
UNBLOCKED

How to Expand Your Creativity by
Overcoming and Preventing Creative Blocks



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Cover illustration: *Melencolia I* (1514), engraving by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). Melencolia, daughter of Saturn, is the medieval root of "melancholy," derived from the Greek "melas" (black)+ "chole" (bile, gall), and originally interpreted as "dark thinking" or "disturbed thinking." This engraving has been variously described as "a frustrated thinker" or "an artist creatively blocked."

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How to Expand Your Creativity by Overcoming and Preventing Creative Blocks

The ability to create – to express the distinct, the unique, the exceptional, the extraordinary – is innate in every human being. It is creativity that impels you to be different from everyone else, that drives you not only to create differently but to think differently about life and to live your life differently from those around you. And the more creative you become, the more courage you need to muster up in order to continue marching along to the beat of your distinctly different drum.

Creativity is always within you. It is a driving force that brings great joy with every tap of the key, every stroke of the brush, every note voiced, and every idea brought one step closer to fruition. If it were not for the sheer ecstasy that it brings, creativity would surely cease to exist; at best it might be relegated to one of those “grunt jobs” that no one wants to do.

Creativity does not decline as you age or as you become more educated or as you grow into a responsible adult. However, if you do not continuously exercise your creative muscles by always looking beyond the parameters of your education and experience, you will ultimately become less flexible in your ability to be creative. It is not a condition of age; it is a condition of will. You must *want* to create – *love* to create – and be willing to detach yourself from whatever it is that inhibits your creativity.

But for even the most willing creative person, there are many kinds of obstacles to creativity that can rear their ugly heads at a moment’s notice.

What does it mean to be creatively blocked? For most, it simply means that you are stuck and unable to move forward with your book

or painting or music or whatever it is that you are creating. You may be blocked due to a lack of fresh ideas or you may have a dynamite idea that you cannot seem to get off the ground or that you find you are unable to finish once you are half-way through it. You may not be able to put into words what it is that got you stuck, and you may be repeatedly stuck for days, weeks, months, or even years, shelving numerous viable projects along the way simply because you don't know how to resolve your creative blocks.

You may try to re-do your work several times over or you may try to become re-inspired in an effort to move forward with your project. But to overcome a creative block, you must first identify the specific source of it so that you can find an appropriate solution. That's how you become unstuck and complete your work. It is also how you implement preventative measures to avoid getting creatively blocked on future projects.

There are probably as many kinds and combinations of creative blocks as there are people experiencing them. You could be stuck because of a combination of blocks that all produce the same end result: a stoppage of your creative flow. There are basically five categories of creative blocks:

- ◆ Environmental-Structural
- ◆ Intellectual-Educational
- ◆ Perceptual-Cognitive
- ◆ Emotional-Psychological-Spiritual
- ◆ Culture-Family-Friends
- ◆ Career-Field-Position

On the following pages, we will explore how these blocks are formed and what you can do to overcome them and prevent their future occurrences.





ENVIRONMENTAL - STRUCTURAL

These are by far the most common kinds of blocks and they are also the easiest to troubleshoot. It takes work, but it is time – and money – well spent. These blocks result when the work space or tools of the trade are inadequate, are not used correctly, or are not well-maintained.

Work Space

If you work in a space that is not conducive to your creative efforts, you are destined to become creatively blocked. Whether you work in an office or a studio or a combination of both, it must meet your every need in order for you to be your most creative. If your energy doesn't get pumped up when you're in your work environment, you won't want to enter it, and you certainly won't want to stay in it long enough to get anything done. Since no two creative people are exactly alike or have the same work styles, your work space is likely to be different from everyone else's. The important thing is that you like – that you love – what you see and feel when you enter that room every day.

Jeannie was a neighbor of mine who was a part-time writer of magazine articles. She confided in me that she had a hard time concentrating on her work and that she found herself working mainly at the library. I suggested that perhaps her work area – her apartment in general, actually – might be distracting her. I admit that I'm a little on the fussy side when it comes to my office, but her place was the most cluttered, filthy, and disgusting place I'd ever seen. A couple weeks later, she had cleaned it all up, and had begun working in an alcove that had a built-in desk. She announced that she now felt more like a "real writer."

While most creative people seem to prefer working in a very quiet and peaceful space, you may want to be alone but not necessarily

working in silence. You may prefer to be accompanied by your favorite music or even a TV blaring in the background. You may feel more creative in a rural environment or you may get turned on by the hustle and bustle of the big city. You may need to live where you are even though you yearn for something quite different, in which case you will need to find other ways to bring the country into the city or vice versa. Your decor can help in achieving the ambiance you require to be inspired and to work comfortably and creatively.

How your work area is decorated is entirely up to you. You can have bright white walls, or turquoise, Chinese red, chartreuse, basic black, or any other color that makes you feel alive and creative. You might even choose wallpaper that brightens your day and makes you feel welcome in your work environment. Your furnishings can be traditional or modern or homemade; they can be rustic pieces from your local import store or they can be fine antiques bought at auction. Some plants or cut flowers can brighten it up further. Your degrees, awards, framed book covers or paintings, your sculptures, photographs, sketches, plans, or whatever you create should line the walls.

These days, many more creative people are sitting while they work, especially those who use computers. This makes having the most comfortable chair possible a very important factor to your creativity. If your chair causes you even the slightest amount of pain or fatigue, you won't be at your most creative. The United States Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration thinks chairs are so important that, as of March 2004, they devoted an entire webpage to the components of a suitable chair – probably because low back problems continue to be the leading cause of disability in the workplace.

Once you have the right chair, you must also make sure that your work tables, desks, or easels are at the right height for you. They should also be in good working order – no wobbly legs or broken drawers. And if you stand when you work, you need a soft carpet or mat on the floor and comfortable footwear with good support for your feet.

No matter what kind of work you do, you need to do it in a clean and organized manner. You may have become accustomed to working in a messy and cluttered, even dirty, environment, and you may even believe that you thrive in that atmosphere, but studies continuously show that people work more productively and think more clearly when their work spaces are neat and clean. So if you do nothing else to improve your work environment, at least clean it up. Throw out the out-dated, worn out, damaged, and broken things that you don't need and that you haven't used for a year or more. Neatly organize the things you do need to exercise your creative output.

There are more choices for storage in the work space than ever before. Just take a walk through a Target or Walmart. Other options are Ikea, Pier One, and Cost Plus stores. And there's always your local discount store or office/art supply store, most of which have online catalogues to browse. And don't forget garage sales – one person's cast-offs can be your organizational treasures. Shop around to find exactly what will best suit your needs, and then get everything put away where you can always find it. If you feel that you are not up to the task of organizing your office or studio, find a professional organizer in your area. It's not as expensive as you might imagine, and you will be more productive once you take control of your work space.

Once you have a clean, organized work space, you must keep it that way. Allow yourself time each day, each week, or each month to file away papers, back up your hard drive, put away supplies, dust, clean the windows, and mop the floors or vacuum the rugs. Mark these tasks on your calendar until they become a regular part of your routine. You can't pay someone to put things away for you every day unless you hire an assistant. But if you can afford having someone in to clean once or twice a month, by all means do so. The important thing is to get rid of the distractions of dirt and clutter as a first step in establishing a functional and productive work environment that's right for you.

If you work in someone else's office, it is unlikely that you will have much say in how your work space is constructed, furnished, colored, ventilated, or lighted. So you will have to make do with what you get

and try to fix it up to the best of your ability in order to work there in comfort, with as much creative stimulation and motivation as you can inspire from those surroundings. But you can still keep your work area clean and organized, and that will always improve your mental clarity and acuity, as well as your overall productivity.

Tools of the Trade

It doesn't matter what you do for a living, you absolutely must have the proper tools of the trade, whether it's a chisel, a paintbrush, or a computer. And you must know exactly how to use them to your advantage. If you lack the tools, have tools that are not in proper working condition, have tools that are not appropriate to your work, or tools that you do not know how to adequately use, you simply must address that problem immediately.

Start by always buying the very best tools. Take a second job, if necessary, to get whatever you need. You will never regret buying the best. In the meantime, if you can't afford anything but student grade paint, start with that. If you can't afford the latest fancy new computer, work on the serviceable old one. If you can't afford a decent desk just yet, keep working on the old garage sale table until you can. As your creative output increases, you'll be making more money and you can upgrade to better quality tools.

When I first started writing and illustrating, desktop computers were not an option. I sat at my rickety old kitchen table with my watercolors or my portable Olympia typewriter. Cut and paste meant using real scissors and glue/tape. I did my preliminary sketches and typed my drafts on the backs of used paper (as I do today when I print out my drafts on the back of used pages of old manuscripts, etc.). I didn't have a filing cabinet, and I kept my files and my paper supplies in those old hard plastic milk crates that I more or less kicked under the table when not in use. As the years went by, I acquired better equipment and supplies to improve my efficiency.

