

20 Creative Blocks

and how to break through them

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So if you know anyone who could do with some help with a creative block, please pass it on!

Here's the link to the download page: <http://lateralaction.com/creativeblocks>

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How to use this ebook

This ebook is a toolkit of practical ideas to help you if you ever suffer from a creative block.

Feel free to read it from cover to cover if you like, but you'll probably get more out of it if you use it as a reference book for when you get stuck — and most importantly, as a set of cues for taking action.

Here's how to use it:

1. Read the Introduction, which explains how the ebook came about, and why creative blocks are normal occupational hazards for people who set out to achieve something remarkable.
2. Whenever you feel stuck or blocked, browse through the Contents and click on a block that looks similar to your own.
3. Read through the suggestions for that block. Pick ONE idea and try it. See what results you get.
4. If you need more help, go back to the article, pick another idea and try that.
5. Rinse and repeat. Look at other articles and keep trying new things until the creative juices start flowing again...

Contents

Introduction: It's not just you.....	6
1. "I'm not creative"	9
2. Fear of getting it wrong.....	13
3. Lack of time.....	17
4. Creativity v cash.....	22
5. Disorganisation.....	28
6. The Inner Critic.....	32
7. "I don't know what to say"	37
8. "All blogged out"	42
9. Taboo.....	46
10. Sex, drugs and rock'n'roll.....	51
11. When inspiration runs out.....	55
12. Taking on too much.....	59
13. Information overload.....	65
14. Kids!.....	70
15. Procrastination.....	75
16. Torn between different ambitions.....	81
17. Afraid to reveal too much online.....	86

18. The problem with success.....	93
19. “Working in a vacuum”	97
20. Hitting a brick wall.....	106
21. Why there’s no such thing as a creative block.....	110
Your FREE 26-week creative career guide.....	112
Would you like help getting back in the creative zone?	113
About the author.....	114

Introduction: It's not just you

Creative blocks come in all shapes and sizes.

The most obvious type is the **psychological block** — a mental barrier you can't get past, or a powerful emotion (often fear) that makes you shy away from your creative challenges.

Sometimes your **personal life** gets in the way of your creative work. Maybe a family or relationship issue is taking up all your energy, leaving little or none for creativity. Or maybe your lifestyle is incompatible with getting high-quality creative work done.

Sometimes it's a **communication issue**. You feel demotivated because you can't find an audience for your work, or persuade key influencers of its value. Or you can't say 'no' to others' demands, and give away too much of your precious time. Or maybe you're afraid of what others will think if you reveal too much of yourself in your work.

And sometimes it can be as simple as **work habits** that don't work for you. You've never really stopped to consider when, where and how you work at your best, so your creativity is swamped by disorganisation (and email).

The following chapters cover all these types of block — and I suggest some practical solutions you can use if you ever find yourself blocked.

This ebook started as an experiment on my blog, [Lateral Action](#). I posted an [invitation](#) to my readers to tell me about their creative blocks, and promised to write a series of blog posts offering solutions to them.

Who am I to offer advice about creative blocks?

Firstly I'm a writer. I write poetry, articles, blog posts, ebooks and training courses. Believe me, I know how miserable it is to be blocked — but I've also found ways round my own blocks, and these days I'm prolific.

Secondly, I've been coaching clients to overcome their creative blocks since 1996. I started out as a psychotherapist, and found I was being consulted by

artists and creatives about their creative blocks and professional challenges — so I developed a specialist coaching service for creative professionals.

I've worked with hundreds of people from all kinds of creative professions — artists, actors, novelists, designers, film directors, copywriters, musicians, entrepreneurs, programmers, dancers, fashion designers, and many more.

One thing I've noticed about people who are blocked creatively is that they often compound their misery by taking the whole thing personally. When you're blocked, it can feel as though the whole world is working away productively, while you're the only one suffering and procrastinating.

But I know different.

Because over the past fifteen years, I've heard about the same blocks — the same patterns of thought, feeling, and behaviour — from many, many different clients. Yet they all seem to think it's just them.

I sometimes say **"I wish we could get you all together in a room, so you could see it's not just you"**. One way I do this is by running live workshops, where we all work together on these challenges.

The Creative Blocks project is another way of lifting the lid on the creative process and getting people to realise they aren't alone in their struggles.

