. Maybe you dream of retreating to a cabin in the woods or taking a six-month sabbatical to live in a French farmhouse in order to finally finish your magnum opus. I certainly do!

I’m a huge proponent of creatives retreating from real life to recharge and immerse themselves in their work. The problem is that too many of us wait for that perfect moment when the idealized life we dream of comes close to our own, when we can quit our day jobs to write full time, rather than building our days around a creative system that lets us do good work no matter our situation.

It’s easy to believe that you must find exactly the right ritual, exactly the right environment, exactly the right life before you can get down to work. But it’s also dangerous. That’s why I say don’t wait for the right circumstances—make them yourself.

Making the time requires time management tricks, careful habits, and a lot of dedication to actually get the work done. One of the great myths of creativity is that if you could only have more hours in the day you get so much more accomplished. You'd write more books, paint more pictures, finish writing your business plan. But having finite amounts of time to pursue our art can actually make us incredibly efficient.

If you only have the time during your kid's nap every day to write your book, like YA fantasy author Katie Cross, you're going to guard that time preciously. In an interview with the folks at the Sci-Fi and Fantasy Marketing Podcast⁶, she spoke about the length she goes to plan around that time. She makes sure all her phone calls are made, emails answered, and chores are done by the time she puts her toddler down for a nap. She makes sure she's had lunch so her energy levels are good. She makes sure the dogs have been walked, so they won't come bugging her during the middle of her writing time.

And then she sits herself down in her chair and doesn't get out of it until naptime is over.

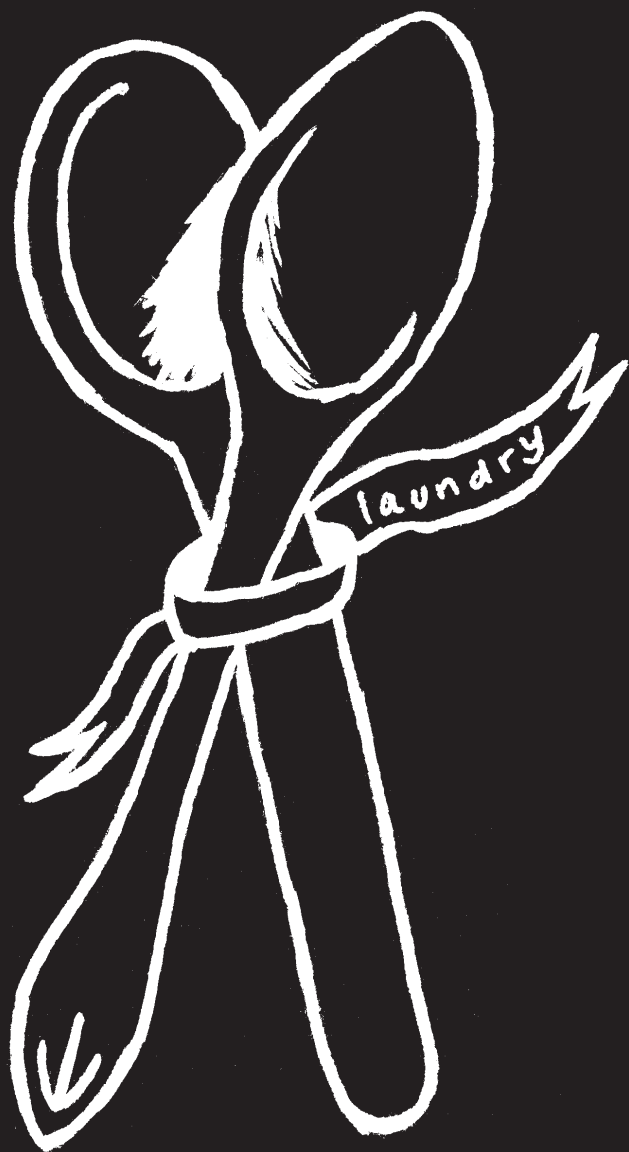
Whether you have the luxury of being able to set your own schedule or are at the mercy of your job or family obligations, we all have the same problem: There are only so many hours in the day, and there are an infinite number of obligations.

Doing hard work requires willpower. But as we've already discussed, I'm not a big believer in willpower. Instead, in this section we are going to build a system to help you bypass your

limited willpower reserves and get the work done. We're going to talk about discovering your creative rhythms and working with your energy levels—regardless of where the Muse happens to be. We'll track your time to figure out where it's going, and where it could be put to better use. We'll design a weekly and daily schedule around the optimal times for you to work on different types of work. And we'll get into strategies for finding the time to accomplish your art and building a creative habit—whether you're working a day job for someone else or setting your own schedule.

Again, I encourage you to go through the exercises one at a time, rather than just reading through to the end. Check in with your accountability partner if you have one.

Now let's get to work.





UNDERSTANDING YOUR TIME & ENERGY

The first step to designing a schedule that supports your creativity is to know yourself. When are you most distractible? When are you most energetic? When does your brain melt? You probably have a vague idea, but have you ever really tracked it?

Here's what my daily creative energy looks like:

I tend to putter a bit first thing in the morning, taking some time to get up to speed before I'm really immersed in a project. By about 8 or 8:30 am, I'm normally going full steam with deep focus. That focus peters out around 11:30, when my stomach starts growling and my brain is getting tired. That's a good time to switch to more shallow-focus tasks like answering emails.

I normally either power through lunch at my computer doing "busy work" tasks, or take that time for learning, working through one of the many online courses I always have on my plate. I can do light proofreading during that time, but trying to do good writing work is pretty much a lost cause.

By about 2 PM I can feel the gears in my brain grinding to a halt. I start to feel what I call "screen sickness," that queasy, headachy feeling you get from staring at the computer screen for far too long. If I nip it in the bud, I know I can come back strong for

a solid writing streak from about 3:00 to 5:30. If I try to power through without resetting myself, I know I'll be a complete wreck during that afternoon session. So at about 2pm, I normally try to get away from my computer for a bit. I'll go for walk, do a project around the house, or even take a nap. With my brain fully reset, I can come back and do another 90 minutes or so of deep work.

That's my creative work rhythm, whether I'm working in an office with inflexible napping rules or at home. When I worked full time as an in-house copywriter, the afternoon walk was a critical part of clearing my head for the rest of the day's work. Skip it, and I might as well be trying to write about sparkly tutus and light-up dinosaur shoes in Quechua.

I arrived at this understanding in part through trial and error, and in part through actively tracking my time and productivity. I first heard about time tracking from Laura Vanderkam in her book *168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think*. The idea is similar to tracking your spending if you want to get your finances in check. Once you see where all that time is going, you can make smarter decisions about how to spend it. Plus, the very act of recording what you're doing makes you more aware in the moment.

(Do you really want to record that you spent 30 minutes arguing with your cousin on Facebook?)

It can also help you see where your inefficiencies are, and help you come up with strategies to work around them. As I edit this section, I'm in the middle of one of Vanderkam's time tracking challenges. (More on how to actually track your time below.) I can see my creative rhythms represented visually in my log from

yesterday. A trip to the climbing gym cut into my morning work session, but it didn't do much to disrupt my afternoon slump. There are two large swaths of good work lasting for over an hour each, then at 1:30 the list starts getting chopped into 15-minute segments: Social media, Work on Chaos to Creativity, Reading, Nap, Emails, Social media. If I'd wanted to skip that Twitter time and actually be productive, I would have been better off going for a walk.

Laura Vanderkam was kind enough to let me pick her brain about her own time management habits. She's a full-time author juggling fiction, freelance work, and a popular blog and podcast—along with raising four children.

"I encourage people to think of their days as times for the core production aspects of their jobs, whatever it is they do," she told me. "If it's writing, then you have a couple of hours that you're cranking out the stuff that you've got to crank out. Then you have a couple of hours devoted to other things as well, like networking and building your own platform, learning, and skill building."

Laura tends to do her writing work in the morning when she's fresh, and save the afternoons for tasks that require less mental energy, like lighter editing, phone calls, or research. But she also knows she just needs to get the work done. "I've had days when for instance I don't have childcare during the day, but I can get a sitter to come in the afternoon," she said. "If I have a story to write, I'll totally write it between 4 and 5:30 and it doesn't matter that that's not the best time. That's just part of being a professional writer."

When you track your time, you'll quickly see how many spare minutes you have throughout your day. Back before I had a smartphone, I always carried a book and a notebook with me to fill those moments. I was nearly always reading more than one book at once—I had my bedtime book, and my “carry around” book. (It was smaller.) Any time I had a couple of minutes waiting for a friend, at the doctor's office, on a bus, I would bust out my book or notebook and spend time learning or creating.

Once I got a smartphone, I was excited. Now I had thousands of books and a digital notebook at my fingertips, wherever I was. I would be so much more productive!

You can guess where this is going.

I also discovered Facebook, Twitter, and Plants vs. Zombies.

I'm notorious for wanting to wait until I have a huge blocks of time to start working on a project. Those scraps of 10, 15, and 20 minutes never seems like long enough to start anything — so why bother? The problem is, big blocks of time are rare, while these tiny scraps of downtime proliferate throughout our day. Waiting at the doctors office. Killing time before a conference call. Taking a coffee break. While dinner's in the oven.

If you're like most people I know, you probably grab your phone and zone out — you know, just killing time while you wait.

Killing time.

If you have enough time in your day to kill, you have enough time to work on your art.

It's time to stop giving yourself an out by saying you don't have time in your schedule to write your novel, paint your masterpiece, start your business. Sure, you may not have a leisurely afternoon, but you surely have fifteen minutes.

Artist and dancer Nalisha Rangel keeps a journal where she collects inspiring images and partial drafts of sketches. She carries it with her so that when she has a spare few moments, she can pull it out and page through the images, getting her creative juices flowing. She told me this is one of her favorite ways to pass the time waiting at the doctor's office, because then when she gets called back to her appointment, her mind is busy musing on her next piece of art and she's not stressing about the exam.

I do something similar with the dentist. Whenever I have an appointment, I always arm myself with an intriguing plot point from my work in progress that needs some work. That way I can spend my time in the chair mulling over fiction rather than thinking about whatever they're doing with those torture tools.

How are you spending your spare moments?

Take Action

Exercise 1: Track Your Time

Starting today, keep a time log for at least two weeks.

How you do it is up to you. Laura Vanderkam has a downloadable guide and spreadsheet available on her website (lauravanderkam.com); I use a Google Sheet that I've coded to change the cells

different colors based on the activity I'm doing. You could also use a time-tracking app like Toggl or HoursTracker.

After you've collected a week or two of data, analyze what you see.

- When do you tend to have good swaths of productivity?
- When does your focus tend to drift?
- Are there certain triggers that get you off track?
- Are certain days better than others?
- Could you batch different tasks together to make better use of your time?
- Are there activities you could hand off to other people, or let go of?
- Where can you combine activities? (Like combining exercise with friend dates, or dictating first drafts of a story with your commute time.)

It's an eye-opening exercise to see just where all your time goes. You may be pleasantly surprised that you accomplish so much in a day. Or frustrated that so much time gets frittered away on things you'd rather not be doing.

I recommend tracking your time for at least two weeks, or longer if you want to. If I'm in a slump that lasts for more than a few days, I'll often go back to tracking my time in order to provide myself some accountability.

Exercise 2: Find Your Creative Rhythm

Look through your time logs (or think through your work days) and write down when you're most creative and productive. When are you generally most in the groove? When are you most distractible? Once you have a clear idea of your creativity hotspots—both daily and weekly, it's time to figure out how to work with them instead of against them.

(If you're not sure, Charlie Gilkey at Productive Flourishing has a great tool on his website⁷ for finding out, called the Daily Productivity Heat Map.)

