

Self Help for Creatives



There are a lot of things that can make creativity difficult.

Finding the time and space to create, overcoming fear and procrastination, growing confidence and self-esteem, coping with working alone, choosing what to work with, coming up with ideas and staying motivated, to name a few.

I have created a master plan that has helped me overcome these difficulties and keep my creative life moving forward: writing books, articles, a blog and several PDFs including this one.

I am a writer, but the lessons I have learnt on my journey are applicable to any artistic pursuit. I have used these techniques to help me achieve more, learn new skills and create things I never dreamed I had the ability to create.



Table of contents

Defining your Creative Path - p.3

Medium and Theme - p.4

- Look at what you already do - p.4
- What do you already own? - p.5
- Which stores are you drawn to? - p.5
- What did you love to do as a child? - p.4
- What do you do when you are procrastinating? - p.6
- Consider a class - p.5
- Use the library for inspiration p.6

Time to Choose - p.7

- Ideas - p.8
- Imagination - p.8
- Brainstorming - p.9
- Keep a journal, notebook or scrapbook - p.9
- Journaling - p.10
- The subconscious - p.11
- Getting started - p.11

Getting (and Keeping) going - p.12

Physical obstacles - p.13

- Finding time - p.13
- Making space - p.18
- Creating a ritual - p.20
- Planning - p.21

Emotional Obstacles - p.24

- Confidence and self-esteem - p.24
- Dealing with disappointment - p.25
- Finding your tribe - p.26

The pros and cons of our current society for the artists p.28

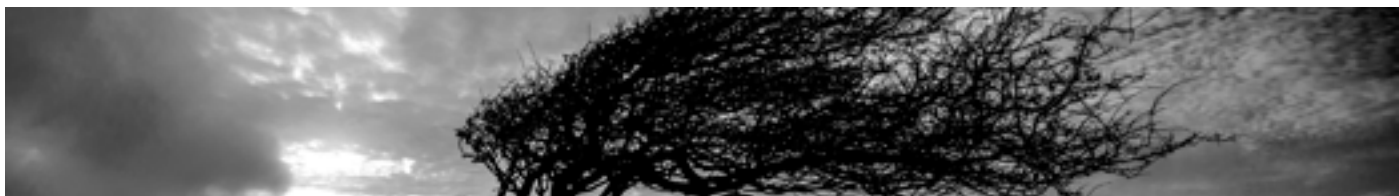
- Negatives - p.28
- Positives - p.28

Recommended Reading - p.29

Defining your Creative Path



Some of us know we want to create but we are not sure how. We are not even sure which medium we want to use and we certainly don't have any definite ideas about the creative work we want to do. If you do know what you want to do and you have a head brimming with ideas then feel free to skip the next two sections and move straight to the section Getting and Keeping Going. But if you are struggling to find your creative outlet and flow — these ideas might help.



Medium and Theme

Look at what you already do

There are clues as to your passions all around you. What kind of books do you read? What TV programmes do you watch? What magazines do you subscribe too? What do you do with your spare time? If you are obsessed with being outside, then perhaps nature photography or sketching might become your passion. If you love history programmes than perhaps writing historical fiction is for you, or writing art history essays. If you have a stack of interiors magazines and are always updating your home's decor then interior design might be the obvious creative outlet. Perhaps you subscribe to a craft magazine but have never quite got round to any of the projects in it — use the rest of this plan to help you make a start.

What did you love to do as a child?

Looking at your childhood pursuits can provide a treasure trove of ideas. As children, we had more free time, less pressure and obligations and were able to follow our inner desires more frequently. We were also more open to what was possible as children, before society taught us to be practical and useful and not to dream too big. Many of us were told that we couldn't make a living as an artist, potter, writer or wood-turner, so we gave up on our dreams. Re-connecting with our childhood passions can help us find the inner creative hidden beneath the layer of obligations and free the creativity side of us from negative lessons learnt about our art. Did you spend your childhood making up stories, creating mini-plays, drawing, painting, collecting things. What made you curious as a child? Does it still fascinate you now? What could you do now to begin to nurture your creative dreams once more?