So as the series progressed I was particularly pleased by the number of comments and emails I received saying "That's just like me! I'm so glad to find I'm not the only one".

Because it's not just you. Really.

When you embark on a creative venture — whether a work of art, a client commission, a new business or any other kind of innovative project. you are by definition attempting something new, difficult, untried.

No wonder you get stuck sometimes. It would be a bit weird if you didn't. If you never get stuck, you probably aren't picking a big enough challenge.

My approach in the Creative Blocks series was a little different to a typical coaching session. When I'm working with a client, I spend a lot of time at

the beginning asking questions, listening and looking for patterns.

I do my best to help clients find *their own* answers to their creative blocks. And when I come forward with suggestions, I'm watching very carefully to see how enthusiastically (or otherwise!) they are received by the client.

In the Creative Blocks series I had far less information to go on — a blog comment or email, and I didn't get to meet any of the readers face-to-face. Part of me was curious to see whether I could offer anything useful with such a meagre amount of information.

You'll notice that I usually didn't offer one solution but a menu of options — things that other clients have found useful in similar circumstances — so that they could choose the ones that were the best fit.

I received some very nice emails and comments from the people whose blocks I wrote about. I didn't hit every nail on the head, but most of the time it seems that my posts were helpful to them.

And I didn't write just for them. I wrote for you too.

I'm putting these ideas into your hands in the hope that they will help you if you are struggling with a creative block.

You may not need to read the book all the way through — browse through the contents and pick out the blocks that seem most relevant to your own situation. Then experiment with the ideas and see if they work for you.

And if you want some more ideas, check out the comments on the posts in the [original series](#) on Lateral Action — many of my readers came up with great suggestions based on their own experience.

If you find the ideas in this book helpful, I'd love to hear about it — you can contact me via [this page](#) on my website.

And if you know anyone who is working on some big creative challenges and could do with a little help, feel free to share this ebook with them.

Mark McGuinness
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1. “I’m not creative”

If you believe you’re “Just not the creative type”, there’s no point even trying to think or act creatively. You’d just be setting yourself up for failure.

This is one of the biggest and most debilitating creative blocks of all. Fortunately, it’s also one of the easiest to get around, provided you’re prepared to make a shift in your mindset...

These days, we’re forever hearing how vital creativity is to success. In the 21st century creative economy, we have to [innovate or die](#) – or at least end up on the scrapheap, like [Lou](#).

Which is wonderful news for Bohemian types. But what if you’re not that kind of person?

You’re not an artist, designer or a mad scientist. You’ve never heard the voice of inspiration in the middle of the night. You’re perfectly happy with a sensible haircut. You don’t hang around in cafes dressed in black, smoking French cigarettes and discussing obscure subtitled movies. You may not even – whisper it – use a MacBook Pro.

Is there any hope for you?

To find out, let’s flip things round and have a look at the kind of people who clearly *are* creative, to see what makes them special.

So what makes a creative person?

Throughout history, human beings have regarded artists, poets and other creative people as somehow different from and mysterious to the rest of us. There have been several explanations as to the precise nature of the creative ‘X factor’:

Divine Inspiration

Thousands of years ago, it was common knowledge that inspiration came from the gods, and those who were visited by the Muse were

revered and/or feared. These days, those who claim divine inspiration are more likely to be ridiculed or referred to a psychiatrist, but it's a [surprisingly persistent idea](#).

Genius

High-level creators are still revered in the modern world, but not because of their association with the gods. They are described as [geniuses](#), born with special skills and powers that are denied to the rest of us mere mortals.

Madness

Less flattering than the 'inspiration' and 'genius' theories, this one suggests that creativity is a side-effect (or even a symptom) of mental illness. The implication is that, although it must be nice to be able to write novels and symphonies, no-one in their right mind would want to be creative.

Personality

More down-to-earth than inspiration, less glamorous than genius, but more attractive than madness, this theory suggests that creative individuals can be identified as a particular type of personality. We can all recognise the stereotypical 'creative person' – a cross between Vincent Van Gogh and Lord Byron: "mad, bad and dangerous to know". Or at least a pain in the ass to manage.

Researchers have spent a lot of time and effort trying to pin down the specific traits of the 'creative personality', but no-one has convincingly demonstrated that most creative people conform to the same personality type.