Learn to use your tools. Don't waste time using them incorrectly or inefficiently. It will only discourage you and put a damper on your

creativity. Ask for help from someone who knows how to use the tools you can't seem to manage. And once you learn how to use them, learn how to maintain them properly. There is no point in spending \$60 or more for a great brush and then not cleaning it properly so that the bristles become brittle or come loose from the ferrule. If you spend a lot of time on the Internet, you need anti-virus software – take it from someone who knows first-hand what it is like to battle a computer virus. And think about your health when you're working with your tools. Be sure you have proper ventilation and a dust mask/respirator or ear plugs or whatever you need to protect yourself when you work.

Summary

Environmental and structural blocks are the easiest to correct, but it takes time and money to make it happen. In the end, by having the right work environment and all the right tools of the trade, you will have established the very best possible foundation from which to achieve your most creative dreams.





INTELLECTUAL - EDUCATIONAL

It often appears on the surface that creativity is innate, that it comes directly from the heart and soul of an individual. Well, you may have been born with a creative streak a mile long, but that doesn't mean that you can go out and make a living at your chosen art form without having a solid base of skills and knowledge at your disposal, along with a good deal of practical application. A lack of knowledge, skill, or practice can cause frequent creative blocks when you are forever trying, unsuccessfully, to do things that exceed your levels – causing delays from errors you make while you try to “earn while you learn.” This lack of a proper foundation for your craft can cause repeated feelings of frustration that make you feel doomed to failure. You are, after all, experiencing daily failures as you work.

Skills, Training, and Knowledge

Knowledge is at the heart of all creative pursuits. Learning who was doing what you do long before you were ever born is critical to understanding your particular form of artistic expression. How did Hemingway come up with the idea for “A Farewell to Arms”? How did Leonardo da Vinci paint the Mona Lisa? What inspired Baudelaire to write “La Vie Antérieure”? What motivated Sinetar to write “Do What Your Love-The Money Will Follow”? How did the Bauhaus movement affect the later works of Kandinsky? How did Dickens get his novels serialized in the newspaper? Who taught Rodin and Remington to sculpt horses with such majesty? How did Shakespeare's works reflect on the society of his times? How do the works of Stephen King speak to our 21st century culture? It may sound trite, but you need to know what's gone before in order to know where you're going now.

Taking classes and reading books provides an ongoing stream of information and ever-advancing skill level. You need to understand early on that learning goes hand-in-hand with working, no matter

what you do for a living. Continuing education in any form is a necessity for every professional, especially nowadays with so many almost daily advances in technology. The more you know, the more tools you have to create whatever it is that you create. And possessing such knowledge gives you the power to use it and create with it. Without that knowledge, you will be weak and largely ineffective, and you will probably end up being a dreary hack and never an inspired professional. Why struggle when you can thrive in your creative career?

You don't need to enroll in art school or get an advanced degree in literature to be proficient in your creative pursuit – but it sure can't hurt! Take all the classes you need in order to master your craft inside and out. If you can't afford to buy books, get yourself a library card and use it regularly. If your library doesn't have the books or videos you need, another library probably does and you can apply for inter-library book loans at the reference desk.

An added bonus from all of this studying of your craft is that you will be almost constantly inspired! How can you not be? Every time I look at a work of art, I am inspired to draw or paint. Every time I read a good book, I want to sit down and write another one myself. Read "Alice in Wonderland" and remember what the dormouse said: "Feed your head." Feed it with every scrap of knowledge you can find.

You don't know it all. You never will. You don't have all the answers. You never will. Even experts don't have all the answers. And they never will either. You must always be learning and open to learning and hearing new ideas. Learn to listen to other divergent ideas. Even if you don't like them or don't use them, every idea is food for thought. You never know when you might need them.

Research & Planning

If knowledge is the foundation for your craft, then research and planning are the foundation for your individual creative works. If you are missing information or have the wrong information, or if you fail to create good plans for your works, you will ultimately become blocked creatively.

Research and planning are done almost simultaneously. You start with a basic idea and create a plan from it – a sketch, an outline, a chart, etc. – and then you do your research. The plan is likely to change somewhat after you do the research, so you revise the plan. As you begin to work with the plan, you may find you need to do additional research. More plan revisions will usually follow. You may go back and forth like this throughout your project, as do many writers in the course of working on their manuscripts. Or, you may only need to do some research up front followed by either a very simple or a very complex plan. There is no specific right or wrong to this process, only that you must develop these important work habits in order to successfully complete your projects. Here are some examples:

Michael *is a jewelry designer who spends most of his time drawing his designs before ever building a piece. His wife and fellow jewelry designer, Marianne, prefers to immediately begin work from three-dimensional models that she makes from clay and wire and “odd bits and scraps of this and that.”*

Terry *designs facial appliances for use in movies. He spends all of his time doing detailed drawings and rarely ever molds or sculpts his designs. Mark, another designer of facial appliances, does only brief sketches which he then sculpts and molds with finer details.*

Otto *works for an advertising agency. He designs and builds ads, brochures, business cards, etc. His company requires him to draft for the client at least three viable options for each piece he creates, whether they are done by hand or on the computer.*

Bettina *writes articles about domestic issues: cooking, home improvements, sewing, gardening, etc. The soul of brevity, she claims that all her articles are written using the exact same outline: introduction, description, how-to, and summary. Evan, who writes articles about outdoor sports, says that he approaches each article differently and always writes with as detailed an outline as he can manage.*

Many writers these days are negligent in creating outlines. This is likely due to a very unfortunate trend in the teaching of writing over the

past twenty years or so. Students are being taught to write without structure in a stream of consciousness manner. While this is a terrific means of self-expression, it does little to train a would-be writer to organize their thoughts sufficiently to create an intelligible book or article for hire. If your market is magazines, you need to be able to knock out a 2,400 word article in about 4 hours. You can't do that effectively without an outline. And contrary to popular belief, having a proper structure for whatever you do is not a barrier to creativity. On the contrary, having a solid structure such as an outline merely provides a viable workspace within which to fully express your creative flow.

I receive many calls and letters from writers who are having trouble finishing their manuscripts, long and short. And of those who do manage to finish, their works are generally rambling and incoherent and in need of a great deal of work in order to be saleable. If you are a writer, do yourself a really huge favor and learn how to create a proper outline. It is the key to good writing and I guarantee you will thank me all the way to the bank. Muriel does.

Muriel *handled insurance claims for a medical practice and wanted to write articles about health and health care. She said she didn't care if she made any money doing it; she just wanted to educate people. I taught her everything I knew about writing as a profession, and I emphasized the outline as an integral part of the writing process. She balked at it. I assured her it was her best option for a well-organized piece. She continued to balk. Ten years later, I came across an article she had written for a health magazine. I wrote to her and congratulated her. She wrote back the following: "I have been a full-time writer for five years now ... I am very grateful to you for all your advice ... I confess I did not write with an outline at first, and many of my articles were rejected or the editors rewrote them ... Everyone likes to hear it, so here goes – you were right! Outlining is definitely the answer."*

Expressing

Once you've made a plan and start to express it, you may still find yourself blocked. If you are newly trained, you may simply lack practice and/or lack experience with the practical application of your craft. When I wrote my first magazine article, I knew and understood the English language – grammar, syntax, spelling, vocabulary – and I understood how to use language to communicate. But I had no idea how to write for hire. I knew people would be reading what I wrote, but I didn't understand how to write for a particular audience or how to angle a piece to reflect a particular viewpoint. I didn't know how to evaluate the articles in a publication to get a feeling for their editorial style. I also did not understand the importance of the overall structure of an article to its ultimate readability. I got much better with practice. It meant a lot of rewriting and more than just a few rejections before I finally got the hang of it.

Another source of creative blocks that is a frequent problem for both part-time and full-time creative people is the absence from their projects for prolonged periods of time. This can happen if you are a part-time writer working on a novel and have a full-time day job and a busy family to take care of, or if you are a full-time writer who has to put aside the novel from time to time in order to work on article assignments or other works for hire.

If you can only pursue your work once or twice a month, you may find it very difficult to get back into the swing of it each time. You may not always hear the muse or even feel particularly motivated when you finally have the time to work. This is something you will just have to accept. Try not to force yourself to get motivated all at once as that will surely block you in and of itself. If you're trying to create a large work such as a historic novel or a mural-size painting, you might want to consider pursuing smaller/shorter projects that can be completed within the scope of a day or two until you can devote more continuous time to such large scale projects.

Whenever you are ready to continue with your project – even if you’ve only been away from it for a couple of days – give yourself a few minutes to “warm up.” Review what you have done so far, looking at it from all angles. Review your plan and see where you stand with it. Don’t just sit down at your desk, your easel, or your piano and expect to take up right where you left off.