Your creative hot spots might not come at convenient times—especially if you're working a day job, raising a family, or, you know, living life. Say you have a great burst of energy during 8 and 11 AM, but you're at work. Or you get a nice long lunch break, but (if you're like me), that's when your brain completely melts down. Or maybe you keep trying to get up at 5am before the kids and work then, but every word you write before 10am is complete gibberish.

If that's the case, you could take the drastic plunge and find a more flexible job that allows you to do your best work during your most creative hours. Or you could find a more productive way to spend the days of the work week—doing logistic work, learning, outlining your project, practicing your craft, and then guard your weekends as your best creative time.

Whatever you choose to do, the goal is to work with your rhythms, not against them. And knowing what your rhythms are is half the battle.

⁷ productiveflourishing.com/how-heat-mapping-your-productivity-can-make-you-more-productive





MANAGING A SUSTAINABLE WORKLOAD

“You can do anything, but not everything.”

— David Allen

Let’s have some real talk about projects for a minute. If you are like literally every artist I’ve ever met, you have approximately 175,000 super-exciting ideas vying for your attention at any given moment. (Weirdly, the only ideas you’re not excited about right now are probably the ones due tomorrow.)

I’m here to tell you you have to narrow your focus. (I’m talking to myself here, too.)

While trying to figure out how to create a sustainable workload for myself, I came across the Personal Kanban productivity system. It emerged from the lean manufacturing model, and has two simple rules: visualize the work that needs done, and limit how much work you’re doing at any given time. It’s a helpful way of thinking about sustainable workload.

We’ve talked a lot about why you need to visualize what work needs done—you need to corral the chaos in your brain, and stick it into a system that lets you deal with it. But, if you’ll permit me a brief memory trip back to the farm, once you have the cows in a corral, you shouldn’t try to deal with them all at once.

One of my favorite play toys as a child was something my sister and I called the “cow catcher.” More properly called a cattle squeeze

chute, it's a contraption used to immobilize a cow (or sheep, we had lots of sheep) in order to give it shots, or for branding. (I also liked to lure unsuspecting city-folk friends into the “cow catcher” and trap them.)

Basically, the squeeze chute consists of a pair of adjustable barred walls with a gate at either end. The way it works is this: After you herd the cattle into the corral, you then encourage them into a series of chutes, where they follow each other along until they get to the squeeze chute. You open the rear gate of the squeeze chute, lead a cow in, close the gate, yank down the lever to squeeze the walls in and immobilize the cow, then give them their shot. Once you're done, you release the cow and open the front gate. Then you close the front gate and open the rear gate so the next cow in the chute can come in.

Just like with a herd of chaotic projects, you can only realistically deal with one cow at a time. On a farm, the chutes are a system to help you limit your work in progress. For your creative work, you need something similar, but presumably less space-intensive. (Though if you have a spare few thousand dollars and a large home office, the Q-Catch 86-Series from Arrowquip is apparently a very nice model.)

The creator of Personal Kanban, Jim Benson, apparently didn't grow up on a farm, because he uses the metaphor of a freeway to describe our capacity to take on work. “A freeway can operate from 0 to 100 percent capacity,” he writes. “But when a freeway's capacity gets over about 65%, it starts to slow down. When it reaches 100% capacity—it stops.”⁸ Our brains are like that

⁸ personalkanban.com/pk/primers/why-limit-work-in-progress/

freeway—we can operate from 0 to 100 percent capacity, but above a certain point we don't do it very well.

Bringing a project to completion is a lot like trying to herd cattle from one end of the field to the other. You can maybe feasibly manage to herd two or three at once, but you won't make any progress at all if your efforts are split between a couple dozen without any help.

Mark McGuinness, poet and coach for creatives, blew my multi-tasking mind in his book *Productivity for Creative People*. His rule of thumb for creating a sustainable creative workload is your normal amount of ongoing work plus *one* single other project. He defines a project as planning for an event, clearing out a backlog (catching up), or creating an asset (a work of art or product for your business). “So if you have a big event coming up, forget about clearing a backlog or creating a new asset,” he writes. “Until you meet the deadline, just focus on the event, plus doing your minimum ongoing tasks.”

How focused I need to be depends on the state my project is in. For me, I can break down the stages of my projects into:

1. Brainstorming (outlining a novel, doing research for an article, interviewing, other prep)
2. Drafting (generating first draft words, or deep revisions)
3. Editing (polishing up the text, lighter revisions)
4. Publishing (all logistics of designing a book, marketing and advertising)

I can dip in and out of Stages 1, 3, and 4—but Stage 2, Drafting, requires my full attention. It's much harder for me to get back into the Drafting flow when I've gotten out of it than it is for the other stages. And although I can juggle multiple edits or brainstorm multiple projects (albeit inefficiently), I can't juggle more than one draft.

Switching between tasks constantly slows your progress in part because you're not spending as much time on each piece—but also because it forces you to switch between types of energy. Creative flow doesn't just come in one flavor. For example, I can spend hours completely in the groove of tweaking my WordPress website, or I can spend hours completely in the groove of a first draft of a novel. They're both states of creative flow, but they're not the same. And my brain will have trouble switching from one to the other.

As I'm writing this, my generative project (currently drafting) is this book. I also am launching a novella, which takes up a lot of logistical time, and works a very different portion of my brain. I'm itching to start writing the next book in the series, but I've learned better than to try to write it and this book at the same time. So I'm nudging it along by daydreaming about it and noodling with the outline, so that once I'm ready to dive in I'll have a solid outline to work from.

But let's get real. I pretend that I can have two or three projects on the front burners at any given time if they're at different stages, but because my clients keep me busy full time (yay!), only one project is realistically getting my attention. That's because

creative work—whether that’s drafting a novel or expanding your business—requires access to those margins of time around the rest of your day. All those shower epiphanies, brainstorming sessions at the doctor’s office, and flashes of brilliance when you’re trying to fall asleep can’t happen if your attentions are divided between multiple projects.

Not that it stops me from trying.

As I write this, I’m looking at yesterday’s Brain Dump list of projects in progress, which includes eight major personal projects between my freelance and fiction businesses—and I didn’t even bother to add in client projects. My attempt to prioritize them, on the next page of my notebook, just led to me writing the same projects in a slightly different order. But clearly one cannot prioritize eight projects at once.

Sean Platt, author and founder of storytelling studio Sterling and Stone hopped on the phone to let me ask how he stays organized and productive with so many projects going on, between organizing conferences, writing books, designing software, and podcasting. It gave me hope to hear that he also struggles with working on one project at a time.

“Let’s say there’s three stories I’m working on in tandem while also trying to build a landing page for something,” he told me. “I can lie to myself and say, ‘Well, when I’m working on this, it’s getting 100% of my attention.’ But the truth is, your attention is finite. I may be giving 100% of it to whatever project is in front of me, but there’s still part of my mental real estate is over somewhere else.”

Part of the reason creatives juggle so many projects is because it's mentally tough to focus on something so big for so long. When you're editing a lengthy novel, as Sean had just finished when we talked, it's natural to want to take a break and work on another project for a bit. It's more fun to bounce to something else for I bit—but it's not nearly as efficient.

Rather than give into those urges, Sean tries to reframe his mindset around work. "Instead of thinking, 'Well, it's not much fun to stick with this one project all the way through, I think, 'It's way more fun to be efficient with my work so I can have more fun with more projects over time.'"

Setting Quotas

There's a fine line between keeping yourself accountable and legislating the life out of your creative work. But if you want to make progress you need to have goals. Many people choose a quota, but let's talk for a minute about how quotas can actually be a downer. Sometimes, putting that amount of pressure on your personal creativity can actually be a turnoff—particularly if you feel like you're in a delicate place, creatively.

I'm most successful when I focus on time spent working on fiction, rather than on an output goal. It started because I would inevitably get thrown out of whack when I was between novels, or wasn't feeling the excitement on a current work in progress. How could I meet my goal of writing 1,000 words every day if I

wasn't feeling it, or if I was in editing mode, or.... Let the parade of excuses begin.

But finally I decided to work on fiction for 30 minutes every day. It didn't matter what project, it didn't matter how many words I got written, it didn't matter if those words were just me playing around with a character, or if they were beautifully polished prose.

All I had to do was sit down for 30 minutes, and play with fiction. Play.

That's it.

For some reason, this habit took off unlike anything I've tried before it. Along with renewing my motivation, the other upshot of that strategy is that it helps build momentum. The first few days were all around 250-300 words as I noodled around with a setting and characters, trying to figure out what project I was working on. The numbers have steadily increased as I've gotten more into the project, and for the past few days I've found myself going back for another 30-minute session later in the day, or jotting a few character notes before bed, or daydreaming snippets of dialogue in the shower.

In two weeks I went from being completely uninspired about writing fiction to being 6,000 words into a new novel. All because I gave myself permission to simply play.

Like anything, little steps every day may not feel like much, but they add up to something in the long run, and build up momentum over time. The trick is that there is no trick that will work for everybody. When I learn that my favorite authors write

3,000 to 5,000 words a day, it's discouraging. Comparing your output to what others are doing isn't helpful. There is no standard word count or productivity measure that you should absolutely be hitting.

In fact, I'd recommend setting a small daily quota of either word count or time—with the operative word here being “small.” Set yourself a goal that you know is achievable every day, and you'll be much more likely to actually achieve it. You certainly don't have to stop at 300 words or 15 minutes or whatever goal you set—but so long as you hit the goal, you'll know you're making progress.

Choose a number you know you can hit every single day, whether that's a time limit, a number of sketches produced, or as one of my friends does, a “decision quota.” Rather than setting a word count or time goal, he makes sure that he makes one important decision about his project every day—about the purpose of the scene, a character's background, or anything else.

The reason I personally do better with a time quota is because I like when things are scheduled into my day. Setting aside a concrete amount of time—30 minutes—before my workday seems easy. Especially when compared to setting aside an unspecified amount of time in order to hit a certain word count. And when it's only 30 minutes, sure, I can spare that. No problem.

Take Action

When I have too many projects on my plate (and I always have too many projects on my plate), I use the “Avalanche versus Snowball” method to help me prioritize them.

Surely it's not an original idea, but I took my inspiration from the two popular debt-reduction theories. Both methods assume that along with paying your minimum payment, you have an extra few dollars (say, \$50) per month to pay down a debt.

The Debt Snowball method involves using that \$50 to pay off your smallest balance first, after which you take that \$50 (and the amount you were paying on the now-extinct debt) and add it to your next smallest balance. The Debt Avalanche method is the same, with the focus on paying off your balance with the highest interest rates first.

When translated to productivity-speak, the Snowball helps you build momentum by knocking smaller projects off your list first. The Avalanche prioritizes the most urgent and important projects. The idea is that even though you probably have to make “minimum payments” on most of the projects on your plate, use your extra energy to focus on one single project until it's completed.

To use this method, list out all the creative projects vying for your attention. Now, prioritize them using the Snowball method (fastest to completion) vs the Avalanche method (most critical to complete).

Compare the lists side by side, then go with your gut and choose **ONE SINGLE PROJECT** to be your focus until it's done. Write it down on a Post-It and keep it front and center as you're working. Once that project is done, you can take the energy you are spending on it and knock out the next project on your list.





DESIGNING YOUR WORK DAY

Trying to work against your creative rhythms is a recipe for frustration: you spend your best hours processing email or mucking about on social media, then spend your energy slumps trying to accomplish real work and wondering why it's so hard. I learned my own daily creative rhythm through trial and error, but now that I know it, I understand that if I get distracted into busywork during those morning hours when my brain is performing at peak creative writing ability, I've wasted the best part of my day. That's why I'm a big proponent of designing your ideal work day to help you manage both your everyday work and your creative work.