Which stores are you drawn to?

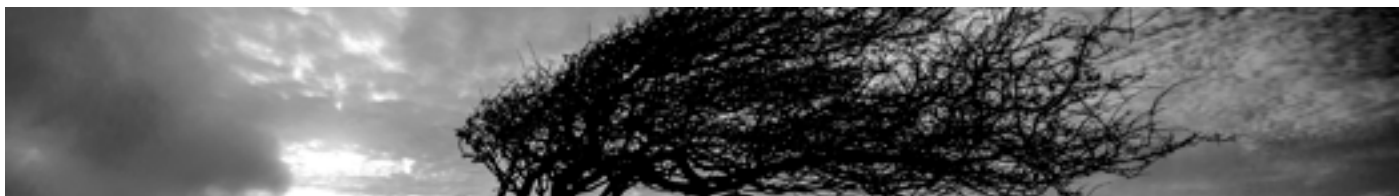
Perhaps you are always drawn to the quilts in your favourite store, or the pottery, or artwork. Maybe you can't pass the music shop without peering in the window. Perhaps you spend your time browsing camera equipment, digital recording gadgetry or kitchen tools. Your shopping habits offer clues to what your inner creative wants to be doing.

What do you already own?

Do you have a cupboard full of fabric or a painting box, a beaten up vintage car in the garage or a complete set of woodworking tools you have barely used. You were drawn to these things enough to buy them so put them to good use. The creative tools you have purchased offer concrete evidence of where your passions lie.

Consider a class

If you are still not settled on your path, then perhaps sign up for a class or classes in the subjects that intrigue you. This is often more cost effective than buying the equipment you need to experiment and find what it is you love. Start with a short course so you can change your mind and try out a few ideas if the first one doesn't inspire you. If you already have the equipment but need some guidance, then there are many online workshops, courses and tutorials available for every medium under the sun.



Use the library for inspiration

If you are still unsure, spend an hour at the library and allow yourself to pick up books on whatever subjects appeal to you. Take them home, browse through them and see which you are drawn to most strongly. You don't have to read the books, but just allow them to point you in the right direction.

What do you do when you are procrastinating?

This offers clues as to what you might really like to do. It doesn't always work. I procrastinate by tidying and cleaning, but I'm pretty sure I don't want to be a cleaner. But I also procrastinate by reading books on writing, self help books, creativity books and novels — that's how I know I'm on the right path.

If you procrastinate by browsing cookbooks then maybe you really want to start a catering business. If you love chatting to your friends and helping them through their problems, then you might consider a business in coaching or healing. If the minute the rainclouds pass all you want to do is get out in the garden, then begin to incorporate this passion in your life.

Time To Choose



By now you should have an idea of which artistic mode you want to work in or at least enough of an idea to start something. But you might still not have an idea of what exactly you want to do. If you like the idea of sewing, just get a book, look up a tutorial, order a few supplies and begin with something appropriate to your skill level. But if you want to write, how do you get an idea for a story, if you want to create business, how do you choose what type it will be? The next section will help you with idea generation within your chosen art form.



Ideas

Everyone comes up with ideas in different ways. Some people rely on inspiration, but I think that idea generation gets the gears of inspiration moving. You can't just wait for an idea to happen. You have to be on the look out for it. Get curious, dig around search things out. Be a detective and discover the clues to your ideal next work.

Imagination

Everything starts with the imagination, every book ever written, every medicine ever created, every bridge built. Someone saw a problem and imagined a way to solve that problem, or they had a spark of an idea and saw it through to its fullest conclusion in their imagination. So take time to allow your mind to wander. Don't cram every moment with tasks. Take a shower in the middle of the day or go for a drive, many people have their best creative breakthroughs while showering or driving because the mind is focused on one thing allowing the imagination some play time.



Your imagination works on all the information already in your mind: every sight, sounds, smell, feeling and experience you have ever had. Add to this well of information by trying new things, going to places you have never been to before, talking to strangers, visiting art galleries, but also discount supermarkets or run down cafes. Follow your nose and see what intrigues you. Don't force yourself to do things you feel you should—like reading great literature or studying the golden ratio—if you don't want to. There may well come a time when you will want to but if it's not now then don't do it. Follow your interests, seek out what inspires you and fills you with joy. Perhaps you are currently obsessed with light and shade, haiku or lemongrass. Investigate, satiate your curiosity.