Talent

When confronted with outstanding creative performance, particularly when it seems to come effortlessly, it's tempting to conclude that such achievements are down to an innate talent. As with the other qualities on the list, you either have talent or you don't. And without it, your creative ambitions are doomed. If you find that a bit discouraging, you may find a glimmer of hope from those authors who suggest that [Talent](#)

[Is Overrated](#), even if it could take you [10,000 hours](#) of practice to become a world-class performer.

Lateral Thinking

Another popular modern theory suggests that creative people [think different](#) to the rest of us. Instead of following the well-trodden furrows of logical thinking, they ‘think outside the box’ and make use of special thinking techniques, which Edward de Bono groups under the heading of lateral thinking. The nice thing about this theory is that – unlike inspiration, genius, madness, personality or talent – it doesn’t boil down to a magical quality that you either have or haven’t got. According to de Bono, lateral thinking is a skill that anyone can learn.

On the flipside, as regular readers of Lateral Action will know, some people have dared to suggest that [lateral thinking is unnecessary for creativity](#) and [thinking outside the box doesn’t work](#).

Having studied all of these theories of creativity in depth, without finding any of them especially convincing, I’ve arrived at the following definition of a creative person:

A creative person is a person who creates things.

You either create something or you don’t. Period.

No doubt there are plenty of factors that influence things along the way, but it’s hard to say definitively that any of them are *the reason* why creativity happens. So worrying about them – and whether you have them or not – is a red herring.

And the great thing about this definition is that there’s nothing stopping anyone having a go for themselves, to see if they too can create something extraordinary. Including you.

Forget about ‘being creative’ – start *creating*

Forget about who you are (or think you are) and what qualities you may or

may not have.

Forget nouns ('creativity', 'creation', 'creator') and adjectives ('creative'), and focus on verbs ('create', 'creating'). In other words, stop worrying about theories, and start taking action.

And whatever you do, consign the thought "I'm not creative" to the dustbin. Take a moment to listen to the Thud! as it lands in the bottom of the bin, and the Clang! as you slam the lid shut on top of it.

What next?

Use this four-step creative process for every project you start:

6. **Goal:** "What do I want to achieve?" (Don't forget to dream big.)
7. **Options:** "What is the next action I can take, that I think is likely to get me a step nearer my goal?"
8. **Action:** Do it.
9. **Review:** "Have I reached my goal yet?" If the answer is "Yes", give yourself a pat on the back and start thinking about your next challenge. If the answer is "No", cycle back to 2. and keep going until you get to 'yes'.

There you go. It's not rocket science. You don't need to make a moonlit sacrifice to the Muse. You don't need to jump out the bath and run about in your birthday suit. You may even be able to manage without a Moleskine.

It may not look mysterious or glamorous, but this kind of iterative process is fundamental to the success of all the high-achieving creative people I've worked with over the years.

Try it. Do it often enough, and one day you may discover that you, too, have joined the ranks of creative people.

2. Fear of getting it wrong

The fear of making a mistake and getting something 'wrong' can be paralyzing for a creator. Paradoxically, this block can get worse the more successful you are. The more great work you've produced, the higher your reputation – and the more you have to lose by making a mistake.

This is the problem faced by an anonymous Lateral Action reader, who responded to my invitation to send in a creative block:

I am a professional composer, working almost entirely by myself. I have found the process of creating harder and harder over the years. While occasionally it is enjoyable and seems to flow naturally, often it is fraught and I find myself being dragged away from whatever it is I'm supposed to be working on, distracted by anything and everything that will allow me a break from the task in hand.

I had a eureka moment late last year when I worked out that the reason for this ongoing battle in my head is that I'm terrified of getting it wrong.

At every decision making moment along the way I question incessantly whether I'm doing the right thing. I fear that making the wrong decision will result in my work not meeting the very high standard I expect of it. Hence self-doubt, procrastination, and ultimately creative stagnation creep in.

I have a ton of unfinished work. My unwillingness to commit affects not only my music but my ability to make career decisions, to find collaborators – even making everyday decisions on all kinds of things is a struggle!

Any advice on how to beat my fear of getting it wrong?

If you're a composer, you must know the story of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*.

In 1913, the premiere of the ballet provoked a riot. The 'primitive' and 'violent' rhythms of the music and dance shocked an audience used to a more sedate evening's entertainment. Booming and arguing escalated into punch-ups in the stalls. The police intervened, but even they couldn't restore

order until the performance had ended. Stravinsky left the theatre in tears.