I do everything I can to protect my two best daily creative streaks. If I have to schedule a phone call, I'll do it between 11:30 and 1:30, or after 5:30. I schedule coffee dates and in-person meetings at 1:30, because I know by then I'll need to get out of the house, and I'll have time to get back and get some more work done. I try not to commit to evening plans that start before 6pm, because I know I'll just be hitting my stride in the afternoon session, and I'll have to cut it short.

When fitting your priorities into your daily schedule, it may work best for you to start with your smallest tasks and clear them out of the way first. Or, you may prefer to dive right in to the meatiest, highest-priority task (like creating art, or dealing with a tough

situation). I like to dive into the biggest project first, but when I asked my freelance writer accountability group how they work, I got two very different answers.

It takes freelance writer Ayelet Weisz some time to get rolling in the morning, but instead of letting herself putter around on social media until she's ready, she warms herself up with less mentally taxing tasks, like reaching out to prospects on LinkedIn.

"That means I made the most of my time early in the morning, when I'm still in the waking up process and not as productive as later," she wrote in our Google group. "The added bonus is that being proactive in the morning makes me more productive later in the day." That's because instead of using her best hours on busywork tasks, she's already gotten those out of the way early. By the time she's ready to do her best work, her plate is clear of those smaller distractions.

Freelance writer and business coach Stephanie Morrison, on the other hand, feels creatively stifled when she gets locked into a set schedule. The need to get her work done while raising a family has required her to embrace more routine than she'd like, but she still tries to keep her schedule flexible.

"In my experience, being productive is an evolving process," she wrote. "While I'd describe myself as very organized and detail-oriented, that 'creative' side just wants to be successful without being hampered down by routine and self-imposed rules." Instead of adhering to a set schedule like Ayelet and I, she prefers to keep

herself on track by setting goals in our group and using them to guide her choice of task when she's ready to work.

No matter your work style, I recommend setting your day's priorities the night before. You could actually schedule them into your calendar, like I do (I talk this in the section on planning, Step Four: Schedule Your Tasks). Or you could simply list out your priorities in the order you'd like to tackle them and let your energy levels guide you, like Stephanie does. Whichever way makes the most sense to you, planning your day's work out the night before helps keep you from wasting time trying to remember your priorities the next morning—or being derailed by more urgent but less important work.

Designing Your Work Week

You may understand your creative peaks and valleys throughout the day. But every day is not the same. You also need to take a look at your work week and analyze your energies there.

Mondays always tend to be busiest for me. It's the day when I'm fielding client inquiries, following up on loose ends from last week, and putting out all the fires of people who are getting back to me from things I submitted the week before. I've learned not to schedule meetings or deadlines on Mondays, since I'm normally running around quite a bit.

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday tend to be pretty deadline heavy, as that's normally when I've told people from the week

before I will get them things. I'll schedule meetings in the afternoons if I need to, and I tend to be very good about staying to task.

Fridays are generally reserved as a catch-up day. I rarely set myself deadlines on Fridays, so that I can use it to soak up any work that spills over from the rest of the week. I also try not to schedule meetings or phone calls on Friday, since I let my schedule get more free-form and I'll sometimes space them. Because my clients tend not to check in much on Fridays, it often becomes a bonus day for me to work on my own business-building or creative projects. Plus, pretty much anything that comes in on a Friday can wait until the next Monday.

Now that my freelancing business is established and I don't have to work on weekends anymore, weekends are reserved for fiction writing and spending time with my husband (or, rather, spending time chasing after him on a mountain bike). I have a harder time writing fiction during the weekdays because I always have deadlines looming in the back of my mind, but on the weekends I can spend long hours noodling over plot points without worrying about staying on a tight schedule.

Ayelet also schedules in catch-up days as a way to combat her tendency to overschedule herself. "Sometimes they fill up because I schedule very ambitiously," she admits. "But this way, I still got the most important stuff done."

Dave Lee, founder of GP Apps, is more deliberate about his work. He uses a "week chart" to break down his week into daily focuses:

one of each of the five most important areas of his business per day (like creating, marketing, or planning). At the end of the day, he works on less crucial areas like email. He also sets three desired outcomes for each week to help keep him on track. “In this case,” he wrote on his blog, “often your tasks are not necessarily well-defined, but you know intuitively where you need to head. You need a way to keep your ship steered in the right direction. You need structure but not rigidity.”⁹

Jill Pickering and Kate Rapier from the country music duo Jill and Kate also try to schedule different aspects of their creativity on different days. A full-time music career comes with a number of different facets. They write songs together and practice their craft, they schedule regular co-writing dates with other musicians in Nashville, they connect with their fans through social media, and have even branched out into clothing lines and jewelry. There are also emails to answer, schedules to manage, tours to book, and—of course—albums to produce.

Like all art, the act of songwriting itself is hard to systematize. “On the musical side of things, there is no formula,” Kate told me. “I wish there was, but the only formula is you have to sit down and write a song.” The business side of things is different, requiring way more intentionality about accomplishing tasks. Because of the difference, Jill and Kate try not to do creative and business things back to back, or even on the same day.

Instead of hopping back and forth between emails and writing, Jill and Kate schedule a block of time at the beginning or the end of

⁹ heydave.org/post/24857123736/introducing-the-week-chart

the day to deal with them all at once. To accomplish the logistical work of the business, they prefer to schedule a day and spend the whole day working on it.

They're also very aware of their most creative times of the day. Jill tries not to look at emails at all before diving into creative work in case her attention gets hijacked dealing with whatever she finds there. "When you get into emailing, all of a sudden what you thought was going to take you 12 minutes takes you two hours. And that's your brightest brain part of the day."

Working in Blocks of Time

How you design your days and weeks will depend in part on how you prefer to work. Maybe you like every minute to be fully scheduled; maybe you prefer to have longer chunks of more free-form time.

I find I can only focus for about 90-ish minutes at a time, so I tend to block my day into two-hour slots to add in some slack on either side of this time. Your energy may be different.

For example, Jen Mayer of Kitemath tends to work in 25-minute blocks inspired by the Pomodoro technique. Because she has so many internal projects and client-related projects going on at once, she needs a way to keep herself from getting distracted by competing priorities. She chooses a focus item, then sets a timer for 25 minutes in order to make progress. Her husband and co-founder, Chris Jennings, prefers to work in four-hour sessions.

“No phone, no texts, no email—unless one of the cats is on fire, don’t bother him,” Jen said. “That doesn’t work for me. I can’t sit there for four hours, so I like the chunkier 25-minute blocks of time.”

Take Action

Exercise 1: Plan Your Ideal Work Life

Look back at your time log and creativity heat map, and think about how your creative rhythms work. What types of work do you do best in the mornings? In the afternoons? After dinner? On Mondays? Saturdays? Spend some time brainstorming what your ideal work day and week looks like.

What obstacles are in your way, and how can you remove them? I had one client who insisted on 9am check-in phone calls multiple times a week, which landed squarely in my premium morning work session. They paid well, but we don’t work together any more.

Of course, life isn’t always ideal. You may need to work around family obligations or an inflexible work schedule. Talk to your boss, your spouse, your kids and try to come up with solutions that align your life schedule as much as you can to your creative rhythms. (More on this in the next chapter.)

Exercise 2: Extend Your Focus

How long is your natural ability to focus on a project?

If it's not very long at the moment, you're not alone. Most of us are so used to task-switching, multitasking, and interruptions that even when we have solid chunks of time we self-interrupt naturally. If you want to be able to work for longer time periods, it's possible to build your focus.

This week, practice focusing by playing around with what works for you. Try implementing strict rules, like Cal Newport, author of *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, who experimented with forcing himself to stay with each new task for at least 30 minutes at a time.¹⁰ Or, set a timer like Jen Mayer. If even 25 minutes is tough at first, start with 10 and keep increasing slowly from there.

¹⁰ www.ggu.com/articles/7032/a-day-without-distraction-lessons-learned-from-12-hrs-of-forced-focus





WORKING AROUND LIFE

“I don’t wait for moods. You accomplish nothing if you do that. Your mind must know it has got to get down to work.”

— Pearl S. Buck

Now that I’ve painted a glowing picture of designing your ideal schedule, let’s have some real talk about how life happens. Whether you work a day job for someone else, own your own business, are going to school, or are a full-time caregiver it’s unlikely you’ll have complete control over your schedule. Health can get in the way, or you can find your productivity derailed by seasonal changes or hormonal cycles or the news. Maybe your schedule changes week by week because you work in retail or healthcare. Maybe you’re working a handful of jobs to make ends meet. Or maybe your routine is constantly disrupted by travel.

It doesn’t matter how passionate you are about your art, there will be tough days. Days when you’re just not feeling it. Weeks when life gets in the way, and it’s easier to go with the flow than to carve out time for art. Months when you’ve just lost the spark.

When I was working a desk job, reading advice like “work with your creative energy” was frustrating. Despite being a creative position, the job didn’t allow me the flexibility to do my best work during my best hours, to take breaks when I was mentally

exhausted, to escape from the distractions of an open office, or decide when was best to take meetings.

If that's what you're feeling right now, I get it. I hated giving control of my schedule up to others so much that I sacrificed the safety net to go freelance—but even now, my workload makes my creative schedule unreliable. Some weeks tend to be light on client work, in which case I can spend full mornings writing fiction or working on other personal writing projects related to my freelance business. Other weeks are packed to the gills, and I'm lucky if I can carve out thirty minutes to work on a novel. Other weeks I pack up my laptop and attempt to work in the car while my husband drives us to Montana for one of his work trips.

How on earth can you stay on track toward your creative goals while living life?

Laura Vanderkam may not report to a day job, but finding time to write still means working around external deadlines, travel, and raising four children. “You don't have time to wait for the muse,” she told me. “You just have to do the work.”

We'd gotten on the subject of prioritizing art versus family life because I'd brought up a line I'd loved from her blog: “I'm always amused by the lines in book acknowledgements in which authors (generally, male authors) thank their families for putting up with all their missed dinners. Not only am I not missing dinner, I'm generally cooking it.”¹¹

¹¹ lauravanderkam.com/2015/03/writing-life-playing-long-game/

She laughed. “Writing a book is certainly a great achievement but often times, authors take themselves a wee bit too seriously,” she said.

It’s possible to live a life that combines your art and your family, and plenty of artists have produced amazing work in the margins of their day. Laura brought up the example of Toni Morrison, who wrote her first book at night after her kids went to bed. “She wasn’t thinking she needed the perfect time with her art,” Laura said. “It’s silly that the rest of us would think creating art requires all personal obligations to be gotten rid of and somebody to take over your life and remember to bring you meals. That’s just self-indulgent.”

One of the upsides to working around daily life is that it can create a sort of filter that helps you identify your priorities like never before. Choreographer Andrew Simonet, founder and director of the creative incubator Artists U, found this out when he and his wife had their first child.

“Having our first kid called into question a lot of our unsustainable habits,” he told Creative Capital.¹² Things like not having set work hours and juggling multiple projects at once had been the norm, but the birth of their first child forced Simonet and his wife to hone their focus and priorities. “It was painful, but those habits are bad for anyone, kids or no kids, and in a way it was good that the intensity of parenthood made me change.”

It isn’t just family and work responsibilities that can make creating art a challenge. My friend Elizabeth Mitchell is one of

¹² blog.creative-capital.org/2014/09/artists-raising-kids-thoughts/

the fiercest writers I know. She also has Ehlers-Danlos syndromes (EDS), which makes her joints prone to dislocation and leaves her in near-constant pain. You'd never know it by the cheerful energy she radiates—although the cane she walks with and the spoon tattooed on her arm are a clue.