Brainstorming

Get all your ideas down on paper and then play around with them, expand them, add to them, combine them. See what you come up with. Start again with a new subject. Look for themes — not necessarily big themes like the nature of evil but smaller themes, little sparks that intrigue you. You may find that something comes up again and again. This may be your current obsession and will provide fertile soil for your creative dreams to grow.

Keep a journal, notebook or scrapbook

Write or stick in anything that inspires you, snippets of information, scraps of coloured fabric, picture of things you love from magazines, passages of writing that make your heart soar or bring tears to your eyes. Copy out quotes, poems. Write lists. Add anything you find interesting to this book and keep it as a sourcebook for creative ideas.



Journaling

A blank page or an un-started project can be a block. Journaling, where you write down whatever comes to mind is a great way to overcome this block. You might also consider a doodle book or an art journal.

Use journal prompts to get you started. One of my favourites is ‘if I had anything interesting to say, what would it be about?’ When it feels like I have nothing unique or valuable to offer, this seems to trick my mind into believing otherwise. See more about this in my blog post [blockbusting journaling prompt](#).

Or use a book of prompts such as:

642 Things to Write by San Francisco Writers’ Grotto

642 Things to Draw by Chronicle Books

104 Things to Photograph by Chronicle Books

365 Journal Writing Ideas: A year of daily journal writing prompts, questions & actions to fill your journal with memories, self-reflection, creativity & direction by Rossi Fox

When journaling, the idea is just to get words on the page. It doesn’t matter what they are. Write ‘I don’t know what to write,’ over and over until you think of something else to say. This doesn’t just work for writers, it help all artists articulate their thoughts and come up with ideas and themes. Journal about the colour yellow or the scents in an english country garden or the feel of cotton cambric on the skin. Write a list of words you associated with grandma, or linseed oil, or grapes, anything at all to get the juices flowing so stuff is coming out of your brain and into the world — which is all that art is.



The subconscious

You can use a variety of techniques to connect with the subconscious part of the brain to find things you had no idea you were interested in, knew you knew or remembered. There are many books, CD's, apps and youtube videos about how to meditate, so I won't go into details here. Meditation helps to calm the busy part of your mind, the logical, critical part that often gets in the way of intuition and creativity. At its simplest, a meditation can be just taking a few deep, calming breaths. If you like this style of accessing your subconscious try to go deeper with more in-depth meditations or perhaps shamanic journeying or path-working. If you are not one for sitting still, try one of the techniques I talk about in my blog notmeditating.com. Your work itself will become a form of meditation, so the more you practice and get into the flow, the more you will access your subconscious and find ideas and work you never thought you were capable of.

Getting started

Don't get hung up on finding the perfect idea. At some point, soon, you need to choose an idea and get started. Practice makes perfect so choose your best idea and get on with it. This way, you hone your skills, so that when a brilliant idea comes along, or is dug out — you have the skills to do it justice.

Getting (and keeping) going



Now that you have your medium and your idea, it's time to get started and to set some procedures in place that will help you keep moving. These practices will help you to build a creative life, rather than just a creative project. These habits will stand you in good stead even if you change your mind about your artistic path. Once in place, the habits will last a lifetime and ensure you build the creative life you have always dreamed of.



Physical obstacles

Finding Time

Whether you work full time in your creative field, are self-employed or have to squeeze your creative endeavours around an endless list of other commitments, I'm pretty sure you feel like there is never enough time to get your creative work done.

- There are many reasons for this:
- time often is short
- we don't always make the best use of time
- small amounts of time don't seem to count
- too much time can make us as ineffective as too little

When time is short we often don't prioritise our creative work. Creative work is important, but not usually urgent, unless we have a pressing deadline. As a result, urgent and time sensitive tasks: picking the kids up from school, taking the dog to the vet, getting the leaking roof fixed or planning a birthday party, get pushed up the list and the creative work has to wait for another day.