And it wasn't just an ignorant mob who hated the Rite. The composer Camille Saint-Saëns was among those who walked out. Any artist will know that the most stinging criticism of all comes from one's peers.

Clearly, Stravinsky had got it wrong.

And of course, we know better. *The Rite of Spring* is now acclaimed as one of the great works of the 20th century, and we shake our heads at the poor judgment of those who were unable to appreciate its genius from the start.

Yet even at the time, the ballet's impresario Diaghilev said the riot was "just what I wanted". It was a publicist's dream. And more recently, musicologist Richard Taruskin has suggested that it was the choreography as much as the music that caused such an outrage, and Stravinsky had exaggerated the story of the protests about the music, in order to present himself as a cutting-edge composer.

So maybe Stravinsky got it right after all.

Or maybe there is no 'right' or 'wrong' where creativity is concerned.

Maybe, whatever you do, someone, somewhere will accuse you of getting it wrong. And maybe that's a good thing.

Maybe it does audiences the power of good to have their assumptions questioned and their senses assaulted by the 'wrong' kind of music, art, writing or whatever.

Maybe it also does creators good to get things wrong from time to time, to make mistakes and mess things up. To surprise or even shock themselves with a rough edge, dissonance or clumsy turn of phrase.

Remember the Persian carpet makers who include a deliberate mistake in every carpet they make. A perfect carpet would offend Allah. It would also mean that their work was done, that there was no loose thread for them to follow up next time.

Maybe playing it safe and avoiding mistakes is the biggest mistake you

could make. If you do it for the rest of your life, you could end up looking back and wishing you'd taken a few more risks – and made a few more surprising, magical discoveries.

And in your case, maybe there's a mischievous, frustrated part of you that's itching to make more mistakes, to make it more 'wrong', less perfect, and more human.

Maybe this part of you knows something very important about why you fell in love with music in the first place.

Maybe this part of you would secretly love to put a few noses out of joint with an unconventional composition, and see the shocked faces of your listeners.

I think that allowing this part of you out to play would be a lot of fun for you. It would help you loosen up and enjoy the process of composition.

So how can you do that?

Write with your body

I don't know what your composition process is like, whether you have a daily routine or warm-up ritual. But I'd suggest that before sitting down to write, you do something to get out of your head and into your body. Your head is where all the worrying and judging and agonising happens. Your body is where the rhythms live, where your heartstrings are.

It could be as simple as a hot bath or shower. You might like to go for a walk or run. Or you might like to practice a discipline that helps you develop body awareness, like yoga, tai chi or walking meditation.

And when you start writing/playing, do it with your gut. Put down the first things that come into your head. You can tidy things up later – to begin with, just go with your first instinct and get it down as quickly as possible.

Stop worrying

You need to cut out that anxious, nit-picky worrying habit. For some

practical tips, read [Why Worry?](#) and [7 Ways to Stop Worrying When You're Under Pressure](#).

Start getting things wrong

Next time you sit down to compose, write the 'wrong' version, full of mistakes, the kind of conversation only an idiot or a rank beginner would produce. Then produce another 'wrong' version, this time featuring a completely different set of mistakes. And so on, until you've got at least five completely unusable manuscripts.

Give it a few days, then go back to the wrong versions. Ask yourself whether there's anything at all, even the slightest detail, that you like and could use. Even if it's still clearly wrong for this specific piece, you might find the germ of another composition in the midst of all that dross.

Stick two fingers up at the critics

If you find you can't help thinking about critics, peers, listeners and other people who might criticize you for getting it 'wrong': stop composing, and turn around. Imagine you can see them in the corner of the room. Stand up and walk over over to face them. Look them in the eye and stick two fingers up at them. Enjoy the look on their faces. Then get on with your work.

Get good feedback

Find someone whose opinion on music you really respect. Maybe you already have a [mentor](#) – if not, look out for one, they are worth their weight in gold. Ask them for honest feedback on your work, and whether they think you could benefit from loosening your tie a little.

3. Lack of time

One of the biggest challenges facing creative people is finding the time to pursue their creative interests, in the midst of everyday life.

So I wasn't surprised when it cropped up in a comment from [Sholeh Johnston](#):

While my 9-5 job is quite creative (communications manager) I struggle to find time to write outside of work hours, writing being what I consider my first and favourite creative pursuit.