The spoon refers to the Spoon Theory¹³ of what it's like to live with sickness or disability. The theory can be summed up like this: Each task you do throughout your day—from taking a shower to arguing with your coworker—costs you a spoon. Healthy people have an unlimited number of spoons, but if you're sick you only have a handful of spoons. This forces you to make strategic choices: Do I wash the dishes *or* take a shower? Do I meet a friend for lunch *or* write this afternoon? Do I attend this conference *or* have the energy to leave my house at all next week?

“When you have a limited amount of spoons, you have to plan your life,” Elizabeth told me. “I can't say I'm going to write every day. That's irrational, it's impossible. That's what Mondays are for.”

Mondays are her regular writing date, where she meet a friend at the same time every week. That means she needs to be in bed at a reasonable time on Sundays, even if there's an event that might tempt her to stay out late. “Part of my love for my craft is to set aside every Monday and write.”

The accountability is a key component for Elizabeth. When we spoke, she'd only missed two days in four months—knowing her friend is waiting for her got her out the door when she would be

¹³ butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/

otherwise tempted to preserve her energy. And when her EDS flares up so badly that she can't even leave her bed? "I let myself off the hook. Then I look at my schedule for the week. I might have four things on it, and I'll cancel some of them so I can write later. Because this"—she gestured at her writing laptop, laying on the sofa between us—"is what I want. If this is really important to you, you have to make time."

Even if you've got a system down to work with your regular life, temporary conditions like travel, seasonal affective disorder, short-term illness, or a big project can derail you.

It might be because of the upset schedule, or because the change in circumstances creates a shift in your psyche. I've long harbored fantasies of writing novels on trains and planes while visiting foreign countries, but when I travel, my mind only wants to journal (I never journal at home). Being exposed to new experiences makes me want to write it all down—not indulge in making up new worlds of my own. Now I take travel as a time for reflection and to refill my creative well.

No matter how much of a whirlwind it feels like your life is, remember that how you spend your time is your choice. Keep your goals and priorities in mind when deciding what to say yes to and what to pass by. If you spend your time one way, how will that affect your goals? Does this choice take you closer to or further from doing your creative work? It's easy to feel trapped in your schedule, as though you're a victim of your job, your family, your debts, or your health. But building the creative life you want will take time, and it won't be easy—and if you give away your

agency by blaming your schedule or your creative slumps on outside factors, you'll miss seeing possible solutions.

Gillian Robespierre, writer and director of the 2014 film *Obvious Child*, worked full time as an administrative assistant at the Directors Guild of America while writing and producing the film. From 6am writing sessions before her commute to hoarding her vacation days for shooting the film and scheduling press interviews on lunch breaks, she treated her creative project as professionally as her day job.¹⁴

Your goal may be to quit the day job and work on your art full time. Or you may truly enjoy your job, like I do, and just want to accomplish more creative work. Either way, treat your creative work professionally.

One way to keep productive is to keep a running list of your next tasks. I listened in awe as author Jim Heskett spoke on the Rocking Self-Publishing podcast¹⁵ about how he keeps publishing a steady stream of novels in between his day job and raising a toddler. He uses Trello to keep track of his to-do list, using a series of boards labeled: “Do Someday,” “Do Later,” “Do Next,” “Do Now,” and “Done Did It Already.” He moves cards with each task through the chain, so that whenever he has a spare fifteen minutes he can check the board and see exactly what's next on his plate.

I prefer to keep running to-do lists of action items in the folder for each project I'm working on, then set a theme for each week or month so I always know what project should be in focus. As I

¹⁴ <https://www.aol.com/2014/10/06/gillian-robepierre-shane-jones-day-jobs-career-advice/>
¹⁵ rockingselfpublishing.com/episode-182-power-good-organisation-jim-heskett/

write this, for example, my month's main writing focus is to finish the draft of this book. Whenever I have a spare few moments or a free afternoon, I know it's time to work on the next section of this book. Last month my focus was writing a lead magnet and launching a website for my freelance business, so every time I had a moment I would check on that to-do list to see what needed done. I also have a series of ongoing marketing and prospecting tasks I can work through when I have time.

Because Elizabeth Mitchell doesn't have much time or energy to devote big chunks of time to writing, she tries to make the most of it by keeping herself in a creative mindset throughout the week. "I try to see everything through the eyes of my characters. Like, when I walk into a cafe, I take a few minutes and try to see it how my characters would. That sometimes sparks a new idea, or a new line for a story." She jots these all down. She also uses music to keep her creative gears turning. She has a playlist for each book, and adds those songs to the regular rotation on her iPod. "When those songs come up, it puts me in the mood to write, and I start thinking about the book."

Of course, some days I hit a wall. Then, the best use of my free time may be to go on a bike ride, or knit and watch a great narrative on Netflix. Remember, building in time for self-care is hugely important if you want to stay creatively productive! More on that in the chapter on self-care in Section 3: Dreaming.

Take Action

Think about the little scraps of time in your day: your commute, the fifteen minutes between meetings, the ten minutes while you're waiting for dinner in the oven. What do you normally do while you're waiting?

Here's what to do instead: brainstorm two lists.

List One should be of 10-15 small tasks you could be doing instead that will put you in a creative mindset. You could do a character-building exercise, like Elizabeth, or steal away for a quick session with your sketchpad. Sometimes I'll write a quick monologue from the POV of a character whose head I haven't gotten into yet, or hunt through Pinterest for the exact right inspiration photo for a setting I haven't nailed. This is a list of things that should excite you about your art, things you'll want to snatch time away from your daily life to do.

List Two is the place to put little chores related to your art, like "Update book description" or "Research coffee shops for art walk." Brainstorm all the discrete steps that put you one step closer to finishing your work. You could load these into a Trello board, like Jim Heskett, or keep them in a notebook or file on your phone. This list is the little chores you never find time to do, but could realistically fit in to the scraps of time through your day. Plus, when you get them out of the way during your scraps of time, you free up your larger swaths of time for deep creative work.





SHADOW WORK AND WILLPOWER

In his book *Turning Pro: Tap Your Inner Power and Create Your Life's Work*, Steven Pressfield talks about the concept of “shadow careers.” His idea is that artists sometimes turn to shadow careers when they’re terrified of embracing their true calling. They take the safe route, chasing yet another degree, or yet another adventure or yet another lover instead of pursuing the work.

“That shadow career is a metaphor for our real career,” he writes. “Its shape is similar, its contours feel tantalizingly the same. But a shadow career entails no real risk. If we fail at a shadow career the consequences are meaningless to us.”

I think this concept also applies to our daily work. Doing real creative work is hard. It requires you to sit with the discomfort of not knowing your direction. It requires you to sit with the fear that what you are creating won’t be well received or isn’t any good. It requires you to persevere when you’re bored, uninspired or straight-up tired.

It’s natural in those times to turn to an easier task. Research, answering emails, talking or reading about your art, tweaking your creativity system, searching for the perfect supplies that will definitely make doing your art easier, scrolling Pinterest or forums for inspiration can all fulfill that need to be productive without actually being creative.

None of these tasks are necessarily unproductive, and many of them may indeed be requirement of your art—especially if you're running a business. But all of those things are shadow work, busywork or shallow work.

None of them take the place of actually doing your creative Work.

Doing creative work is difficult; busy work is an easy substitute. But don't let yourself be fooled. You can't research your way into a completed novel, or Pinterest your way to a finished fashion show. Researching the perfect standing desk won't start your business, and getting to inbox zero isn't going to land you your next gig.

As I was working on this section, I went to a networking event run by the Freelancer's Union that focused on productivity for self-employed folks. At one point we were asked to jot down two lists: things that make us feel good and bring us closer to our goals, and things that make us feel bad and keep us from our goals. While looking at the two lists, I realized that the negative one was an icky mirror version of the positive one:

- Mindlessly scrolling through social media vs hanging out with friends or going to networking events.
- Researching things I know how to do vs actually doing them.
- Rote client work like writing SEO website copy vs engaging client work like researching an ebook on how adaptive learning technology can put a college degree in reach for disadvantaged students.

I realized that the reason doing items on the negative list makes me feel so unfulfilled is that they're literally just bad substitutes for the things that are more fulfilling. Scrolling through Twitter or reorganizing my schedule for the 18th time make me feel like I'm accomplishing things, but in reality it's the emotional equivalent of eating a bag of chips and a chocolate bar for dinner when my body needs real food.

<i>Bad</i>	<i>Good</i>
-Mindlessly scrolling social media	-Hanging out with friends or going to networking events
-Researching things I know how to do	-Doing work
-Rote client work like writing SEO website copy	-Engaging client work like researching an ebook on how adaptive learning technology can put a college degree in reach for disadvantaged students

Tracking your time may help you identify these problems, but tracking your time on its own won't help you find more time. You also have to be realistic about your responsibilities and priorities. For a while, I tried to say, "I chose not to prioritize that," rather than "I didn't have time to get that done." Because when you understand you have a finite amount of time, you understand that you have to prioritize things. When you don't call a friend back because you chose to meet a work deadline, you prioritized your job over being late in returning a call, you made the choice. It also makes you feel less guilty, because you're not contending with the idea that you have to do all the things at once.

Try it. What are you choosing to prioritize at this moment? What did you choose to prioritize today? What did you deem a low priority, so it didn't get done?

Too often, those low-priority items are the most important ones: our art.

Saying you didn't have time to work on your art today makes you sound like a victim of circumstances. You'd love to create, but who has the time? Saying you chose not to prioritize working on your art is a different story—it puts you in control of what you do with your time.

Which will you choose: your art, or its shadow?





GET AHEAD OF DISTRACTIONS

“Creation is in part merely the business of forgoing the great and small distractions.”

— EB White

If you’ve been reading along, you know by now that I’m not a big believer in willpower. So I try to do everything I can to eliminate reasons for me to use it. This means removing barriers in the way of doing the things I should be doing, and putting barriers in front of things I shouldn’t be doing.

In her book, *Better Than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives*, Gretchen Rubin calls this the Strategy of Convenience. “We’re far more likely to do something if it’s convenient, and far less likely to do something if it’s inconvenient, to an astounding degree,” she writes. She gives the example of a study done in a cafeteria. When an ice-cream cooler lid was left open, 30 percent of diners bought ice cream, vs the 14 percent who bought it when they had to open the lid themselves.¹⁶ Both sets of diners could see the ice cream through the clear lid—but the requirement of having to open the lid triggered impulse control for over half of those who would have grabbed ice cream from an open case.

I tried a similar thing with Facebook, before I started using the [app Freedom](#) to block social media entirely during the workday.

¹⁶ gretchenrubin.com/happiness_project/2013/12/want-to-know-6-secret-weapons-in-the-battle-against-unhealthy-habits/

I would log out at the end of every session, so when I found myself seeking distraction later in the day, I'd be greeted with a login screen, rather than my Facebook feed. My information was pre-filled, so all I had to do was click the button. But more often than not the simple fact that I had made scrolling mindlessly less convenient caused me to rethink the impulse.

As another example, when I wanted to build a habit of exercising first thing in the morning, I would lay on my exercise clothes on the bathroom counter so they were the first thing I saw after I got up. It made it convenient to put them on and head downstairs. Now I just go exercise without the added convenience, because the habit has been formed.

Designing your work environment follows the same principles. Create an environment that has everything you need and is distraction free. This goes for both your digital and physical space. If you use your phone for work, try creating folders for all of your non-work related apps. That way, whenever you reach for your phone to do something actually business related, you won't be distracted by seeing a social media site, and then have to use your limited willpower to avoid clicking on it.

Set the Stage for a Productive Day

Productivity experts love to tell you to get up early. And I do love being up and at 'em by 6am—but only in the summer when it's bright and cheerful out. In the winter when 6am looks like 3am

and the whole house is chilly, you can't drag me out of bed for anything.