The trouble is, creative work is unlikely to ever be the most urgent priority on our list and therefore will never regularly be checked off our daily to do list. If we allow this to carry on, we will reach the end of our days without achieving some of our most important work and we will regret it. We will have spent most of our lives firefighting urgent situations and never made time for our creative dreams. Conditions will never be perfect for creating. It's up to you to make your creative life happen despite this.

Building a routine is the best way to overcome this problem. When we do a little every day, we maintain a creative flow, and our mind works away on our behalf in the spaces between the work. Working on our art sporadically means we have often forgotten where we were and lost this flow so it takes a lot of time to get back into the work. For this reason, working on our art for an hour a day is better than a whole weekend every month.



The first step to becoming the artists we want to become is to allocate this time and make it sacred. The solution to this problem will be different for everyone, depending on our commitments and schedule, but finding a time that works for you is the most essential step you can take to improve your creative life. If possible, it is best to find the time for creative work first thing in the morning. The minute you begin doing something else, one task leads to another and before you know it another day has gone past with no creative work done. Working on your art first thing makes it a priority and sets the tone for the day. It boosts mood, self esteem and confidence. I highly recommend it if it is at all possible for you.

If this is not possible, try to set another regular time, that come hell or high water, you will create. Make a chart or record the progress in a diary, try to create the longest run you can of ticks in your diary that represent days you completed real, creative work.



If any kind of regular time is impractical for you because of childcare, shift work or other scheduling issues, then tell yourself you are not going to bed until you have completed an allocated time, or word count, or other measurable amount of work each day. Again, try to keep an unbroken run of days when work is completed.

You can take a day off each week if that suits you. Some people feel better for the break, others find it harder to get back in the flow. Experiment and find what works for you.

Of course, if your creative art is gardening, or restoring an old car or building your own house there will be different time issues to overcome. But the important thing is that you create a system for allocating regular time that helps you live the creative life you want.

Starting a thirty day project (see my blog post) can help you build this habit. Often we have spare moments of time in our lives that seem too short to get anything useful done. But these tiny pieces of time add up. Identify wasted time in your life, waiting in queues, waiting to pick the children up from school or class, waiting for a delivery, sitting in the car wash, time when you are early for an appointment, time travelling or the small amount of time between appointments. If you get any extra time, such as a cancelled appointment — squeeze some creative time in there. Use this time to sketch, journal, brainstorm or do any other creative work you can in the circumstances. This is also the ideal time for planning and preparation, so that when you next enter the creative zone you have an idea of the work you want to do.



Too much time can be as much of a problem as too little. If we have the luxury of a whole day to create, the tendency to procrastinate is stronger — we feel that, as we have the whole day, we can afford to ease ourselves into the work by tidying our work space, writing lists, sorting files or folders and we may never get to the actual creative time. This is another reason why daily segments of time work better than periodic sessions. When we know we only have an hour, the desire to crack on and reach the word count, finish the sketch or bake the cake is stronger.

Consider what you can cut out or reduce in your life to make this time, perhaps cut down on TV, social media, or reading magazines. Perhaps you could reduce cleaning the house, or ironing or some other chore, by just a little each day to make the time. If you consistently fail to make the time, there are two possible reasons.

The first is that your fears are getting in the way of making the time. In this case, try working in tiny amounts to overcome this fear. Try to be creative for five minutes, twice a day at first and then build on this. You can do anything for five minutes. It might not seem much, but it gives you something to build on and helps you overcome your fear.



If you can't even manage five minutes, and if you constantly make excuses as to why you can't do the work, consider whether you really want to do the work. You must have the passion and desire for your creative work in order to overcome the hurdles to achieving it. Perhaps a different medium would fill you with this passion. Think about what is stopping you, because your desire must outweigh your fear if you are going to achieve results.

Making Space

As well as time, you will of course need space to do your work. Some things take relatively little space and it is of course, usually possible to work with what you have, the kitchen table, the shed, outdoors, a coffee shop of whatever is relevant to your creative art.