When I get home there is always something else to do – housework, seeing friends, spending time with my partner, catching up the news etc. Or else I'm "too tired".

Suggestions and strategies would be great! Aside from "STOP PROCRASTINATING")

OK, I promise not to say "STOP PROCRASTINATING". :-)

Here are some suggestions that have worked well for many of my clients (and me!) facing the same challenge. Treat it like a menu – choose the items that appeal to you and try them out. As with all good meals, you'll probably need to combine several elements to get the balance right.

Build on your achievements

Before we look at what you could do differently to create more time for your writing, I'd like to know more about how you have already done this in the past.

You see, when I look at [your blog](#), one of the first things I notice is that you've been blogging regularly since 2004 – longer than me, and longer than many other bloggers. That tells me right away that you are capable of a lot of dedication and persistence in pursuing your writing. So the first thing I'd suggest is that you pause for a moment and give yourself a little credit for it.

Now, I don't know all the details of your situation, so it's possible that your work and other responsibilities have become more demanding recently, so maybe you haven't been under the same time pressure for the past six years of writing.

But even if that's the case, there must have been many times when other things were calling for your attention – and you somehow managed to tune them out long enough to get on with your writing.

How did you do that?

Can you recall a time when you were tempted to give in to distractions or outside pressures, but managed to ignore them and focus on your work? How?

Whatever it was you did – supposing you start doing more of that?

You can't do everything

It sounds like you're confronting the fact that you can't do everything in life. Whatever you choose to do, there's "always something else to do". This is why the stories of great creators often involve hard decisions and sacrifices – at least at the beginning.

Like the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope. His day job in the Post Office meant he had very little spare time in which to realise his literary ambitions. His solution was to get up at 5.30 every morning and write several hundred words before breakfast. He also wrote on trains while traveling for work. Eventually, he earned enough from his novels to give up his job – but most of his 37 novels were written while he was a full-time employee.

A few years ago, I was in a similar situation: I was studying for a Master's degree, running my coaching and therapy business, editing a poetry magazine and getting married, all of which required a lot of my time! And the middle of all of that, I wanted to start a blog.

Reluctantly, I took Trollope's route, and decided to sacrifice some sleep by getting up to write at 6.30 every morning. This was pretty hard for me, as I had always struggled to wake up early in the mornings. But the blog was

important enough to make it worth the effort. (If you want to know how I did it, read [How to Become an Early Riser](#) by Steve Pavlina.)

I'm not saying you necessarily have to get up and write in the early mornings. But it sounds like you need to cut down on at least one activity in your life if you're to find time to write.

Here's the list of things you say are getting in the way of your writing:

- housework
- seeing friends
- spending time with your partner
- catching up with the news

Which of these would it be easiest to cut down on?

How much time could you create for your writing by doing so?

Write when you have most energy

You say you're often "too tired" to write. I know how you feel. To write properly, I need to be very alert – which means I try to make sure I write at the times of day when I'm naturally most awake.

All human beings have [circadian rhythms](#) of arousal and rest during the daily 24 hour cycle. For most people, this means they have plenty of energy and mental focus during the morning, feel drowsy at some point during the afternoon, and get a 'second wind' of energy in the early evening.

So I always try to keep my mornings free for writing, when I know the words will flow easily; and I don't even try to write after lunch. But some writers are able to work better during the evenings than the mornings.

If you're a 'morning person' then you've basically got two choices: get up early to write on weekdays; or write at weekends.

If you're an 'evening person' then it should be easier for you to write in the evenings after work.

Whichever your natural preference, you'd be only human if you felt too tired to write after a long day at work. In that case, if you really want to make the most of your evenings, you could try having a [power nap](#) for 15-20 minutes when you get in from work. According to neuroscientist John Medina, this will 'reset' your brain and boost your productivity by 34%!

Ring-fence time for writing

One of the things that makes it hard to prioritise creative work is that most of the other tasks demanding your attention have someone else fighting for them: your boss wants you to do your work; your family want you to do your share of the housework; your friends will miss you if you disappear off the social scene.

But who is there to champion your writing? Only you. So you need to stand up for it!