Striving for perfection and an over-attention to details are also sure ways to become blocked while your work is in progress, especially if you actually think your work will ever be perfect (it won’t) or if you are trying to attend to all the fine details prematurely (patience is virtue). Every work starts with the bare bones and is fleshed out from there. You need to establish an organized approach with your initial plan. Then you do your rough draft, conceptual design, clay mold, or watercolor sketch and build on that. If you try to apply the details and make them perfect at the beginning stage, you will basically set yourself up for failure upon failure. Do it all gradually. If you have trouble doing that, try incorporating the fleshing out stages into your initial plan by itemizing them and then indicating when and where they should be done.

Gary was a perfectionist. He talked all the time about the progress on his novel. He said that he dedicated almost every Saturday morning to working on his novel for four hours. After about a year, he casually mentioned that he had written only 40 pages. That’s roughly five hours per page! His explanation? “I keep reading over what I have already written and I tinker with it each time. Then I write a couple new pages and end up reading them the following week and rewriting them too. I probably rewrite everything at least a dozen times because I want it to be perfect.” Gary has never completed any novel or short story that he has started.

Someone like Gary could well be an exemplary writer, but if they can’t finish anything because they are too caught up in the details, what’s the point? Writing is just an exercise and will never attain the status of a masterpiece.

Another form of creative block occurs when the project is going along just fine, but you suddenly deviate from your plan and go from your initial idea to something that is so totally different that it no longer fits the plan at all and ruins the entire project in the process. This is really just a lack of follow through in disguise, because rather than sticking to the plan and finishing the work, you've stopped what you're doing and gone in another direction altogether. Unless there was a legitimate reason for deviating from your original plan (i.e., a flaw in the plan itself), you need to learn to finish what you start the way you initially planned it. Discipline is important in completing any project successfully, so make a good plan and then summon up all your available will power and stick to it until you are done.

Getting Organized

Every time you have an idea, write it down. Keep a notebook with you at all times. You won't believe how many ideas you really have until you look at your list of potential projects to do. You can transfer them into the computer and print them out. I attach my working ideas to a clipboard and I look at it first thing every day. That reminds me of what's ahead for me. I'm more focused that way, and I'm always ideating. Ideas always breed more ideas. And you can't have too many of them. Some will be duds, but others will spark some terrific creations.

Another benefit to writing things down is that it keeps you from having to remember everything in your head, taking up the energy you could put to better use by creating something. I keep not only my creative projects and ideas in writing, but also the things I need to do in my everyday life, because that takes up mental energy too. I have my master to-do list organized on one page according to what it is that I have to do and want to do, whether I need to do it immediately, a week from now, or just "some day when I have the time." This means that I have the page divided into sections: one for my website, one for my books that I'm writing, one for illustrations I need to do, one for garden projects, one for home repairs and improvements, one for my family genealogy projects, etc. As I complete something I draw a line through it. If I need to add something, I scribble it in the

proper section, and then I update the list each week from those scribbled notations. My current list has 11 sections and a total of 96 items. Your list may be smaller or it could be twice as long.

Keep a calendar too. At the beginning of each year, write in all the things you do regularly. I do this with birthdays, yard clean-up weeks the garbage company offers, special art shows at my local museum, etc. I make sure to include reminders to back up my computer files onto CDs, do my taxes, renew my driver's license, return books to the library, and so forth. Nothing is ever too trivial to put on a calendar. It's one less thing for your brain to handle. You just look at the calendar every morning and know what has to be done. And that's how it all gets done.

Summary

Intellectual and educational blocks are not always easy to conquer, but to be your most creative demands that you be fully prepared with all the skills, training, and knowledge available to you and that you exercise sound planning techniques to ensure that your projects reach their successful completion.





PERCEPTUAL - COGNITIVE

Perception has to do with how you see and interpret the world. It's part brain and part experience. That means that you have to change the way you think and change the way you live in order to break down any barriers to creativity that your perceptions and thought patterns may be erecting. Your imagination comes from your brain and more deeply from your heart and soul. But it is triggered by what you experience. So, you need to get out of yourself and into the world to expand your thinking, your imagination, and your creativity.

You don't have to climb Mt. Everest or swim with the dolphins to accomplish this, but you do need to experience life to see clearly what your world is all about, the many different kinds of people in it, and all the different ways to approach life and the creative process. If you only know how to do things one way your work will be left wanting when it comes to innovation. Everyone has at least one perceptual block to overcome, and the sooner you overcome it the better.

Brendon *was an only child who showed a talent for playing and composing music at an early age. His parents gave him all the necessary musical training they could afford. They indulged his talent and set high standards of achievement for that talent. But Brendon was also a semi-invalid, and his parents sheltered him too. He did not move away from home until he was 32 years old and playing with a major touring orchestra. When he traveled to other countries, he was astounded at what he saw and he was inspired to compose. Said Brendon after his first globe-trotting experience: "If I never travel again, I will have seen and experienced enough from this one trip to inspire me for the rest of my life."*

Another form of perceptual block results from an overabundance of input from your world. Sensory overload can also cause a block because today's world has so many choices for everything, many of

which seem to be important on the surface, but when more carefully observed often turn out to be relatively inconsequential. But those inconsequential choices are still there and they do add up, so much so that they can distract you when you try to assure yourself that you have all the necessary information on which to base a decision, but you instead just end up feeling overwhelmed and incapable.

Greta was raised in a small, poor town in eastern Europe. She had little formal schooling but was a very talented artist. She did not leave her home town until she was 22 years old, at which time her widowed mother married an American who brought his new family to the United States. **Greta** enrolled in a private art school in California. She was overwhelmed by the fast-paced culture into which she was suddenly submerged. She felt unable to continue her studies as she was continually blocked due to distractions of noise and so many things from which to choose. She found it not only disconcerting but also traumatic just going to the grocery store. “I want to buy some little thing and I can’t find it anywhere. I see so much around me and it is too much. Sometimes, I just want to go back to where I was born. I can’t think here.”

Daydreaming

I once worked at a company where I was doing some design work. One day, I was relaxing in my chair and looking out the window, trying to come up with an idea. My boss walked in and said, “What are you doing?” I replied, “I’m thinking.” “Well, get back to work,” he ordered.

Some people just don’t understand the creative mind and the creative process. They don’t understand the intensity of thought that goes along with doing something creative. You have to either try to educate them or just go right on doing whatever it takes to create and hope that they’ll be so wowed by what you produce that they’ll ignore how you did it.

Escaping into your own mind is often a great place to go to seek the ideas and inspiration you need to get the job done. Daydreaming is just fantasizing. It’s letting your mind drift. For some, like me, this is just another form of meditation. But I also find that almost anything

I do can get me into the daydream or meditative state of mind, whether it's going outside and watering the yard, going for a walk or bicycle ride, sitting on the back patio and watching the birds splash around in the bird bath, or even just playing a quick round of solitaire on the computer. After just a few short minutes, my mind is clear and I feel refreshed. I'm ready to return to what I was working on, often with a new perspective or at the very least feeling more energized.

Brainstorming

You can break down limitations and expand creativity by brainstorming over your project. Just let your imagination go wild, and don't be afraid if it starts to take you into unexplored territory. The process of ideation is at the heart of all creativity and sometimes it gets a little crazy. Brainstorming is part and parcel to "thinking outside the box" and "pushing the envelope" – both expressions that sound ridiculous and even pretentious at times, but they actually make sense when applied to the creative process. Begin by asking "what if ...?" and then fill in the blank with whatever pops into your head. Of course, some ideas will be pure nonsense, but out of all the ideas, there will be at least a few that you may one day develop, and they are likely to be in some way "cutting edge" for your craft or for you as a person.

Do your brainstorming wherever and whenever you feel most energetic and open to the process. But don't be surprised if you are able to "wake yourself up" by brainstorming too. The important thing is that you learn to do it and that you do it often. Exercising your mind is key to creativity. So is opening up your mind to all that the world has to offer.

If you're still stuck during the creative process, talk about it. Whether you talk to your spouse, your parent, your best friend, a fellow creative person, or your favorite cat, you need to communicate your frustration. Often, just talking about it will trigger a solution.

Open Up Your Mind

Visiting art galleries and reading classic literature are certainly great ways to fire up your creative juices. But if you only visit art galleries that

cater to traditional works of art and only read novels written before 1900, perhaps you would find new inspiration at a gallery of modern art or by browsing the stacks on the bestseller table at the bookstore or library. The same is true in reverse. The point is, you need to keep your mind open to anything and everything that is happening creatively throughout the world. There are new trends developing daily and there is a plethora of new and unusual works of art and literature released on the public every day. It is almost a full-time job keeping up with it! And you probably won't be able to keep up with all of it, but you really owe it to yourself to at least try to keep up with as much as you possibly can. Subscribing to, or reading magazines and newspapers in libraries and online, will allow you to get an expansive new perspective every month or so on what's happening in the world.