I'll also admit that although I love being up that early, I rarely am. I don't rise at some ungodly hour. I don't always exercise. I don't habitually sit and meditate with a cup of tea. I rarely make myself put off checking my email until 9am—let alone noon. At least not every day. But I can tell you the days I do are remarkably different than the days I reach for my phone before I get out of bed, then rush through breakfast to put out fires.

Whether you're a morning person or a night owl, there is value in understanding what makes you feel good, and taking time for yourself before anyone else gets in your head. When I used to work a desk job, that time was my hour-long bike commute. Parts of it were hectic and awful, but mostly it was on a lovely bike path along the Duwamish and Green Rivers. Once I got through the high-traffic industrial area, I'd lose myself in thought or listen to an audiobook and enjoy the scenery. I always felt more relaxed than on days when I rolled out of bed late and drove in a panic.

Do what you can to start the day on your terms, without letting the world hijack your attention first thing. Maybe that's not checking email in bed. Maybe that's going for a run before anyone else gets up. Maybe that's waking up at 4am to work on your novel before you have to get ready for work (or 10am, I don't know your work schedule). Maybe that's just getting up fifteen minutes before everyone else so you can sit with a cup of coffee and do a crossword.

I set out my schedule the night before, so I know what I need to work on first thing without having to wade through my other priorities and get sidetracked. I already know what I need to do, and my workspace is prepared for me to do it. This is aided in part because my desk is in our bedroom now. I resisted setting up a desk in our bedroom for ages because I didn't want to have the clutter of business stuff be the last thing I saw before I closed my eyes at night. So instead of moving my work desk in to the bedroom, I bought a smaller secretary-style desk with a couple drawers and a sliding work table that can be fully tidied up at the end of every day. It had the surprising benefit of making me more productive in the mornings.

I also try to put off email and social media until I've had a chance to do some combination of meditation, exercise, and 30 minutes of fiction. I've used a dozen different methods not to check my email first thing in the morning, including using Freedom to block it until 9am. That proved too stressful, because I'd wonder if clients needed something from me (spoiler: they never did), and eventually I was right back to checking my email first thing every morning.

One night I left my phone downstairs and didn't touch it until I went down for breakfast. It was amazing. Now I've started putting my phone in my sock drawer before bed. Sure, I could just go grab it when I wake up, but the act of having to pull open the drawer is (so far) enough to remind me I'm not supposed to be checking email.

I also never listen to the news before noon. This helps me to start the day thinking about my own priorities: my health, my fiction, and my vision for the future. That way when I do begin to allow input from others—my clients, my friends on social media, newscasters—I can receive it in my own way.

As usual, I believe systems are the best way to deal with distractions. Here are a few of my favorites:

Schedule a Time to Deal with Loose Ends

Simply scheduling things for later can help clear up your brain. If my husband and I are planning a big cleaning frenzy on Saturday, I can look at a cluttered house and not worry about it, knowing that it will get taken care of in a specific time or place.

You may not get as stressed out by clutter as I do, but you probably have other “loose ends” of your own. Maybe it’s your yard. Maybe it’s an ongoing project. Maybe it’s an obsession with a new video game. Maybe it’s a strained relationship with your partner or a family member.

To hush your brain up, figure out a way to defer them to a later time. Plan to check your email, social media, and news sites at a certain hour. Plan a chunk of time later to make those phone calls. Schedule a time to talk through a problem that’s been frustrating you. When your brain understands that it doesn’t need to stress

about these things now because they'll be taken care of later, it will be noticeably more quiet.

Capture Distractions and Move On

Treat doing your work like meditation. While you're meditating, thoughts will constantly vie for your attention. But rather than letting these stray thoughts take over your attention—either by giving way to thinking about them or forcing yourself not to think about them—just note the thought without judgement and then let it float on.

Likewise, little distractions will pop up throughout your day: you need to deposit that check, water the plants, call your mom... It's tempting to hop up and take care of them when they arise, but instead, simply note the distraction without judgment and get back to work. I often keep a pad of paper beside my laptop when I'm writing, so that if I remember that I've forgotten something, I can write it on a piece of paper and go back to what I was doing rather than letting it distract me or bounce around in the back of my brain.

Killing Distractions

You only have so much willpower—don't waste it trying to stay off the internet. Instead, remove distractions from around you, or remove yourself from those distractions.

As of the time I'm writing this, I have three different apps on my laptop to keep me away from social media. The first is Freedom, which automatically blocks my access to social media for all hours except from 12-1pm, and from 6-8pm. I also use StayFocused to limit the total amount of time I can spend on social media during the workday to 5 minutes, so I don't spend my entire lunch break scrolling through Twitter.

The third app is called News Feed Eradicator, which replaces the Facebook news feed with an inspirational quote about how I should get back to work. I installed that because I do have some legitimate networking groups I use on Facebook, but each time I'd go to check in there I'd find myself distracted by my friends feed. Now I can go to check on a specific thing without endlessly scrolling.

Build up your own barriers to make accessing your normal distractions as inconvenient as possible. Delete games from your phone, or ask your partner to change the password on your social media accounts. Set your phone to do not disturb, and unsubscribe from all the notifications that are constantly pinging for your attention.

Delayed Gratification

In her book, *The Creative Habit*, Twyla Tharp suggests a game she calls "Brew Ruts into Grooves." In it, you take a bad habit, like checking your email or reading the news or having a glass of wine after dinner and change it into a reward. She uses the example of

delaying her daily coffee until she's produced something solid for the day.

The goal is to get out of a distracting rut (like hopping on Pinterest during breakfast) and change it into a productive groove. "Exorcise the rut. Exercise the groove," Tharp writes.

Find Different Spots for Different Work

Another way to keep distractions at bay is to do different types of work in different places. For example, I often take my laptop and sit in an armchair in our bedroom, or to the living room couch when I am writing fiction. Since I'm not sitting at my desk surrounded by reminders of my freelance business, it helps me relax and focus on storytelling.

If I'm having trouble concentrating because the house is messy, I'll go to the coffee shop where there is no clutter to require my attention (at least no clutter I'm responsible for cleaning up).

Finding a different place doesn't have to be just physical. On an interview on The Creative Penn podcast,¹⁷ Sarah Painter, author of *Stop Worrying, Start Writing: How to Overcome Fear, Self-Doubt, and Procrastination* revealed that she has two separate logins for her laptop: one for regular use, and one where she can only access her writing software.

¹⁷ thecreativepenn.com/2017/08/28/stop-worrying-start-writing-overcome-fear-and-self-doubt-with-sarah-painter/

Take Action

What hijacks your brain?

Think back through your week—bonus points if you've been tracking your time and can reference your time logs! List all the times you can remember when you meant to get work done, but your attention was distracted by something else:

- Demands for your attention (email, phone calls)
- Demands for your energy (news, social media)
- Demands for your time (loose ends, new project ideas, obligations)

Now, brainstorm an obstacle you could put in place to prevent you from accessing those distractions. Maybe that's to require yourself to log out of social media sites every time. Maybe that's to delete your email app from your phone so you don't check it first thing (super hardcore, I applaud you if you do!).

Next, think back to all the objections you had to doing your work in the first place. Brainstorm things you could do to clear the path for your work. Maybe it's having the file you're writing in already queued up on your laptop, so it's the first thing you see when you sit down at your desk. Maybe it's staking claim to a section of the living room for your easel or sewing machine, so you can have a workspace that doesn't require you to set it up every time you want to create. Maybe it's joining a coworking space so you'll feel obligated to go in and accomplish things each day.

Commit to doing one thing from each of those two lists today.





BEATING PROCRASTINATION

There are all sorts of reasons why we might avoid a certain task. Maybe you're just not in the mood—but maybe there's a deeper reason. It's worth checking in with yourself about exactly why you're avoiding it. That answer might give you insight into how to make progress.

One of the biggest reasons for procrastination is our natural aversion to discomfort. Creating art is hard work, and most of us would instinctively rather spend the time doing something more relaxing like watching a movie, or even something less taxing yet mundane like cleaning out your email's spam folder (guilty!).

But sometimes we procrastinate not simply because the task is difficult, but because we fear failing at it. It can be tough to ignore that little voice in the back of your head that tells you no one will ever read it anyway, no one will ever see your art. Why bother?

On the flipside, it's also possible to be afraid of success. What if you gave your art your all and succeeded? What if you didn't hold back and ended up creating something so powerful, strong, courageous, something that laid your soul bare? And then it became successful, and your bare soul was there for the world to see? And not just your world, but your family, your coworkers, and your friends.

Sometimes we procrastinate because the timing isn't right. You have stomach cramps or the flu. You only have 20 minutes before you have to leave for work. You're not feeling the muse.

Sometimes the problem is self-confidence. You don't feel ready, so you put it off. I come across this constantly in my writing. When I get stuck in a hard spot, instead of pushing through I'll find myself googling things like "How to write a scene," like I haven't written hundreds if not thousands already. My self-confidence issues take over, and I find refuge from the difficult work in reading about how to do the difficult work, and call it professional development.

And sometimes we procrastinate because there's something wrong with the project.

Procrastination can be our gut's way of letting us know that something isn't right. Maybe you're going in the wrong direction, or it's a project you've had on your plate for years and you've grown out of it but haven't consciously realized it's time to let the project go. Maybe it's a project you're doing for someone else, rather than because it's something you really want to do. Or maybe the project's foundations are shaky, and you need to do some more work to figure out how to shore them up.

And sometimes? Sometimes you just need to knuckle down and do the work.

Here are some tactics for breaking through your procrastination habit and getting started:

Do the Smallest Part: What could you do it in five minutes to make a tiny step forward? If you have absolutely no momentum, this can be a good way to get started. Take the smallest task you can think of and just do that.

Set a Timer: When a project feels daunting, it can be hard to start. But if you tell yourself you just need to work on it for 15 or 25 minutes, then it's not so bad. This is my favorite method of getting unstuck when I find myself in procrastination mode. I set a timer for 25 minutes, sit myself down in front of the task, and refuse to move until the timer dings.

Get an Accountability Partner: Having someone else hold you accountable is a great strategy to keep yourself on track. If you know someone is ready for your results, you'll be less likely to procrastinate than if it's just you.

Treat Yourself: Promise yourself a reward if you get through this task. It could be something as simple as saying you'll go make a cup of tea once you've written 500 words, or as big as taking yourself out to dinner to celebrate working on your art every day this week.

Turn a Chore into Something Fun: Is there any way to combine a chore with something else to make it more fun? For example, I'll listen to a favorite podcast if it's time to clean the floors, which is something I hate doing. Once I get started, I'll normally keep cleaning until the podcast is done.

Schedule It In: Schedule a “power hour” once a week, where you blast through all those tasks you need to do. That way you’re not stressing about putting tasks off the whole week—you know you have time scheduled to get them all done.

Take an Irreversible Step: My favorite way to create momentum is to take some small, yet irreversible step. In fitness world, this would be something like signing up for a marathon even though you haven’t been for a run in years. While working on this book, I would send out interview requests to create momentum. Doing so only takes a few minutes, but if I get a yes, then a ball is in the air and I’d better be there to catch it. For my fiction, those irreversible steps are things like scheduling time with my editor, or commissioning cover art. Once the deposit is paid to the cover artist, I suddenly have a lot of motivation to fix those plot holes and make the story come together in a timely manner.

Figure Out Why It Isn’t Working: When I find myself procrastinating on a book, it’s often because I’m trying to do the work without addressing fundamental problems. For me, that often comes in the form of character motivation or plot holes. For a visual artist, that could be a color or form that’s not quite right. Whatever it is, there’s something lurking beneath the surface, causing us to subconsciously avoid the project. If you suspect that might be the case, take a step back and try to figure out what’s not working. You may need to go back and sort that out before you can continue.