Here's how:

1. Set aside time for writing. E.g. two hours on a Saturday morning. Mark it in the diary! Tell your partner and/or anyone else who needs to know that you'll be unavailable.
2. Write down all the excuses you could give yourself for not doing your writing at the appointed time.
3. When it's time to write, switch off your phone, email, internet etc. Close the door. And write.
4. Watch out for those excuses!
5. If you do miss a day's writing, give it back to yourself.

Make the most of odd moments

You can take another leaf out of Anthony Trollope's book, by copying his

habit of writing on the train, in 'dead time' between his other tasks.

I live in London, where lots of people complain about the time it takes to get anywhere by Tube train. Not me. Whenever I head into town, I take a book or notebook, and look forward to an hour's reading or writing on the journey. Another bonus of the Tube is that no-one can ring me on my mobile while I'm down there. And of course, living in Britain, there's no danger of my fellow passengers trying to engage me in conversation.

Where are the odd scraps of time during your week?

Could a notebook (or netbook) transform them into blissful oases of writing time for you?

Get (more) organised

Another big change I made in my life at the time I started my first blog was to [get more organised](#) in my working habits. This meant I became much more efficient – and freed up extra time for important things like writing.

You may already be super-organised, in which case feel free to ignore this suggestion. But if not, then improving your time management skills will reduce your level of tiredness, as well as creating more writing time.

You'll find plenty of advice on how to fine-tune your daily workflow for maximum creativity in my ebook [Time Management for Creative People](#). It's free to download and share, so you're welcome to pass it on to anyone else who might find it helpful.

4. Creativity v cash

Sometimes it's a struggle to earn enough money to buy time for creative work. This problem can be particularly acute if you work in a creative field with little commercial potential.

So I wasn't surprised that this issue was raised by several Lateral Action readers in the course of the Creative Blocks project:

This idea/piece of work is not (or will not, depending on whether or not I've actually started it yet) get me any closer to my goals, and it certainly won't pay the rent. Therefore, I'm not going to pursue it – I'm going to do some other thing that is far more practical/that will generate income.

Michael Radcliffe, [Artbizness](#)

Biz is so slow, I seem to only gravitate towards only the ideas (no matter how stupid or unwanted) that may make money right NOW. Creativity is discarded for necessity then I freeze! Help!

[Ray Harvey](#)

Starting in college, I intentionally left my talented painting side to study advertising and design because I wanted to be sure that I could support myself in the world. After a successful 20 years in advertising, I was kicked to the curb when my employer started losing accounts and couldn't afford to pay me. I had just moved across the country, bought a new house in my new city based on my new salary. And then boom.

"The housing market dropped, there were no jobs and I have all this time to paint. Yet, all I can do when I'm not taking on freelance work is stayed glued to the computer looking for a job or keeping up with all the social media. Because it feels like work.

I'd love to rid my head at least a few hours a day to paint again.

Anonymous

Guys, I know how you feel. :-)

My biggest creative passion is [poetry](#) – and I’m scratching my head to think of a creative medium with less commercial potential than that. But according to Hugh MacLeod’s [Sex and Cash theory](#), even movie stars and rock stars face the same basic dilemma:

THE ‘SEX & CASH’ THEORY

The creative person basically has two kinds of jobs: One is the sexy, creative kind. Second is the kind that pays the bills. Sometimes the task at hand covers both bases, but not often. This tense duality will always play center stage. It will never be transcended.

A good example is Phil, a New York photographer friend of mine. He does really wild stuff for the small, hipster magazines—it pays virtually nothing, but it allows him to build his portfolio. Then he’ll leverage that to go off and shoot some retail catalogues for a while. Nothing too exciting, but it pays the bills.

*One year John Travolta will be in an ultrahip flick like *Pulp Fiction* (“Sex”), another he’ll be in some forgettable, big- budget thriller like *Broken Arrow* (“Cash”).*

I’m thinking about the young writer who has to wait tables to pay the bills, in spite of her writing appearing in all the cool and hip magazines . . . who dreams of one day not having her life divided so harshly.

Well, over time the “harshly” bit might go away, but not the “divided.”

This tense duality will always play center stage. It will never be transcended.

And nobody is immune. Not the struggling waiter, nor the movie star.

(Hugh MacLeod, [Ignore Everybody](#))

After years of struggling with this issue myself, I’ve come to the conclusion that there are three basic options:

1. Put creativity and cash in separate boxes

This is where you make a very clean distinction between the work you do for money and your creative passion. It’s the classic “Work 9-to-5 and write/paint/play in a band in the evenings” approach.