It's okay to spend some time watching movies and TV, but keep in mind that too much TV won't fire up your brain cells; it will more likely burn them out! I'm not kidding. Not only does TV promote stereotyping, which is a sure way to stop creativity cold, but it also plays to the lowest common denominator as far as audience intellect is concerned. Sitcoms and reality shows are sadly lacking in imagination, and news reporting is now little more than news commentary that drags on and on, repeating itself again and again. If you can't turn off the TV altogether, at least be very selective about what you watch. You can put those "couch potato" hours to far better use with a good book or a trip to a gallery or even a workout at the gym to keep you fit and healthy.

Patience is Virtue

All good things come to those who wait. It's true. It pays to wait. If you try to rush something because you are impatient and want it "right now," you may not give your creations time to develop, to mature, to ripen into the masterpieces you envision. Don't panic when you've got a deadline. Remain calm, take stock of what you need to do, put your plan into action, and create! And don't be afraid to take a break now and then. Whether it's a 15-minute coffee break, a game of solitaire, an hour-long walk, an overnigher to a neighboring town, or a two-week camping trip, you need to refresh yourself. Sometimes

a change of surroundings can help. Take the needed break from your office or studio. When you relax, your head clears and ideas flow.

In some cases, you will probably want to “sleep on it,” or merely walk away from a project for a period of time until you can revisit it and see it with new eyes. This is particularly important for writers, because they so often get bogged down in their work that they lose perspective. A break from the work for a few days – even a few months – can be invaluable to their creative process. This will also prevent writers from prematurely judging and critiquing their own work before it is even finished.

And patience really helps when you’re dealing with the long waits that are so often inherent in getting your work recognized. You don’t want to give up simply because you are too impatient. As of this writing, the biggest-grossing movie star of all time is Harrison Ford. He made his living as a carpenter until he got his first major acting role at the age of 35. According to Ford: “I realized early on that success was tied to not giving up. If you simply didn’t give up, you would outlast the people who came in on the bus with you.” Ford’s patience paid off, and so will yours.

Troubleshooting

No creative work is without its set of problems. There will be times when you simply have to admit that your idea was not as great as you thought it was. Your plot line doesn’t wrap up neatly. Your ceramic pot looks like a kindergarten flop. Your sunlit landscape turns out murky. And your self-portrait in clay looks more like a bust of George Washington. Learn to look at your work critically and see where you went wrong. Then try to think of several different ways that you might be able to fix the problem. If you get in the habit of troubleshooting while the work is in progress, you can often avoid writing a hundred pages of meaningless drivel or wasting several tubes of perfectly good paint.

To fix a problem and get back on the creative track, you have to know exactly what the problem is. You must be able to realistically assess the problem and seek advice from others if you can’t see it as

clearly as you should. And that is a real possibility, since sometimes we can't see what's right in front of us because we are so deeply immersed in it. We can't see the forest for the trees, so to speak. If you seek the advice of others, be sure that you listen to what they have to say with an open mind. And try not to take only one outside opinion as the definitive one. There are many sides to any given problem, and you want to hear all of them, especially if you are coming up empty on your own.

So what might the problem be? Lack of imagination? Is the work derivative or just like everyone else's? Is it too far out, perhaps even incomprehensible? Is it a color problem? A grammar issue? A seventh chord that doesn't quite fit with the intent of the lyrics? Is it too long, too short, too tall, too massive, too petite, too pale, too dark, too sharp, too dull, too cute, too ornate, too bland? Is the perspective off in some way? Is a subplot interfering with the main story line? Or is it most likely a combination of several things that work together to spell disaster? Once you define the problem, you can brainstorm – alone or with others – to find a solution.

Fear of Failure

This is basically the same as fear of making a mistake. You don't want to be laughed at if you do something that doesn't work out the way you thought it would. Maybe there was a parent who was judgmental and you're still carrying that parent's voice in your head that says you're a failure. Fear of failure can either stop the initial flow of ideas for a project long before you ever get started, or it can prevent you from finishing a project once you do start.

To overcome failure, you have to think about it differently. Failure is a necessity. It is how you learn. The more failures you experience, the better you get at creating things that are successful. For example, when writers send out query letters to publishers trying to get writing assignments or books published, they risk failure with every query letter. Amateurs tend to write poor query letters and get more rejections, more failures, than do their experienced counterparts who have

learned what works in their query letters and what doesn't from their own pile of rejections. Professional writers also learn early that querying, like traditional sales, is a numbers game. The more you query, the more rejections, but also the more acceptances.

One way to get over fear of failure is to work as part of a team so that many ideas are on the table and the group takes the responsibility for failure rather than the individual. As times goes by and you become more confident in your ability to perform effectively as a creative person, you can then attempt more solo projects that will display your competence.

Be A Risk Taker

One of my favorite quotes was made in a speech at the Sorbonne in Paris on April 23, 1910 by President Theodore Roosevelt. It is from his speech "Citizenship in a Republic," but it is more commonly known as his "Man in the Arena" speech. The following is an excerpt:

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

Being creative always contains an element of risk. You are, after all, attempting something new and unique. You could fail. People could laugh at you. Maybe rightfully so. You may foster many ridiculous creations in your life. You are bound to fail many times. You win some,

you lose some. But you must keep taking the risk. The more things you create – great, bad, or mediocre – the greater the percentage of successes you'll have, because you will become more proficient at your craft in the process.

Taking a risk can produce different outcomes depending on the person and how willing they are to keep forging ahead when the going gets tough:

Paulette was a production assistant and aspiring screenwriter. She had written several plays and screenplays and couldn't get any producer interested in them. Finally, she got two TV scripts produced, but the series was cancelled before the third installment aired. A negative review of the show mentioned the quality of the writing as "derivative" and "trite." **Paulette** stopped writing entirely. Within one month she had moved from southern California to Missouri where she works to this day as a customer service representative for a cosmetics company.

Aaron was a high school teacher and aspiring novelist. But neither publishers nor literary agents had any interest in his one finished manuscript. He decided to rework it into a screenplay and he found a producer for it. It was going to be a made-for-TV movie. While the movie was being produced, **Aaron** moved on to finish another screenplay that he adapted from a novel he had started but never finished. Unfortunately, the TV movie was shelved before it ever aired. **Aaron** could not sell his second screenplay. He began working on another novel based on a short story that he had recently sold. A literary agent loved the manuscript but could not find a publisher for it. **Aaron** then tried his hand at a play, and the play was produced. A director saw it and put **Aaron** in touch with a man he thought might want to make it into a movie. It never happened. But, the director also introduced **Aaron** to the producer of a daytime drama, and **Aaron** was hired as one of its writers. He continues to write for the serial and sell his short stories. As of this writing, he has a possible movie deal that is currently under negotiation.

You should always keep trying and not be afraid to take a risk. But there are risks and there are risks. You don't want to take stupid risks. You want to take "calculated" risks. These are risks that are based on evaluating a situation, exploring all its possible solutions, and then selecting and implementing what you believe to be the best solution. Here's an example of how determination and steadfast dedication can turn what would otherwise be a crapshoot into a highly viable plan:

Becky was an art student who lived with her family in metropolitan Minneapolis. She had never lived away from her parents and she had no work experience of any kind. But she desperately wanted to work for a well-known movie production company in a small town in northern California. After she finished her degree, **Becky** continued to live at home. For six months she worked on creating and assembling a portfolio that she thought would appeal to the movie production company. She read about the company on its website and she carefully studied every aspect of its many productions so that she could better customize her portfolio to meet their exact needs. She also wrote to the company and established a cordial correspondence with one of their creative directors. He gave her a lot of advice which she followed to the letter. Her parents gave her a round-trip ticket to San Francisco for her 21st birthday. She made an appointment with the creative director, flew to California, and showed him her portfolio. He was impressed and referred her to another creative director who hired her as an intern. **Becky** eventually became a full-time employee and worked for the company for six years. She then married and moved to southern California where she works for another well-known production company.

Break the Rules

Just because they – you know who "they" are, the so-called experts in your field – say that you must do something a certain way does not mean that you can't find a better or more effective way to do it. That's what creativity is all about! Don't ever let "them" deter you from writing a great novel because your way of developing a story conflicts with what is considered acceptable. Evaluate the

known ways of approaching your manuscript and then explore the variation that you think will work better for you. Then make the decision about how to proceed. Here's a little illustration of how it works:

Brian was a landscape architect who lived and worked in New England for ten years before moving to Santa Monica. He had difficulty finding a job in his new location because employers were reluctant to hire someone who was not fully familiar with the plant materials and growing conditions of southern California, where water is at a premium and the change in seasons is negligible. After studying up on the local plant materials, **Brian** found the selections to be somewhat limited; nurseries stocked a lot of the same plants, even though there were many alternatives that could be grown successfully in southern California as well as on the east coast. Eventually, **Brian** ventured out on his own and specialized in designing "New England cottage-style" gardens for the rich and famous in Hollywood and Beverly Hills.

Fear of Success

This works a lot like fear of failure. You want to succeed, but what happens when you do? You are expected to succeed again. And again. And again. That is the responsibility that comes with success. If you don't follow up, you have failed. So, we're back to fear of failure all over again, and like fear of failure, you have to hang in there, because you get better with practice.