Take Action

Bust out your journal and finish this sentence: “I’m avoiding [task] because...”

Let yourself get deep into the weeds here, and keep asking why until you get to the heart of what’s keeping you from doing this work. The goal here isn’t so you can feel bad about the reason—it’s to give you more clarity into your own process so you can address the root of the problem rather than stabbing around in the dark.

If your journaling doesn’t reveal that there’s something fundamentally wrong with the project, it’s time to force yourself into action. Identify one or two small tasks you could give yourself to take the next step, and identify one big irreversible step you could use to propel yourself forward.

Commit to taking that irreversible step today.

Now, stop procrastinating by reading about productivity and get to work.





DREAMING

“Dreams, if they’re any good, are always a little bit crazy.”

— Ray Charles

So far, this book has been about how to do your creative work more efficiently. But I want to be clear about something important. *Being busy isn't the same thing as being productive.*

A healthy creative productivity system isn't about scheduling every waking moment with tasks—it's about making room in your life for your real work. For creatives, sometimes that work looks an awful lot like staring out the window or walking a dog.

As an artist, you can't expect to fill every moment of every day and still produce good work. You need to dream, to stare out the window, to be bored, to puzzle things through in your subconscious, to experience other people's art. Fortunately, if you have good systems in place to know that you are capturing what you need to do and working efficiently, you can play without having guilt that you should be doing something else instead. That's what the system is all about—eliminating the stress of not knowing what you should be doing at any given time.

Most productivity guidebooks will tell you you need to take time to relax and recharge in order to be more productive. That's completely true. Your mind will work better, you'll stay healthier,

and you have more clarity when you build an opportunity to relax into your schedule. But for most creative people, taking the time to dream and relax isn't just about feeling refreshed. It's a vital part of doing creative work. We need to spend time letting our minds wander, letting our subconscious run like water to smooth down a jagged problem no amount of conscious jackhammering can break open. We need to explore unrelated disciplines to widen the skill sets we bring to our art. And we need to refill the creative well with inspiration from other artists by reading books and watching films and visiting art galleries.

That's why a vital part of your creative productivity system will include dreaming alongside planning and working. Because dreaming and playing are vital skills, but they don't always come naturally to adults, and they certainly don't get prioritized in this day and age.

This part is very, very hard for me.

I don't relax easily. I'm always looking for new ways to make better use of spare moments, whether that's dictating a draft of something while walking to the library, or working through an online video course while making dinner. Podcasts let me feel productive while I cook or clean or drive: business podcasts during the day and educational podcasts while cooking dinner. When I pick up a new book or watch a TV show, it's generally related to my work in progress—it's the only way I can justify sitting and reading for long hours, rather than doing something more "productive." Even when I have five minutes to wait for a

friend I'll generally pull out my notebook and start brainstorming for the week ahead, getting myself organized.

My brain is as tightly scheduled and over-optimized as a high school honors student trying to get into an Ivy League university. And isn't that a good thing?

One of the many podcasts that fill my productive hours is *Note to Self*, hosted by Manoush Zomorodi. The tagline is "The tech show about being human," and I love it for the quirky interviews and fascinating insights Zomorodi brings each week about the ways technology is affecting our lives and shaping the way we think.

In 2015, Zomorodi started the Bored and Brilliant project with a simple question: "What happens when we don't give our brains the chance to think?" It's a question she came to after hitting a wall of burnout and trying to understand just what was making her so tired. "What I found was, frankly, exhausting," she wrote in her book *Bored and Brilliant: How Spacing Out Can Unlock Your Most Productive and Creative Self*. In the name of productivity, she was filling every waking moment with stimulation—primarily from her smartphone. And as a result, she was no longer experiencing those weird, brilliant flashes of insight that had previously fueled her career as a journalist. "My brain was always occupied, but my mind wasn't doing anything with all the information coming in," she wrote.

If this strikes a chord with you at all, I highly recommend reading *Bored and Brilliant*. Along with piles of fascinating research about how technology is affecting our interactions and ability to dream,

Zomorodi also leads readers through a week's worth of challenges to help reframe their relationships with their smartphones. Things like keeping your phone out of sight while you're in motion (commuting, walking, driving), and going for a full day without taking a photo.

Doing the challenges helped me notice how I do tend to fill every small moment of my day with my phone. And it made me wonder: when did I lose the ability to be bored? All through high school, I drove tractor for my dad, and my entertainment options were limited. I'd always start by listening to the same handful of songs cycling through on the radio, or pop in one of the same few tapes I had. But eventually, bored of the entertainment, I'd let the radio lapse into silence and just sit and think.

I'd tell myself stories, then write them down in a notebook on my breaks (my breaks were whenever the combine broke down and I had to wait in the field for dad to come get me. They were frequent and lengthy and boring). I'd daydream about college and epic road trips and about how to rearrange my bedroom for the fifteenth time this year. I'd wonder about God and friendship and whether or not boys in college would be any more interesting than boys in high school. I'd contemplate anything and everything that crossed my mind.

My dad is a musician, and has written hundreds of songs while driving tractor. He's used the time to muse on the Bible and come up with gorgeous flashes of insight that he shares at church. I've heard him say over and over that you can get your best thinking done on the seat of a tractor.

As Zomorodi found when she got her first smartphone—and as I have begun to realize lately—you can fill your brain with all the ideas in the world if you like. But you can't incubate those ideas if you don't give yourself space to think. When you give yourself space, that's when you have those eureka moments, those flashes of insight that transform your ideas from ordinary to brilliant.

In this section, we're going to discuss strategies for including more time to daydream, play, and fill the creative well. Let's get dreaming.





HOW TO PLAY

“Each person deserves a day away in which no problems are confronted, no solutions searched for. Each of us needs to withdraw from the cares which will not withdraw from us.”

— Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*

If you're the sort of person who reads books on productivity, you might—like me—have a difficult time letting your playful side go free. If so, this section is for you.

About 6 years ago, I spent a weekend getaway with two friends I've already mentioned, sisters-in-law Andrea Rangel and Nalisha Rangel, talking about our plans to build our artistic businesses. By the end, we'd dubbed ourselves the Trifecta and vowed to check in every week to talk about our goals. And we've done so religiously ever since.

Of the three of us, Andrea and I have the most difficulty simply chilling out. We meet every deadline set before us—whether self-imposed or arranged by someone else. We each have 18 projects on Red Alert at any given moment. In the early years of our businesses, I don't think either of us knew what weekends were for except to catch up on what we hadn't finished during the week.

Nalisha, on the other hand, works hard and plays hard. She kicks ass in her day job and in her artistic business, while hardcore prioritizing her hobbies: dance, fire arts, and straight up chilling.

After years of listing our weekly business goals and accomplishments in our unrelenting quest to do All The Things, Andrea and I finally realized we needed another goal category. We needed to give ourselves permission to chill Nalisha-style.

We started adding a “Me Time” section to our weekly goals. It’s the place where we list a goal that’s just for us, whether that’s working on a sewing project or taking time each afternoon for a walk in the park. I’ll admit I’m terrible at it. I normally pick something that’s also productive, like “go for a walk in the afternoon to dictate a first draft.” But when I take time to truly think through the “Me Time” requirement in my weekly goals, I always feel lighter. I *have* to take time out of my busy day for a visit to the climbing gym, or to attend a friend’s party. It’s on my goals list!

Part of living a productively creative life is learning to play again, but for some of us, it can be as hard as getting the work done. That’s where good systems come in.

Finding Your Joy

A few years back, my friend Megan introduced me to bouldering. I had always avoided gyms—mostly because I felt self-conscious about working out in front of other people. The climbing gym would be different, Megan assured me. And it was.

It was hard to be self-conscious when I was having so much fun! At the top of every route I nailed, my heart would thrill with accomplishment. Standing at the base of every route that was out

of my reach, I would glare with determination, trying again and again until my hands were shaking and raw. I felt victorious. It was such a different activity than my usual sit-and-type mode of being, and the heady sense of accomplishment I felt watching my skills progress was so much more concrete than the slow growth of watching my writing improve.

After that first session, Megan asked me how I felt. “Like I’m ten years old again,” I said, a huge grin plastered across my face.

Ask yourself: What makes you feel like you’re ten again? That’s the thing you need to nurture.

That thing may be a creative hobby unrelated to your art. When you don’t have very much time to work on your art, it’s a tough call to spend time on something that won’t end up contributing to your final project in the the long run—let alone something that’s completely unrelated to the creative work at hand. But this kind of play can boost your creativity in incredible ways.

For one, it can help you get out of a rut. Sometimes when I am completely burned out from staring at a computer and making sentences appear on the screen, it can feel like an entire thesaurus’ worth of words has washed out of my brain and are gone, never to return.

It’s these times that I find myself sewing. And not just sewing, but shirking all other responsibilities to draft complicated, infuriating clothing patterns that require three or four muslin attempts to get right. Or designing a new laptop case with stowaway backpack straps and reflective striping and pannier hooks for my bike rack,

a project that requires me to get out the graph paper and rulers to draw up schematics that rival my final project in stage design class back in college.

Sewing is play, with colors and fabrics and measurements and design elements. It doesn't just distract me from my current work—it's completely absorbing. It's different than going for a walk to work out a story problem, or forcing myself through a writing exercise to get the words flowing. It requires a different part of my brain—and most importantly, it requires not a single sentence, not a single thought about which word is correct, or how to spell something. And at the end of this sort of play, the words I thought were lost forever start to show up once more.

Ken Scholes, a fantasy author from Portland, uses play as a deliberate way to engage his inner child before writing sessions. When he's trying to get into the writing mood, he may play a few songs on the guitar, go for a walk, or space out for ten to fifteen minutes. Or, he might get out his Batman action figures.

"Writing, the actual putting the words on paper is the iceberg above the surface," Ken told me. "Going for a walk is writing. Doing the dishes is writing. Sitting and talking with another writer about self-care is writing. Because it's not just creating words, it's creating the space in your head for story to emerge, that Goldilocks belt where life sparks up."

We've already talked a bit about Parkinson's law, that work you need to do will fill up the amount of time you have to do it. Just think back to a particularly busy period in your life—for me, that

would be college. Between classes, homework, and working two jobs, every spare minute of my day was spoken for before I even woke up. If I only had two hours to write a paper, that's how long it took.

In my job today, if I've overstretched myself with client work, it will all get done—and more efficiently than if I don't have projects to fill in that time. But if—heaven forbid—I only have a single deadline in a day, my husband is away on a work trip, and I don't have any date scheduled with friends? That one project will take me from 8 AM until 10 PM.

Scheduling in play not only helps us relax, it puts those hard edges on our day that force us to be more efficient with our time. When I moved to Portland, I decided to splurge on a climbing gym membership to make sure I continued to get out of the house without Megan's presence. But, life gets in the way. An object at rest tends to stay at rest, and when I was stressing about deadlines the last thing I wanted to do was leave the house and go play at the climbing gym.

I clearly needed a system to go make myself do the thing I dearly loved—and dearly needed.

First, I decided to schedule in two sessions every week, then schedule work around them. However, I found that system too easy to blow off. Eventually I started building those sessions around dates with friends who also climb and errands I needed to run anyway. Now, it's second nature for me to grab my climbing shoes on the way out the door if I'm going to be anywhere near

the gym. Tacking on a quick 45-minute session when I'm already in the neighborhood is rarely an issue. Plus, I won't skip dates with friends.

Every year, the gym membership is a painful splurge, and every year I make it. Each week, prying open time in my busy schedule is a challenge, but each week I make it. Because this hobby gives me so much unadulterated joy that I've made a commitment to myself to keep it up.