The great thing is that it keeps your creative passion fresh – it usually comes as a welcome relief from your other activities, and you're in no danger of seeing it as 'just a job'. And it can also be a bit of a relief not to have to do challenging and potentially scary creative work all day every day.

The big problem, as the examples above show, is that it can be hard to justify spending time on your creative work, when other responsibilities are calling. It feels like fiddling while Rome burns.

It helps if you're earning enough cash to pay all the bills. If that's not the case, then you may need to prioritise solving that problem first! But even if you're struggling financially, you can probably afford to spend your Sunday mornings on your own creative pursuits.

You may find some of the suggestions helpful from the previous chapter on finding time for creativity. But where money's concerned, the difficulty isn't just about finding time, but justifying spending it on noncommercial work. Because it feels like you could / should always be 'doing more' on your day job or business.

One way is to sit down and work out how many hours a week you can realistically spend on your creative work while having little or no impact on your other responsibilities. Then schedule that time in your diary, just as you would any other commitment.

If you still find it hard to escape that nagging feeling that you 'should' be more gainfully employed, ask yourself whether you're more effective spending all day every day working, or by regularly taking time off to refresh your imagination and recharge your energy.

I think you know the answer to that one.

If you're one of those people who find it harder to keep promises to yourself than to other people, then why not make use of that tendency – by making a public commitment to your creative work:

- **Join a class** – one reason why I attend classes at the [Poetry School](#) is that I'm more likely to prioritise writing poetry when I spend time with like-minded people. Especially when it's my turn to

bring a poem to the workshop.

- **Join an online group.** A great example is [National Novel Writing Month](#), when thousands of writers gather each year and commit to writing a novel in 30 days!
- **Find a ‘work buddy’** – someone who shares your creative passion, and who could also do with some help in the motivation department. Both of you commit to spending time each week on your creative projects and hold each other accountable.

2. Earn cash from your creative work

This is the Holy Grail for many creators – [getting paid to do what you love](#). Earning thousands of dollars from each of your paintings, novels, gigs or movie appearances is very nice work – if you can get it.

You can do this as an employee by landing a job with a company whose work inspires you. Or as a freelancer or business owner, by finding clients and customers willing to pay you for your products, services or artworks.

Regardless of which path you pick, if you want to attract opportunities for well-paid and inspiring work, you need to put yourself out there and let people know what you’re capable of.

Check out David Armano’s [Logic + Emotion blog](#) for an example of how to do this as an employee. I’ve been reading David’s blog for several years, during which time he’s worked for several companies, rising from Creative Director to Executive Vice President at Edelman Digital. By publishing consistently valuable articles and graphics for years, David has established himself as a thought leader whom many companies would love to have on their team.

If you prefer to work for yourself, have a look at people like [Hugh MacLeod](#), [John Unger](#), [Natasha Wescoat](#), [Hazel Dooney](#) and [David Airey](#), you’ll see it’s possible to generate a good living by selling your artwork or creative services online.

No, it’s not easy, and it won’t happen overnight. But it can be done – with

hard work and a little creativity. Which brings me on to option 3 ...

3. Take a creative approach to earning cash

This is where things get really interesting. Rather than just producing creative stuff and then selling it, you take a creative approach to the whole business of earning a living. In other words, you become a [creative entrepreneur](#).

A quick glance at the websites of the artists I just mentioned will show you that they aren't just in the business of selling art, but their whole marketing and web presence is an expression of their creativity.

The options for creative entrepreneurship include:

Take a creative approach to marketing your creative work

E.g. releasing music online for free, in order to generate buzz and sell concert tickets. Or publishing [cartoons](#) online for free, in order to sell a printed [comic book](#).

Earn cash from something 'next door' to your creative passion

This is the route I've taken, by stepping sideways from my own creative passion (poetry) to provide coaching and training for creative professionals of all kinds.

Build a business to help your fellow enthusiasts

This is one of the 'Career Renegade' paths recommended by [Jonathan Fields](#):

Very often, that thing we most love to do also requires a certain amount of stuff. Beaders need beads, bead boards, thread, crimps and more. Rock climbers need harnesses, shoes, chocs, nuts, cams, and beyond. It's not unusual for an entire, equally passionate subculture to revolve around that gear. If you look deep enough, you can often find gaps in demand for that gear, stuff, or "schwag" that supports the main activities.