Unlimited Creativity

Putting limits on your creativity can result not only in blocks but may also make you bored and inhibit further creative inspiration and expression. If you are a writer and you limit yourself to writing only certain kinds of poetry or only one particular genre of fiction or only one topic of non-fiction, or if you are an artist who only works in oils, only does landscapes of a particular area, only does portraits, or always works with the same color palette, you may find it exceedingly difficult to maintain a fresh outlook and spontaneity, to feel stimulated and challenged, and to produce work that is new, unique, and exciting.

One way to jumpstart creativity and keep it alive is to try a new genre. Every creative pursuit falls within a genre – perhaps one you create! Artists’ genres range from realism to abstract expressionism; genres for fiction writers cover everything from romance to sci-fi. If you’re a watercolor illustrator who is used to painting people and things that are easily identifiable, take a stab at some free-form abstracts. Always writing historic fiction? How about stretching your writing muscles to “go where no man has gone before”? There’s no law that says you have to work in only one medium. Sometimes when you switch gears and try something different you find new inspiration for your old work:

M’gara *is a watercolor painter who decided to try her hand at collage after attending a workshop. She now paints works that resemble her collages, and she has also done several pieces in which she experimented with combining the two media.*

Ron *was an ornamental iron worker who had a side business creating mobiles for commercial properties. One day, he experimented on a much smaller scale by creating miniature mobile earrings for his wife. It created a whole new business for him, and it took some of his large scale commercial pieces into an entirely different direction creatively.*

So, if you’re going to create a picture to hang on your wall, why use your hard-worked pastels again? Try colored pencils. Or watercolor. Tired of being a legal writer? Maybe you should try writing some ad copy. Or a webpage. Or poetry. What about a how-to book on becoming a legal writer? Sick of chiseling away at a block of limestone? Why not carve a piece of driftwood instead?

Looking for a dramatic creative change? Try removing yourself from what you normally do and experiment with something entirely different. If you’re a writer, give painting a try. Who knows, you might end up illustrating your next book. Already a painter? How about sitting down at the computer and writing a book about your favorite artist? Or maybe write some poetry to accompany your art. Need a break from modeling in clay? Maybe you can write a song or a lyric.

If nothing else, you might discover a pleasant hobby or pastime to pursue when you are not working.

An Attitude Adjustment

In every career as in all other aspects of your life, having a sense of humor can be the real cure for almost anything that ails you. Just being able to recognize the humor in any given situation really helps. Also, the use of humor can help release and reduce tension when the going gets tough.

Optimism pays off as well. If you can't see the glass as half-full, it's time to get your eyes fixed! Being an optimist means that your eyes are fully open and seeing all sides of a situation. And you need to see all sides of a situation when you are trying to create something. The more you know, the more options you have at your disposal for approaching your work. And each approach will contain many viable ideas. But if you see the glass as half-empty, you may be tempted to close your eyes to all those many and varied options. By being an optimist, you will also automatically develop a mindset that says, "I am ready to succeed." And you will.

It is also helpful to learn to let go, to roll with the punches, and to make compromises along the way. You can't control everything and trying to do so is merely a waste of time that you could be spending doing something creative. You won't always get your own way either, and you have to learn how to give a little, to make a compromise that is mutually acceptable.

My late mother always quoted the Serenity Prayer when things went awry, and I think it is definitely an inspiration for adjusting your attitude and living your life in peace and harmony. Its origins and authorship are questionable, but here it is in case you don't have a copy on hand:

*God grant me the Serenity to accept
the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
and the Wisdom to know the difference.*

Summary

Perceptual and cognitive blocks will disappear when you open your mind to all the possibilities, break a few rules, take a lot of risks, and have the patience to keep trying until you succeed in your creative pursuits. Don't put limits of any kind on yourself or your creativity. Try something new – every day!





EMOTIONAL - PSYCHOLOGICAL - SPIRITUAL

Nothing will be able to stop your flow of creativity once you deal with and eliminate even one little tote bag from your psychological baggage. Carrying all that luggage around is bound to sap your creative strength! It takes an awful lot of mental effort to manage one's own baggage. Sooner or later you may find yourself unable to create anything at all. And you don't want that to happen!

When you are distracted by things happening in your psyche or in your life, you may find yourself creatively blocked due to psychological depression, whether acute (short-term) or chronic (long-term). You might feel overwhelmed with grief or guilt or relationship problems. You may have self-esteem issues that don't seem like they should be affecting your work, but they do. You can be subconsciously afraid of success as much as you can be of failure. If you do not deal appropriately with your psychological, mental, and emotional baggage, you may find yourself additionally burdened with substance abuse issues such as smoking, drinking, and drugging or possibly food, sex, gambling, and shopping addictions, each of which then manifests as additional problems to distract you even further from your creative pursuits.

Emotional issues, when unaddressed, can leave you in a rut from which you cannot crawl out. You cannot create much when you're stuck in a rut. After all, you can't be very flexible when you're squeezed into such a tight place. Not much wiggle room in a rut. Also, being in a rut can make you judgmental (my rut is the only rut) and negative (everyone will eventually be stuck in a rut anyway ...). To be creative, you have to be positive and extremely flexible and open at all times. You must be able to live in and experience the world at large, to see the big picture. This also helps you put your own psychological universe in order because, sad but true, there is always someone, somewhere, who is worse off than you are.

As of 2004, statistics by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) indicate that 44.3 million Americans suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder each year, including depression, bi-polar disorder (manic-depression), anxiety and social anxiety disorders, attention deficit disorders, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, panic disorders, and post traumatic stress syndrome. That's 22.1% of all Americans, or one in every five adults! Further statistics indicate that 19.1% of adults 18 to 54 years of age suffer from anxiety disorders.

Depression

Four out of the top ten causes of disability in the United States are mental disorders, with "major depressive disorder" being the leading cause of all disability in the U.S., affecting 9.9 million adults, or roughly 5% of the population. The NIMH's 2004 statistics on depression state that 18.8 million Americans suffer from "clinical" depression. That's 9.5% of all adults. But a 2003 National Comorbidity Study sponsored by the NIMH found that 35 million Americans (16% of the population) suffer from other forms of depression that are serious enough to warrant treatment. Those other forms of depression fall into three main categories:

- ◆ Major or severe depression is when you are in despair and feeling hopeless. You could also be anxious and irritable. You lose all interest in life and are incapable of feeling pleasure or sexual arousal. You may lose or gain weight and suffer from sleep disorders (which can also be a cause rather than a symptom of depression). There is not necessarily a particular trigger event that marks the onset of this condition. It could be a combination of many events over a period of time. In extreme cases, you may need to be hospitalized.

- ◆ Dysthymia is a mild form of general depression in which you still function even though you have a depressed mood. It can last for years and you may not even know you have it because you have become so accustomed to feeling the way you do. It is often characterized by low self-esteem. As with major depression, there may be no specific trigger event.

◆ Situational or short-term depression is brought about as a result of a particular event, such as a major life change (relocation, marriage, new job, etc.) or grief due to loss (of a loved one, a job, a way of life, etc.). Other forms of situational depression include postpartum depression and seasonal affective disorder (a reaction to a lack of sunlight also called the “winter blues”).

Clearly, depression is a very common and debilitating disorder. But the fact that it is so common does not make it normal or even acceptable. It needs to be treated like any other disease or disorder. Unfortunately, it often goes undetected or ignored as “just a passing phase.” But even a minor or short-term depression that is untreated can result in a long-term or chronic depressed condition.

You cannot live with untreated depression and still be at your most creative. The mere distraction of feeling lousy is more than enough to block creativity. Add to that the fact that depression often comes with heightened anxiety that can further distract you from the creative process. The despair, hopelessness, and loss of interest in life destroy creativity.

Addictions

Addictions are disorders of the brain in which there is an impairment of the reward mechanism and the decision-making process. Some people are predisposed to certain types of addictions due to genes that are present in “addictive personalities.” People who suffer from addictions thrive on the rush they get from a substance or an activity to which they are addicted. How they become addicted varies from one person to the next, as do the things to which they are addicted, including but not limited to food, sex, drugs, chemicals, alcohol, gambling, shopping, tobacco, and danger.

Addictions all have one thing in common: they can ruin your life. Some addictions will kill your body one cell at a time, while others will wreck havoc in your daily existence. Think of it as the end result and you’ll see how addictions block creativity. If you’re addicted to a substance, you can destroy your lungs, your liver, your brain, or other bodily organs. Addicted to sex? Welcome to the world of STDs – sexually transmitted

diseases – including everything from herpes to HIV/AIDS. If food is your drug of choice, you may find your waist expanding as your blood pressure rises and your cholesterol jumps sky high. Shopping addictions lead to uncontrollable debt. The list goes on and on.