Just as you schedule in time for your art to keep your other obligations out of the way, schedule in time to relax. Use other people if you need to—scheduling a date to go to a gallery opening with a friend, or even just to lay in your backyard and read books together. If you have someone else keep you accountable, you'll make that date.

Taking time for the things that give you joy isn't unproductive—it adds fuel to your creativity, and sheds light on the rest of your day. It's impossible to be in a bad mood after I've spent 30 minutes clambering up walls at the bouldering gym like a grinning gecko. What's the thing that gives you the same amount of joy? Chances are you've put it pretty low on the priority list. It's time to change that.

Filling the Creative Well

As creative people, we take inspiration from all the art around us. We notice the way a bird takes flight. We learn from the brushstroke

on the painting of a master. We admire the craftsmanship of a cupboard. We get caught up in the beats of our favorite artist.

All of those things soak into our unconscious, mixing together into something new and fresh and truly ours. It's what allows us to turn on the faucet and pour ideas and images and passion into our own work. But what happens when you tap into your creative will and it comes up dry?

In his book, *Die Empty: Unleash Your Best Work Every Day*, Todd Henry calls this *creative inversion*, "because it feels like you're working upside down, in a world where demand drives ideas rather than supply." You're squeezing the tube to get every last drop, but there's nothing more to give. Then it's time to refill your well.

If you want your creative well to sustain you when you're thirsty, you need to get in the habit of filling it deliberately as a part of your regular work. There's a difference between deliberately seeking out creative inspiration and simply vegging out. And sometimes you need both. Filling the well doesn't have to be high-brow entertainment—I'm not saying you have to go to the opera. When my well runs dry, lately I turn to classic mafia movies and serial detective shows. Watching reality TV probably isn't filling the well, but getting caught up in a well-crafted drama might be.

People do different things. Some writers I know won't read anything while working on their novel because they don't want to be influenced. Others read everything in the market so they know the trends. I fall somewhere in the middle. I like to be steeped in

the type of story I want to write, whether thriller, mystery, or epic fantasy so I can soak up the flavor.

Experience art widely—whether that’s having a gorgeously presented meal, visiting a cathedral, reading a pulp sci-fi novel, going to an elementary school play. And while you’re doing so, stay vigilant for those little flickers of inspiration from the Muse. Keep an eye out for sparks of inspiration, and collect them as though they are precious—because they are. Pay attention to those moments when you become intrigued by an aspect of the thing you’re playing with, when your mind asks, “I wonder what happens when...?”

These are the moments that can lead to pure genius in your work, and it’s your job to be prepared for them when they show up.

At the risk of imposing homework onto play, let me tell you about one exercise I like to do to tease out these moments. When I find myself intrigued by something, I like to ask myself what I appreciated about a certain thing, or why it struck my fancy. I’ll ask myself why specifically I enjoyed a certain movie, or why a certain song gives me the chills. I say this not to suggest that you always make playtime instructional, but rather to suggest that when something moves you, honor it by taking the time to recognize what about it moves you. How does the muse in you recognize the muse in this piece of art?

In his delightful book of essays, *Zen in the Art of Writing*, Ray Bradbury says that every time you pick up a book or look at a painting is an opportunity to refine your taste. “You are, in effect,

dropping stones down a well,” he writes. “Every time you hear an echo from your Subconscious, you know yourself a little better. A small echo may start an idea. A big echo may result in a story.”

It’s up to you to collect those ideas. Use notepads, even shower tablets. Voice recorder. A series of text files. Think of these places as a nursery where you plant seeds in neat little rows. Some may never sprout, but those that do can be pulled out and nurtured in their own container (a project folder).

Creative endeavors, no matter the type, rarely arrive in your mind fully formed. It may be a hint of a line, an obsession with a color, a scrap of dialogue, a twist of your wrist that catches your attention and feels desperate to be turned into a sculpture, a painting, a novel, a dance.

You need a system and a place to capture these and space to tend them. Some ideas take years to grow into their full form, requiring careful tending and pruning before they reach their final shape; others grow fast and strong and sure.

By this point, you’ll be utterly shocked to learn I use Evernote to collect and incubate ideas. I have a few folders for “Projects in Progress,” where I’m actively collecting and working on things. But I also have a notebook stack titled “Projects: Simmering” where I keep story ideas and other potential projects. Whenever I come across a link, have a thought, or read a quote that somehow adds to that, I toss it in there.

Take Action

Don't turn the page, don't read on. Before you do another thing, take out your calendar and schedule in a time to play this week. Go to that free concert in the park. Take two hours on Saturday morning and read that new novel by your favorite mystery writer. Call a friend and make plans to go to the quilt show. Buy tickets to that movie you've been wanting to see. Make a date to take your dog on a hike.

I don't care what it is. Just take time out of your ridiculously busy schedule to play this week.





TAKING TIME FOR REFLECTION

The last building block of a creative productivity system that sustains yourself and your work is reflection. Reflection is like planning, but whereas planning is coming up with how you *will do* a certain thing, reflection is taking stock of how you *did* that thing. Reflection is an important part of the learning process, as any teacher will tell you. And whether you're reflecting on the geology test in order to better understand how volcanoes work, or reflecting on how a project went to better understand how you work, it's a valuable tool for growth.

In order to take advantage of that tool, however, you need to build it into your creativity productivity system.

As I write this, the leaves are turning gold and orange and crispy, and pumpkins are beginning to dot the porches throughout my neighborhood. It's fall, which is my favorite time of year for reflection. Many people use the New Year as a time to begin new goals—and I do, too. But I like a healthy amount of reflection leading up to that time of goal setting. I love to look back at the year and figure out what worked for me, what didn't work, what I want more of in my life and what I want to leave behind.

I do this on my own, through journaling. But I also do this with a trio of friends in my accountability group. We each live

in a different city, and most falls, we gather in one of our cities and spend a weekend talking about our accomplishments and challenges and setting goals for the year ahead. It's an incredible experience that I look forward to every year.

Another friend has a practice of taking yearly retreats by herself every October around her birthday. She books a place by herself and spends a few days in solitude, thinking about the year past and the year to come.

You don't need to do a fancy retreat—whether alone or with friends—but you do need to be intentional about taking the time to actively plan and reflect. Start by building regular reflection into your creativity system:

- Set 30 minutes aside at the end of the week to think about last week and plan for the next.
- Start or join an accountability group and set quarterly and monthly goals.
- Take advantage of a milestone (like your birthday) to examine your goals.
- Journal each morning.

Here are some tips on reflecting well:

Get in the Right Environment

Get yourself in the right state of mind, the right environment for the way you think. I can't think without a pen in my hand, so my reflection is generally journal-based. You may prefer to talk things through with a friend or a mentor. You may do best while on long hikes. My mind tends to wander if I'm just walking about, so although I will try to spend time thinking about things deliberately as I go for a hike for a bike ride, I never find it to be nearly as effective as when I deliberately sit down and direct my thoughts to the problem.

Part of getting in the right environment is unplugging. If you want to get in the habit of reflecting, you need to get into the habit of giving yourself the space and silence to mull over a problem, by allowing yourself the luxury to be bored and to muse about your day.

Ask Yourself the Right Questions

It doesn't seem as though we would need to be taught how to think, but learning how to reflect is actually a skill. Learning to interrogate yourself, to recognize when something is working and when something is not working, and to be savvy enough to discern how to improve.

Sean Platt of Sterling and Stone is one of those people to whom reflection comes naturally. "Seeing the intersection of big ideas has always been really easy for me," he told me. "I realized that

ideation is a valuable skill that is not that common, so I've spent a lot of time trying to get better at it."

One thing he does is to ask good, solution-oriented questions. For example, rather than asking "Why don't I have time for my art?" he would ask "How can I make more time for my art?"

"I approach every problem with more questions," Sean said. "A lot of times we're going so fast, we don't have time to ask ourselves the right series of questions. And I think that the more time you take to think, the better your questions. I just keep asking questions until I can't go any further back."

It's all about the art of asking why, over and over again until you've reached down far enough to come to a place of realization. Along with getting to the bottom of why, it's also important to ask how. How can you achieve the next step in your goal? How can you improve on your processes? How can you achieve a better outcome?

Achieving a balance between why questions and how questions is especially critical if you find yourself mired in thoughts of "Why didn't this work?" It's a way to reframe your negative thoughts something more positive—I'll do better next around.

Here are some questions to get you started.

- How can I use my time more wisely?
- How can I make better progress toward my goals?
- How are my current goals aligned with the person I want to be?

- Am I living true to myself?
- Where in my life am I settling for less than I should?
- How can I manage my energy better?
- What are my strengths and how can I build on them?
- What are my weaknesses and how can I shore them up?
- How can I improve valued relationships?
- What wrongs am I holding onto that it's time to forgive?
- What habits have served me well?
- What habits should I leave behind?
- What habits are causing me stress?
- How can I take better care of myself physically?
- How can I take better care of myself mentally?
- What opportunities have I been avoiding out of fear?
- How can I push myself out of my comfort zone this year?
- What daily change could I make to create more joy?
- How can I make more time for the things that matter to me?
- How can I leave behind the things that don't matter to me?
- What one thing should I say "no" to in the coming month?
- What one thing should I say "yes" to?

- What obstacles do I put in my own way? How can I remove them?

Be Honest and Take Action

The last step in learning to reflect is making a commitment to being honest about what you see, and taking action to change things. Whether you're reflecting in a journal, mulling things over while out on a long walk or even reflecting with the help of a mastermind or accountability group, the process doesn't do you any good if you aren't honest about it.

Once you've reflected, what actions will you take? Make a plan that has goals, milestones, ways of measuring, etc.

A few years back, I started to think of my years as having themes. It started when I started freelancing. After getting to the end of a year of hustling hard to get my business off the ground, I knew the theme of the next year needed to be refining my client list and nich. This year's theme was professional development, which meant that I spent a large portion of my time and income taking courses, attending conferences, reading books, learning from mentors, and building my business' brand. Next year's theme will be to put that education to good use by building my network and reaching out to others in my industry.

What idea will guide you through the next year of your art? What stage are you at in your journey? Where should you be pouring your efforts in order to make the biggest leaps?

Take Action

Schedule some time for reflection this week. Even if it's just thirty minutes, sit down with your journal, a friend, or just your thoughts and take time to reflect.





TROUBLESHOOTING YOUR CREATIVE PRODUCTIVITY SYSTEM

I wish I could tell you that if you worked through all the exercises so far, you'll now have a creative productivity system that will work for you 100 percent all of the time without fail. But for whatever reason, your creative productivity system will require tweaking as time goes on. And even if everything does seem to be working well, constant iteration can help you find ways to make yourself even more efficient.

Finding your creative productivity rhythm will be an ongoing process. But as you test and tweak, let me offer you one caveat:

if you're anything like me, creating systems and planning for the future feels really good. In fact, it feels like I'm doing good, productive, satisfying work. Don't mistake maintaining a productivity system for doing actual work, though. What you're going for is something that will be relatively effortless to maintain so that you can spend the bulk of your energy on your art.

When I asked the members of my accountability groups to tell me about their productivity systems, Stephanie Morrison had a confession. "One trap I have fallen into several times is thinking the new productivity technique I've just learnt about is the best ever," she wrote. "I shift my routine/focus/energy to learning more about it and integrate it into my day, but sometimes it has taken away from me actually working. The novelty of it wears off

and I go back to my old routine, so it retrospect it ends up being wasted time.”

Jen Mayer of Kitemath also admits that researching new systems can be addicting and unproductive. “We read a lot of books,” she says, “but at some point, we have to just stop reading productivity or creativity or how-to books and just start doing. I’m always trying to balance reading the next new book with just doing what I already know.”