Ideally, you would have a space to call your own, where materials can be left out ready for the next days work. You are more likely to sit down for your allocated time, or squeeze in an extra few minutes here and there, if your materials are ready.



If you cannot have a designated spot, work on a system that makes starting work as easy as possible. A box of the materials, notes and books relating to the specific project you are working on is easy to get out and easy to put away. Having a shelf for your palette, with a cover so you can leave paints ready to use, makes it easier to make the most of your creative time. Leaving your boots by the backdoor and tools close to hand helps if you are creating a garden. If the tools of your craft are buried beneath clutter or tucked in an out of the way place, it will take more momentum to get started. Make it as easy as you can to begin and you will find that the days when you tick off the work achieved will grow.

The advantage of having a time and space is that your mind will become accustomed to the habit. The physical surroundings will provide a mental cue to your mind that it is time to forget the outside world and get creative. This becomes easier and easier with practice, so that, after a while, you will slip into creative mode, without even thinking about it, whenever you enter your creative space. You will become more creative, more relaxed, more skilled and more practiced with every moment you spend in your space.



It okay to have more than one space. Perhaps you want to write at home sometimes and at the library or coffee shop others. If you work on commissions elsewhere, such as garden design, your creative space will be constantly changing. Some creative pursuits such as landscape artist or photographer require you to be in new surroundings constantly. In these cases, it might be useful to provide your brain with some other creative cue. Perhaps collecting together your equipment will do it, or wearing a particular item of clothing. Or you could create a ritual to help you begin.

Creating a Ritual

For some people, and this is totally optional, (as is everything I say) a ritual can help kickstart the creative process. In a similar way as creative space can cue the mind into readiness for creative work, a creative ritual can, too. This is especially useful if you don't have a regular, defined work space. A creative ritual can be anything you want it to be, but to work best it will involve repeating the same actions every day as you prepare to do your creative work. Everyone is different and will create a different ritual. It depends on the type of work you are doing and the type of person you are. For some of us, a short, specific work meditation helps us get in the right mood, or reciting a specific poem, one we have gathered or created ourselves, or saying a prayer, to God the Higher Self or the Muses, burning frankincense to improving one's spiritual connection, lavender to reduce stress, or clary sage to improve mental clarity.



Others of us will prefer more pragmatic creative rituals. Anything can be a ritual; making a cup of coffee, donning your artists apron, clearing your work space, setting a timer, taking five deep breaths, putting on some special music, uncapping your special writing pen or going for a walk around the block are just a few examples.

Planning

When you have made the time and the space and you are ready to begin, you might find yourself wondering what, specifically to do. Faced with the blank computer screen, the empty canvas or the shabby piece of furniture you want to restore, you may wonder where to start. Fear begins to encroach on your mind and makes giving in to procrastination become all too enticing.

This is where planning comes in. When you get into your space, at your allocated time, you need a plan, you need the materials on hand, you need to know roughly what you are going to do and you need to have had the major decisions already made.



This may not sound very creative and if you prefer to be more spontaneous, and more importantly being spontaneous works for you, then by all means let this one go. But for most of us, the blank page is too daunting and you risk wasting your precious art time on decision making rather than the actual work.

Luckily, planning can be squeezed into spare moments throughout the day. Keeping a notebook with you means that you can jot down ideas as they come to you. You can brainstorm while you are waiting for your lunch to arrive, or in the queue for petrol, or while waiting for a meeting to start or a child's class to finish.

Ideally as well as having some creative time each day, you would allocate some planning time each day, too. Try not to do it immediately before the creating. For one thing it will likely overrun into your creative time, but also this doesn't allow time for the subconscious to mull over the idea, examine it from all angles and offer new insights. You could spend five minutes planning the night before or allocate your planning to a regular time when you are waiting for something or whatever else works for you. The key is to make sure you do it. Believe me, it will make the creative process so much easier.



When you have finished the creative process for that session it can help to leave it in mid flow. Ernest Hemingway offered the following advice:

'The best way is always to stop when you are going good and when you know what will happen next. If you do that every day when you are writing a novel you will never be stuck. That is the most valuable thing I can tell you so try to remember it.'