In many cases, people become addicted after merely trying to do something that will make them fit in with their peer group. Or they may want to numb themselves to whatever pain they are experiencing. I personally recommend therapy at the first sign of a problem, before you even have the chance to get addicted. But if you're already addicted, you absolutely must get help NOW.

Therapy

I love therapy. I really do. Nothing works better at propelling me out of the dark and into the light than a visit to a skilled therapist. Don't get me wrong, I don't believe in protracted, intense, introspective analyses that cost a fortune and make you more neurotic than functional. I'm also not talking about group therapy or "the big wallow," as I like to call it. I'm talking about good old-fashioned "My problem is ..." and "I recommend that you ..." communications.

I want and expect my therapist to actually have a conversation with me. I expect my therapist to give me feedback, advice, and options for how I might handle my problems and prevent them from recurring down the road. Seeing someone who just sits there and nods is no better than talking to your cat, and I've done that too – with mixed results!

Therapy can take many forms and can consist of one visit, ten visits, or a year's worth of counseling. It all depends on what the problem is and how long it takes you and your therapist to get a handle on it. Some problems don't require as much work as others, and some seemingly insignificant problems can take a lot longer than you might expect. The length of time depends on the problem you have, how effective your therapist is at dealing with that specific problem, and how willing you are to take whatever steps are necessary to do your part in confronting your issues, modifying your behaviors, and healing yourself.

You may need a drug counselor or drug counseling program. You may need some other counseling program to deal with other forms of addiction. Most people just need your regular garden-variety therapist. Most need a psychologist/psychotherapist and not a psychiatrist. The difference between the two is that psychiatrists are medical doctors who can order lab tests and write prescriptions for medication. If you have a condition that demands medication, even if only for a short time, you must see a psychiatrist. They may also provide psychotherapy or you may request that they recommend you to a licensed psychotherapist. You do not want to depend solely on medication to enhance your mood; you must also participate in psychotherapy of some kind in order to truly get well.

No matter how long it takes, therapy is simply the best investment you can ever make in yourself. It isn't cheap, but it is money well spent. Learn to manage your expendable income so that you can afford therapy when you need it the most. Spend less on clothing your physical body and put more money towards improving your innermost self.

Take your time in finding a qualified counselor or licensed therapist. Ask around and then speak to some of them on the phone to find out how they approach therapy, whether they take insurance, what hours they offer, and any specialties they might have. Let them know what you need and see how they react.

If you visit a counseling center or an individual therapist and you don't feel comfortable with them or don't feel you can work with them after a couple of visits, don't go back. Even if they came highly recommended. Inviting someone into your very personal self demands that you feel comfort and trust with them. Don't ever short-change yourself by settling for a therapist who can't give you what you need. Keep searching until you find the right therapist for you.

Self-Therapy

You may be able to use your creative skills to discover on your own the source of a block and a way to eliminate it. You can do this by bringing your block to life and communicating with it. You can do this

by using your imagination and having a dialogue in your mind with the block, or you can write down a dialogue between you and your block, or you can draw a picture of yourself with your block. Remember that your creativity and imagination are sharing the same space with your intuition. They can all work together effectively to troubleshoot your problems if you just find a way for them to do it.

So what do you say to your block? Well, you can start by recognizing that the block exists. Then, you can invite it to tell you what it wants or needs for you. The block is, after all, a part of you, because you had a hand in creating it. And a block is an obstacle, which is just an opportunity to learn and grow. It is not something to fear or shun. Face it and figure out what it is trying to tell you. Only then can you clearly understand your block and see all the possible solutions to overcoming and eliminating it.

Spirituality

We all have to believe in something. What you believe is very personal and is entirely up to you. There is no magic faith or one-size-fits-all religion that works for everyone. For many, their belief system is a fountain of strength from which flows all creativity and inspiration. But for others, those same beliefs can be a giant block that separates them from experiencing the joys of creativity. It all depends on how you practice your beliefs. Here are two examples:

Andrea *is a part-time fine artist who would like to make a living from her art. She was raised as a Baptist in a fundamentalist church and is a devout Christian who has very specific beliefs about what is morally wrong and right. She is highly critical of artists and their work and even of her own work, if she even suspects that there may be undertones of immorality in a person or portrayed in their work. As a result, Andrea has never been able to connect with other artists in her part of the world, and she lacks a support group for her artistic talents.*

Tomas *is a part-time writer who has had only minimal success in getting his works published. He is a confirmed atheist and thinks that anyone who believes in a god is a few cards shy of a deck. In fact, Tomas*

doesn't believe in anything that he can't see or touch or that can't be proven by modern science. His work suffers as a result, because he has closed his mind to a part of himself and a part of the world that he does not understand and does not even try to understand.

Both of these individuals suffer professionally as creative people, not because of their beliefs, but from their rigid thinking patterns and judgmental attitudes. Being creative requires a mind that is highly flexible. Seeing the world and everything in it as black and white with no shades of gray is probably the single greatest block to anything and everything creative.

For those who struggle with the “higher issues” of god/God, heaven/hell, good/bad, right/wrong, reincarnation, and the soul's purpose, creativity can be a cure as often as it can be blocked. Like mental disorders, spiritual problems must also be addressed. If you are blocked and suspect that it is in your innermost soul, a spiritual advisor may be able to help you shed some light on the problem and find a resolution to it so that you can creatively express what is in your soul.

Sleep & Sleep Disorders

A few paragraphs back I mentioned sleep disorders as both a symptom and a possible cause of depression. Studies indicate that Americans are not getting enough rest. You need rest in order to wake up refreshed and ready to live your life. Lack of rest is just another cause of creative blocks. You can't create if you're too tired to do so. Here's a little insight into the problem.

Biological Clock

Most studies of highly successful people reveal that they are early birds or “larks.” While night “owls” can and do become successful people, they do not do so in as large numbers as do larks. So it would seem that the early bird does, in fact, catch the worm. But if you're not an early bird, don't worry. You can become one if you want to, and if you don't, you can keep burning the midnight oil and hope that this is all just a myth. But whether you are a lark or an owl, you must maintain your biological clock in healthy working order to be your most creative self.

Like every living thing, you were born with a biological clock, that natural inner rhythm that goes so haywire when you travel and experience “jet lag.” But you can suffer from “jet lag” without ever leaving town. It can be a chronic problem when you do not effectively maintain a regular wake-sleep cycle.

Many people feel tired all the time, dragging through each day, feeling anxious, depressed, and unmotivated. They are irritable and sluggish at the same time. Creativity is at a low ebb. When the weekend comes, they sleep late and still drag through their days off. They are not suffering so much from overwork or depression, but rather from lack of sleep. One reason for this is not managing the body’s biological clock.

When you wake up at a different time each day, when you “sleep in” on weekends and holidays, or when you take a vacation and sleep in every day, your biological clock, the system that regulates your body’s inner rhythms, is forced to reset itself each time. It does not matter when you go to sleep, only when you get up, because that is when the biological clock resets itself. Waking up at different times causes stress to the body that manifests as a subtle form of jet lag. As a result, you become even more tired and therefore less effective during your waking hours.

You can prevent this by getting up at the same time, every day, give or take a half-hour. It is also helpful to not use caffeine to wake yourself up, as that actually contributes to the problem by training your body to wake up to caffeine. You need to wake up on your own, naturally. It takes about two weeks to re-set your biological clock and it takes about the same amount of time to get off caffeine. If you can’t quit the caffeine “cold turkey,” you can wean yourself off it by drinking half-regular and half-decaf and gradually increasing the decaf portion.

While it takes two weeks to reset the biological clock, it may take you longer to adjust to your new hours. Old habits can be hard to break when it comes to falling asleep and getting up each day. It is even harder if you have children or if you are sleeping with someone

who does not want to adjust their sleep hours to match yours. In general, I would count on at least a full month before you are fully adjusted to a new sleep routine.

A Good Night's Sleep

Everyone requires a different amount of sleep each night. Eight hours may be enough for most people, but some only need six or seven while others need nine or ten. And if you are under a lot of stress, or feeling depressed, or if you're physically ill, you will probably need even more sleep than you might normally require. However many hours you need is what you must have in order to be your most creative. You need to be awake and feeling rested and refreshed enough for your brain to work properly. You can determine exactly how much sleep you really need by adjusting your sleep schedule as described in the last section. In doing so, you will eventually begin to get the right amount of sleep that you need.

Eliminate anything that prevents you from sleeping soundly, whether it's traffic noise, a too warm or too cool room, a snoring partner, or a too hard or lumpy mattress. Wear ear plugs, shut or open the window, speak to the neighbor about their barking dog, buy a new mattress, etc. Also, don't exercise or eat or drink anything within two hours of going to sleep. If you watch TV before going to bed, try not to watch disturbing news coverage or violent shows. They can stimulate you too much to fall asleep quickly, and if you do manage to fall asleep and are sensitive to those kinds of images, you may have problems staying asleep due to anxiety or nightmares.