Constantly tweaking your productivity system can be a form of Resistance. You don’t need to add tags to all of your Evernote files in order to write your novel. Spending hours adding your contacts into a client relationship management system isn’t going to land you an art show. Renaming all of the categories on your to do list is not going to get those items done.

There are hundreds of productivity systems and gurus out there to tell you the best way to get your work done. But in the end, the best way is the one that gets results for you, and that you will continue using. The tool isn’t the important part. It doesn’t matter what kind of pen you use or whether the app has been written up on a famous productivity blog. Does it help you get the work done? Then it’s a good system.

When looking at your system, Sean Platt actually thinks you should flip the script. Instead of asking how to be more productive, try to figure out how to be less unproductive. “Everybody isn’t productive in the same way,” he told me. “But there is a very general list of stuff you should knock off, right?” And at this point

in the book, you probably don't need me to tell you what's on that list.

You've tracked your time and your creative energy. You've listed the things that derail you. You've come up with a system to avoid distraction. But if you're still feeling inefficient, here are some specific places to troubleshoot.

Your Creative Schedule

The ideas and schedules you came up with in theory may not work with you in practice. One example from my life is that no matter what kind of system I try to put in place to consistently schedule writing fiction, it never seems to work. Write from 8 to 10 AM? Set aside every Thursday and Friday? Write for 30 minutes every afternoon?

Some of these have worked for a bit, some have simply never stuck. In the end, I write fiction much more easily and productively if I don't have client deadlines looming, which means I either need to do my client work first, or clear my deadlines out earlier in the week, or just simply set aside weekends to work on fiction.

Yeah, I'm still working on this one.

How You Collect Incoming Tasks

Another area to troubleshoot is your method of collecting incoming tasks and scheduling them. Where the gaps in your

method? What are you simply not doing, no matter how hard you try to force yourself?

I've cycled through probably fifteen to-do list apps with varying degrees of bells and whistles before finally settling on my simple system of Evernote files. Every once a while, I still pick up a new application to see what that does for me. Normally I'll use it for a few weeks, then inexplicably put it aside.

If things are slipping through the cracks, try a new way of collecting your incoming chaos.

Your Goals

Another major sticking point you may come across are your goals. Sometimes I find that I have the exact same bullet points in my accountability group goals for ages. I have every intention of doing them, but for some reason I just don't. It's not that I don't have the time, that I just keep prioritizing other things and I can't quite put my finger on why.

When I notice this, I know that it's time for serious reflection about that particular goal. Often, I find that it's not taking me in the right direction. Maybe it's something that I read I should do in order to market my business, but it doesn't feel authentic to me. Or maybe it's something I'm excited about, but I know it's not the right time.

Time to let that goal go.

Your Obligations

Creating an amazing system isn't enough to accomplish it all if you're trying to manage too much. If you're not diligent about saying no, you may find yourself back trying to do too many projects at once.

I'm constantly falling into overwhelm. From my journal just yesterday:

I expect me to be a prolific and creative author, to be great at author marketing, to run a freelance biz and grow that, to keep the house clean and bring in AirBnb guests, to manage everything and to not let anything slip through the cracks. And I feel like everything is slipping through the cracks.

I wish I could say you only have to say “no” once, and then you're set for life. But no matter how good your creative productivity system is, you'll need to clean out the junk on occasion. You'll have to say “no” to other people—preferably before they get on your to-do list, but sometimes after you've already agreed.

You have to say “no” to yourself, too. “No” to that shiny new project that threatens to derail your current work in progress. “No” to taking on a project that sounds really really fun, but which takes your business in a side direction rather than moving it forward. “No” to the expectation that you'll be perfect in every role you take on.

Your Network

We are constantly influenced by the energy of the people around us. If your close family and friends are constantly second-guessing themselves and you, your own belief in yourself will start to wear down. If the artists you hang out with complain about scarcity of opportunities and their own lack of “luck,” you’ll have to work ten times as hard to keep your own chin up.

I have a friend with whom I can’t talk about my successes, because I know she’ll meet my excitement with feeling bad about herself. If I say I finished my novel, her response is “I wish I finished things.” My instinct is to tear down myself to stay on her level. She’s not consciously trying to hold me back—but in her own fear she can’t be happy for me. She’s subconsciously trying to keep me on her plane out of fear.

Along with removing people who bring you down, also be diligent about finding people who support you. I can’t say enough good things about the accountability groups I’m a part of. Over the years these folks have given me ideas, helped me troubleshoot, celebrated my achievements, and brainstormed ways to get around obstacles.

Fill your life with people who work at the same level as you, or better. Fill your life with people who celebrate your accomplishments with you.

Your Reward System

When I used to work in theater, we celebrated the hard work of preparing our show with opening night parties, and the hard work of performing the show with a strike party. It was a beautiful way to recognize our achievements, and acknowledge how hard we'd worked.

My novels are produced with the help of cover designers, editors, and beta readers—but in the end it's no the same as a crew of people working together. It's easy to hit publish and go on to the next thing, especially in a noisy world where people aren't lining up to give me high-fives.

That's where freelance writer Ayelet Weisz comes in. "How are you celebrating the launch of your novel?" she'll ask in our accountability group. "How are you celebrating the anniversary of starting your freelance business? How are you celebrating that new client you just picked up? How are you celebrating Friday?"

Celebrating your achievements helps keep your momentum up when things are good—and it also gives you the drive to keep going when things are hard. Just think of how great the reward will be!

Your Passion

Finally, if you're finding it impossible to make the time, ask yourself why.

Author Susan DeFreitas once told me how she had the love of writing drummed out of her during grad school, and how she's rekindled it in part by making the process passionate again. She pampered her writing practice with gorgeous pens and beautiful notebooks, and sought out the pleasure in the task.

Ask yourself: What was it that first drew you to your art? Why has that faded? What can you do to bring that back?

And I don't just mean getting excited about the finished product—I mean falling back in love with the process by using physical things, like Susan's beautiful pens and notebooks. By seeking out great examples of art in your daily life. By stealing away to dally with your own art.

Take Action

Are you ready for your final exercise? Here it is:

Create Something Today

Whatever your art is, take fifteen minutes today to work on it. To play at it. To remember why you loved it in the first place. Run your hands over the gorgeous fabrics in your stash, daub paints that don't go together on a canvas, take a beautiful notebook to the park and sketch, write nonsense scraps of dialogue on napkins in a cafe, change out your guitar strings, pick up your kid's dolls and act out a scene.

Then do the same thing tomorrow. And tomorrow. And tomorrow.

Developing a creative productivity system will help you make time for art, but it won't make you an artist—because you already are, every time you create.

About the Author

Jessie L. Kwak is a freelance writer and novelist living in Portland, OR. She is the author of paranormal thriller *Shifting Borders*, the *Durga System* series of gangster sci-fi stories, When she's not writing B2B marketing copy for freelance clients or scribbling away on her latest novel, you can find her riding her mountain bike, road tripping with her husband, and wrangling a number of sewing projects. You can learn more about her at JessieKwak.com



SUBSCRIBE TO EVERYTHING WE PUBLISH!

Do you love what Microcosm publishes?

Do you want us to publish more great stuff?

Would you like to receive each new title as it's published?

Subscribe as a BFF to our new titles and we'll mail them all to you as they are released!

\$13-30/mo, pay what you can afford!

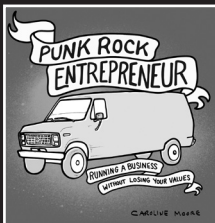
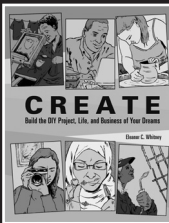
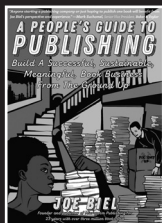


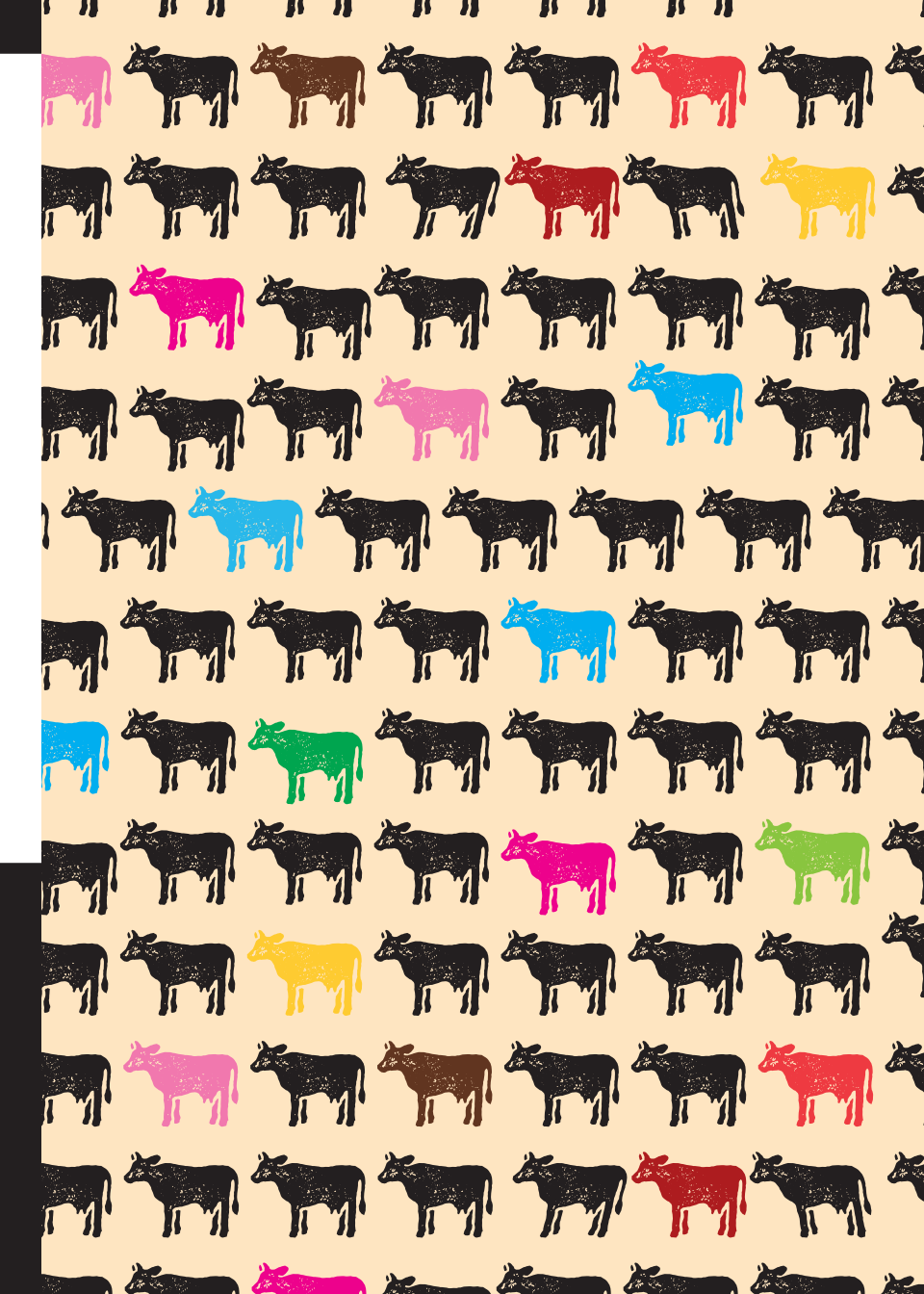
microcosmpublishing.com/bff



...AND HELP US GROW YOUR SMALL WORLD!

Other books about changing the world around you:







\$14.95 U.S. / \$20.50 CAN