Writing some notes about what comes next, sketching in the next part of the painting or leaving the materials ready for the next stage of the work can really help you to begin again and get in the flow quickly allowing you to make the most of each creative session.

Emotional Obstacles



Confidence and self esteem

To do your best work, you need to believe in yourself. This is sometimes very hard for creative people. In the creative pursuits there is often a lot of hard work that needs doing before there is any chance of finding outward success. It is important to keep going with your work even when you doubt yourself. Many, many people give up on their dreams when they can no longer believe in the possibility of success. Usually, our doubts are not related to how well we are doing, we just lose faith. If this happens to you, remember that the winners are just the last ones standing. If you just keep going, you will have some success in the end. The only way you can fail is if you give up.



Dealing with disappointment

Being an artist, inevitably means dealing with some disappointment. You may be disappointed that what you produce doesn't live up to the image you had in your head, or you may face outward rejection. Every artist is disappointed sometimes, you will have work rejected, critical reviews and artwork that doesn't sell. But the thing is, you can't please all of the people all of the time, you will never get everyone to like your work, just as not everyone will like salt and vinegar crisps or jazz. But if you keep working, you will find people who 'get' you. Slowly, you will build a fan base, even if it is just one person at first. There are millions of people in this world. Some of them will want to hear what you have to say or sing, or own what you have to make. It takes time to find the right people and it can be frustratingly, self-esteem batteringly slow. But there is no such thing as an overnight success. Keep doing what you are doing, because you want to do it and because you love it and need to do it and because it makes you whole, and eventually you will find an audience for your work.



Finding your tribe

Being with supportive and encouraging people can have a massive impact on your art. If you are surrounded by nay-sayers, who criticise your ideas and always find fault, this will have an effect on your self-confidence. Often people dismiss our dreams not because they want to hurt us, but because they want to protect us from disappointment and rejection — but these fearful people, who are afraid to follow their own dreams, are of no help to you in achieving yours. Try not to take what they say personally, and never ask these types of people for advice or encouragement — instead, find like-minded creative people who will inspire and encourage you instead.

Spend more time with the people that you already know who are positive, encouraging and have similar ideas and values to you. Make extra time for the relationships that are important to your personal growth, confidence and general well-being. We take a lot from the people around us, whether it is positive or negative, so ensure that as much time as possible is spent with those who lift you up.



There are many groups for artists, both in the physical world and online. Many local communities have societies for art, photography, woodturning and a myriad other creative pursuits. Check out your local library for information. Online there are groups for every possible creative pursuit. Investigate a few to find one that offers what you need.

Joining a class will also put you in touch with like-minded people who share your commitment and goals. I signed up for a local writing class and a few of us went on to form a writing group — and I have never looked back. Being an artist can be lonely, you need to find your tribe.



The pros and cons of our current society for artists

Negatives

The society we live in is difficult in many ways for creatives. A culture obsessed with money and prestige is difficult for the artist or craftsman to negotiate. But your art will help people and inspire people and it will make you feel better, too. A culture without art is no culture at all.

Positives

On the positive side, there has never been a better time for creatives to have control over their work. Sharing your work and processes is easier now that you can have a blog, a website, a social media presence or self-publish your work. Embrace these tools, they have given control back into the hands of the producers rather than those who were the gatekeepers before. But with this control comes more hard work. Now you have to be something of a marketer and business person as well as an artists. Embrace this, too. You can be creative with your business and marketing ideas as well as with your art. Be thankful that you can publish and promote your work in so many ways rather than having to rely on an agent or gallery owner to see the value of what you produce. Getting your work noticed will be a slow process and it will take time, hard work, patience and faith. But with your new found structure, support and confidence you can do it. Why on earth shouldn't you — thousands of other 'ordinary' people have - and you can, too



Recommended reading:

The War of Art - Steven Pressfield

Show your Work - Austin Kleon

Fearless Creating - Eric Maisel

The Artist's Way - Julia Cameron

Now - go and get started!

Best wishes for your creative career.

Kirstie x

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Body. Mind. Spirit. Heart. 90 Quick ideas to create a balanced, creative and joyful life

available free from my website www.notmeditating.com