If you have trouble relaxing enough to go to sleep at night, try light reading or else try taking your daily shower/bath at night instead of in the morning – and make it a warm, relaxing shower/bath. If you wake up a lot during the night, do not turn on a bright light as that can make it harder for you to fall back to sleep.

If you find that you can't fall asleep easily or you keep waking up a lot at night, try going to bed a half hour later the next night – but don't forget to keep getting up at the same time each morning!

Summary

Emotional, psychological, and spiritual blocks are not the easiest ones to overcome. But, you can make the greatest creative strides when you do. Start by believing in yourself and in something bigger than you. Get help from experts in whatever is troubling you. And get some rest – we all need it!





CULTURE - FAMILY - FRIENDS

How you were raised, the people who raised you, your family, and your social circle have an enormous impact on how you express yourself creatively. As a child, you may have been raised to believe that there is a war going on between art and science, in which science is the natural – and more profitable – winner. Your school may not have taught art, and your parents' teachings may have emphasized that anything practical is good and anything impractical is bad. If you were daydreaming, doodling, writing poetry, strumming a guitar, or dancing as a child, you may have been told that you were lazy and wasting time. As a result, you could be lacking a solid support system, in the home and in the workplace, to foster your creativity. Your family and cultural traditions rule above all else and you are left to flounder on your own when it comes to expressing yourself creatively.

My parents were born in the United States, raised during the Great Depression of the 1930s. They were children of people who came from non-American, European, "old world" cultures. They lived out the traditional husband and wife roles in which the husband worked outside the home and the wife stayed home and took care of the house and children. Neither had a college degree, nor did their ancestors. They were children born from generation after generation of carpenters and farmers.

In the late 1960s, women were beginning to go to college to get a degree and a career rather than to catch a husband. Times were changing. My parents wanted me to go to college, but my father urged me away from the things I was most interested in studying, specifically art, and to a lesser degree psychology. He wanted me to be a school teacher, which he saw as a stable and well-paying profession. He said I would never make it as an artist and that all psychologists were crazy. I didn't want to be a school teacher.

I had always dreamed of being an artist and, quite frankly, I didn't know what else to do when I got to college. I didn't want to disappoint my parents, so I tried to do what my father wanted. It just didn't work. Somehow, I still managed to study art, English, and linguistics, and additionally rack up 72 units of psych. But I was completely unfocused and confused. I dropped out of college when I got married.

I didn't return to school for sixteen years. By then, my career in publishing was underway, and I no longer wanted to study art. I just wanted to finish my degree, which had degenerated to being a "loose end" that I wanted to tie up. I had enough units for three degrees, and I decided to complete a special major – Language Arts – that combined two majors, Linguistics and English. I had already completed all the necessary course work except for some general education requirements. I went to a community college for a year and finished most of the lower division GE requirements before I again dropped out. I returned to school in 1997 and finally completed my degree at the state college I had originally attended in the beginning.

My entire education was a disjointed fiasco most of the time. With family support, I am sure my educational experience would have been a lot more focused and enjoyable. This is a long story that I have told, but I think it illustrates a common problem with trying to do what your culture – your parents' culture – demands, rather than following your heart and doing what is best for YOU. Some day, your parents are going to die, and YOU will be the only one living YOUR life.

Being defined by your culture, your family, your economic status, or whatever it is that was a key element in your upbringing can prevent you from going outside of those traditions and values and pursuing your own life and experiencing other viewpoints in life. It is hard to be creative if you are limited to such group thinking. It doesn't matter whether or not the group thinking is positive or negative. It is still a boundary and obstacle to creative thought. Groups have a tendency towards polarized beliefs. They think in black and white; it's what holds them all together. This is bad, this is good. We've always done it that way. Everyone knows that's how it is.

Nadia's family is African-American. Until she met me, she had never been friends with anyone outside of that culture. Her mother worked for the State of Mississippi and her father owned a small janitorial service in Alabama. **Nadia** went to college with the help of student loans and partial scholarships. She graduated summa cum laude with a degree in business. The problem? **Nadia** had no interest in business; she wanted to be a writer. She left Mississippi because her mother, her sister, and her two brothers were all pressuring her to get a job with the State the way they did. So were her two closest friends. **Nadia** felt she would rather die than work for the State. She moved to California and struggled for four years to balance a variety of day jobs with her freelance writing assignments, until she finally established herself. Her mother still thinks she is crazy and that she will some day come to her senses and get a "real job."

Go out and meet new people, people from other cultures, other religions, other cities, other careers. Learn to see the world through their eyes. Who knows what you might see.

Breaking Old Habits

You can be limiting your creativity by rigid thinking and outdated behaviors that stem from your childhood and adult experiences, your cultural definitions, and your educational background. People are all such creatures of habit! You do things in a way that feels comfortable and right for you. This enables you to do what you do in the fastest and most expedient way possible, though not always necessarily in the most creative way. But if you want to do something unique and unusual, something untried and foreign, you have to break free of those restrictive habits that act like blinders and tune you out from the many other ways that can be used to approach your creative tasks.

You can start by clearing out the old voices in your head that say, "you need to get a responsible job," "writers are crazy people," and "artists never make a decent living." You picked up those voices from whoever it was in your family that had the greatest influence over you as a child. I personally carried around my father's voice for almost

twenty years before I finally got rid of it. But I remember how it sounded: “you’ll never amount to anything,” and “you’re my greatest disappointment.” These are horrible words to say to a child, and they have such far-reaching influences well into adulthood.

If you can’t get rid of those voices by yourself, find a qualified psychotherapist who can help you discover how the past is influencing you in the present. We all come up against enough obstacles in life and we don’t need the added burden of having a negative voice whispering in our ear along the way.

Friends and Peers

More than anything, you need people who support you and your work; who understand, respect, and appreciate you and your talent; who value you as a person and artist. Unfortunately, many of us are plagued by people who make our lives miserable and we either can’t get rid of them, choose not to get rid of them, or want to get rid of them but don’t know how to extricate ourselves from the unhealthy or codependent relationship.

Well, you can’t get rid of your unsupportive family members, but you can at least decrease the amount of time you spend with them. If they are also emotionally or physically abusive, you may want to make a complete break from them until such time as you are emotionally strong enough to stand up for yourself in their presence. Mind you, they won’t like it when you try to pull away, but you must think of your own sanity and your vision of a creative life.

Your friends and acquaintances are another story. You can always cut loose from someone who is not truly a friend to you or who is in some way dumping their negative trash on you and preventing you from being your most creative self. If you don’t have the strength to break the tie, start looking for new friends to spend time with so that you can decrease the time you spend with the undesirable one(s).

If you lack the power to break free from someone, try changing yourself and becoming the person you really want to be. Do it on your

own or do it through therapy, doesn't matter which. Once you change as a person, many of your so-called friends will simply fall by the wayside because they won't fit with the new healthy you. As you become stronger and more confident in yourself, they will also lose their power over you. You will have a whole new circle of friends who are supportive, and those who tried to drag you down will be wallowing in their misery without you.

Beatrice worked as a bookkeeper with her best friend of five years, who liked her job and was happy with things the way they were. **Beatrice** wanted to become a fashion designer and began taking classes to fulfill her dream. In doing so, she met people with whom she had more in common. Her old friend was not supportive of all these changes, and when **Beatrice** left for a new job, they saw each other only a few times before drifting apart.

Networking

What every creative person needs is a supportive network composed of many different kinds of people with varying perspectives on life. Hopefully some of them will also be creative people like yourself. Either way, they will provide many of the necessary shades of grey that will keep you from "thinking in stereotype," which can be a severe restriction on creativity. They will provide you with many approaches and options for expanding your creativity. Having such a circle of friends and acquaintances will also prevent you from envisioning yourself as whatever negative cultural stereotype is associated with your particular artform (e.g, a starving artist).

Where do you meet these supportive folks? They're everywhere: clubs and organizations, school, the gym, the park, the workplace, bookstores, concerts, the library, gallery openings, music stores, or your favorite local café. Maybe online. You just have to strike up a conversation. That may seem hard the first ten times you do it, but you'll get better at it over time!

Having a supportive network of people will give you plenty of opportunities to break free from your cultural boundaries so that you

can experience more of the world, walk in someone else's shoes for awhile, forge ahead into new territory, see the world from a different perspective, interact with new people who live lives that are unlike your own, and try something that you might have previously considered to be "unsafe" only because it is something your parents or your culture always prohibited.

You can stay in touch with your network of supportive people by having coffee occasionally, meeting in groups, corresponding by E-mail, and talking on the phone. Some of them will probably become good friends who you'll see socially and with whom you will participate in many and varied activities. Others will never become more than mere acquaintances or professional associates. But they will all contribute to the enrichment of your life and your craft.

Summary

Blocks that are based on culture, family, and friends are less difficult to handle than they might appear on the outside. It can take time to break old habits and break free from those old, outworn traditions that are holding you back. But it can also be fun to make new friends and expand your world. And once you begin to expand your world, there will be nothing to stop you from expanding your creative horizons too.





CAREER - FIELD - POSITION

Just because you always wanted to be a writer doesn't mean you were meant to write the great American novel. And just because you always wanted to be an artist doesn't mean that you have the eye for it. And you may be a good writer or artist who is simply in the wrong career field, e.g., trying to write novels when you are better skilled as a legal writer, trying to paint when you are better suited to the 3-D world of sculpture, attempting fine art when you are really suited to commercial design.

It is easy to get stuck in an outdated stereotype of the creative person we envisioned ourselves to be as children or young adults. In addition, I am always amazed at the number of artists and writers who try to live out their romanticized notions of their career as it might have been pursued over 100 years ago. We're out of the era of quill pens and grinding your own paint. Long gone are the days when artists and writers had to find rich patrons to support their craft. And most of us are not living in a dark little garret, creating great literary and artistic works by candlelight. To be a successful creative person these days, you simply must let go of these fantasies, and yes, that is all they are, just fantasies. And, unfortunately, fantasies don't pay the bills.

But if you're a creative person, you want to pursue a creative career. What else can you do? It's in your blood. Well, there's plenty you can do. You always have options, and once you let go of any outdated stereotype you have created, you can replace it with a more realistic vision for your career. You may even find that you will pursue more than one type of creative career in your lifetime. Here are some examples of individuals who made changes along the way to finding their ideal creative careers:

Shawn had a degree in art history and had taken some photography courses. He started out his career as a curator of photographs

for a small historical society. When his job was later relegated to volunteers, he moved to a bigger city where he worked for a museum in acquisitions doing inventory. He was disenchanted with the job. But part of his work required him to photograph the inventoried items, and this peaked his earlier interest in photography. He purchased a camera, and began taking elegant photographic portraits of local artists and celebrities in his spare time. Today, Shawn is a freelance photographer specializing in portraiture. He says, "I took the photography classes in college as electives. I never expected to use them in real life. But I think that when you are meant to do something, it happens whether or not you are even consciously aware of how you're getting there."

Jane always fancied herself to be a novelist. She wrote short stories and poetry as a teenager, and when she graduated from college with a degree in English, she struggled as a freelance writer for seven years. She managed to get a few things published, but she didn't really enjoy being a freelancer and she found it hard to come up with story ideas that publishers were looking for. She went to law school for a year but dropped out. She took a part-time job as a researcher and writer for a law firm. The job paid well but was not stimulating enough for her. She quit and took a low-paying part-time job as a receptionist at a large advertising agency. She was immediately excited by her new environment. She was eventually given the opportunity to try her hand at copywriting and found her niche. She now owns a small advertising agency. Erica stated, "I was not realistic about my skills or about my romantic teenage career dream. Someone out there is meant to live that dream, but it's not me. I'm enjoying a career that fits me perfectly."

Jeff grew up in a family-owned cabinet business. His father began to teach him carpentry at an early age and when he graduated from high school, Jeff went to work in the family business building kitchen cabinets. He didn't enjoy the work, but he didn't know what else to do. At the age of 32, Jeff got married and honeymooned in Europe where he and his wife met a German wood carver. Jeff admired the man's

work, and the wood carver invited them to stay as guests in his home in a small town in the Black Forest. Jeff was immediately inspired, and thus began his new career as a wood carver. Over time, he began to paint some of his carvings. Today, he has merged what he learned from his father with what he learned from the German wood carver. Jeff creates elaborately carved and painted doors and cabinetry for an exclusive clientele. He advises, "Never turn your back on an opportunity. When opportunity comes knocking at your door, your very destiny could be standing on the front porch."

Erica studied ballet as a small child and was dancing professionally in her early twenties when she injured her knee and back in an automobile accident and could no longer perform professionally. She fell into a deep depression that lasted almost two years. Then she found a way to channel her love of ballet into two creative enterprises, first as a designer of ballet costumes and then as a choreographer of modern ballet. She found alternative career options that satisfied her needs, and years later she said, "I enjoy choreography so much more than I ever enjoyed performing. But I had to learn to dance and to perform first. I guess my injuries were just the impetus I needed in order to move ahead in my chosen field."

"My chosen field." That is, for many, the key phrase. For me, my chosen field is publishing. It gives me an opportunity to write, edit, design, and illustrate my own books as well as a few select titles for other authors. But my original dream was to be a fine artist. I didn't discover the field of publishing until I had first worked for an advertising agency and then established myself as a freelance writer. By then I was 24 and I took a job as a VP of Marketing/Creative Director for a book publisher. That job allowed me to experience first-hand the many tasks involved in the publishing process, and I knew it would be the industry for me. Then I unexpectedly took a short detour into a creative job as a landscape and floral designer in the horticultural industry. But that detour was a fortuitous one, because it ended up giving me some additional focus for the publishing business I started afterwards. Today, I've been self-employed in the publishing field for

over twenty years, and horticulture is still one of my specialties, both in my writing and in my illustration.

The point to all of this is that you should not aim yourself in one direction and one direction only, if you are struggling all the while. If your chosen path causes you to be creatively stumped a good deal of the time, if you find it stressful to be creative, if you lack motivation and feel unchallenged, maybe you are in the wrong career, wrong field, or wrong position. Maybe your creativity needs a better channel for its expression.

Let's look at just a few examples of the many, many career options that are out there for writers and artists.

Career: Writer

Positions: copywriter, novelist, poet, instructor (how-to, self-help), journalist, screenwriter, legal writer, business writer, reviewer/critic, lyricist, scientific/medical writer, editor, speech writer

Fields: advertising, books, magazines, newspapers, small press, trade journals, movies/TV/radio, government, corporate

Specialties-Non-fiction: animals, gardening, home improvement, genealogy, New Age, sports, health/fitness, medicine, business, finance, investing, movies, TV, collecting, antiques, art, psychology, philosophy, computers, travel, trivia, advice, celebrities, wood-working, boating, camping, nature, environment/ecology, religion, crime, current events, politics, history, music, fashion, women's issues, men's issues

Specialties-Fiction: romance, crime, sci-fi, fantasy, historic, horror, general interest

Specialties-General: legal writing (briefs, custody orders, agreements, demand letters, etc.), letters (personal, business), marketing (ad copy, promotional letters, press releases, webpages, etc.), poetry, lyrics (including jingles)

Career: Artist

Positions: artist, sculptor, designer

Fields: advertising, publishing, movies/TV, civic/government, museums/galleries, manufacturing, corporate

Specialties-Fine art: watercolor, oil, pastel, charcoal, ink, collage, acrylics, felt tips, colored pencil, Chinese brush painting, marble, glass, wood, plastic, ceramics, clay, etc.; traditional, realist, impressionistic, abstract expressionism, cubism, pointillism, performance art, muralist, etc.; animals, landscapes, portraits, botanical illustration, still life, social commentary

Specialties-Commercial art: general illustrator, book designer, advertising/marketing designer, logo designer, portraiture, cartoonist, police sketch artist, interior designer, landscape designer/architect, fashion designer, makeup artist, costume designer, textile designer, wallpaper designer, furniture designer, retail store display designer, scientific/medical illustrator, sign painter, automobile designer, set designer, matte artist, photographer, computer-generated designs, architect, model builder, computer games artist

Summary

As you can see, there are more than just a few options for writers and artists. And the above lists are by no means comprehensive. There are likewise hundreds of creative jobs in countless career fields for actors, singers, musicians, dancers, etc.

Somewhere out there is a career that is absolutely perfect for you, and you should not rest until you find it, because when you do, it will open the door to an expanded creativity beyond anything you can imagine. It will tap into your very soul and you will explode with a wealth of fresh, unique, distinctive, innovative, exceptional, and even revolutionary ideas, the likes of which you will explore and experience with unparalleled joy for years to come. And that, dear reader, is what creativity is all about!



You were born creative – everyone is – and creative inspiration is everywhere, every day. But you are also the one who makes your very own set of creative blocks. It will take you time and effort to discover why you made those blocks, and then it will take you even more time and effort to get a handle on them so that you can forge ahead with your creative projects. So you must raise yourself to the challenge, because once you have learned to overcome and prevent creative blocks, you will be able to tap into that wealth of inspiration that is all around you and manifest anything and everything that you aspire to create.



About the Author

Joelle Steele is a writer, artist, publisher, and educator. Her works include almost 700 articles, 30+ books, 50+ short stories, 65+ contract templates, and numerous poems, lyrics, jingles, promotional pieces, Web pages, advertisements, illustrations, photographs, and fine art paintings. She frequently weaves her many interests into her works, including horticulture, genealogy, writing, art, photography, cats, and astrology.

Since 1994, Joelle has created and developed several Web sites on which she sells her work and provides a variety of informational resources. She also teaches many different classes through the extended education programs at colleges in the South Puget Sound area of Washington state.

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