[Career Renegade](#)

Treat business as a creative medium

This means adopting the entrepreneurial mindset, and constantly

looking out for trends, problems and market opportunities. It's also about coming up with innovative business models that deliver outsized value for your customers – which can lead to outsize profits and plenty of spare 'creative time' for you.

5. Disorganisation

Creative people are not renowned for their powers of personal organisation. “A cluttered desk is a sign of genius,” we like to say, when challenged about our working conditions.

So I wasn't surprised that organisation featured more than once in the creative blocks postbag:

Organization – I have a lot on my plate and not completing any tasks.

Alexander Duque, [Left Hook Fitness](#)

I put my personal creative work on the back burner. I think about it all the time, but cannot seem to bring the work to fruition... I am not good at structure {though I am very productive} and I don't like the idea of to-do lists: just doing things to get it done.

I want the process to be the creativity, the product to be the result of an amazing experience. With the kind of projects I am working on, the process needs to be soulful, mindful, thoughtful so the product I put forth will be too.

(Alisa Barry, [Bella Cucina](#))

Once upon a time, I wrote an article called [Why You Need to Be Organised To Be Creative](#) – leading to howls of protests in the comments, from outraged creatives telling me it was “lies! all lies!”.

Clearly, I'd offended against the unspoken artist's code. My words didn't fit the Romantic image of the artist who flouts the petty rules of society, surrendering to the divine madness of inspiration. And doesn't wash the dishes for a week.

When I finished the series of articles, I released it as a free ebook: *Time Management for Creative People*. Several people told me it was the wrong title. “Creatives don't want to know about time management, they run a mile from that kind of thing.” Undeterred, I went with the wrong title.

Then a funny thing happened. The ebook got downloaded. A lot. Some [high profile bloggers](#) wrote about it, leading to more and more downloads every day.

I got a phone call from my hosting company: “What are you *doing* with that site? I’m afraid we’ll have to upgrade your account.”

Last time I checked, the ebook had been downloaded over 100,000 times. It’s led to requests for workshops on the subject. And every time I’ve run the workshop, it’s sold out.

So while many artists and creatives scoff at the idea of organisation and time management, my experience suggests that there are plenty of people out there who are hungry to learn the skills.

Maybe this is one of the dirty little secrets of creativity. Maybe it’s not so romantic and exciting to be overwhelmed by an overflowing email inbox, or to be perpetually anxious that you’ve forgotten something important. Maybe a little more organisation could actually make you *more creative*.

From my work with clients, I’ve seen that the biggest barrier isn’t getting organised — it’s getting over the *resistance* to getting organised. Once you deal with that, the actual process is pretty straightforward.

Is your work working for you?

I’m not saying you have to be meticulously organised about every aspect of your life. I’m certainly not saying you need to be as anal as [Lou](#), with his perfectly tabulated spreadsheets and project management systems. Alisa hits the nail on the head when she says there’s no point “just doing things to get it done”.

Take a step back and look at your current work situation. How does it make you feel?

Does it enable you to set aside trivial distractions and focus 100% on your creative work? Are you getting the big, important, challenging things done? If so, I wouldn’t sweat too much about being ‘disorganised’, even if your office looks like a landfill site.

Or does your work make you feel anxious and frustrated, with emails, phone calls and demands getting in the way of the work you love? If so, then you could probably benefit from taking a different approach.

Create your own structure

I find it telling that Alisa says “I am not good at structure {though I am very productive}” – which suggests to me that she may be better at structure than she thinks. It may not be a conventional 9-5 working day, but if she’s producing lots of good stuff, it may not need too much tweaking.

Have a look at this list of [25 Famous Thinkers and their Inspiring Daily Rituals](#). It includes some pretty unusual working habits – like [John Cheever](#), who commuted to a basement where he stripped off to his underwear before sitting down to write; [Gertrude Stein](#), who wrote her poetry sitting in her car (fortunately she parked it first); or [Alexander Dumas](#), who began each workday by eating an apple at 7am under the Arc de Triomphe.

Unconventional? Yes. Organised? You bet. Effective? I think the results speak for themselves.

For some practical tips on devising your own creative routine, read chapter 3 of this ebook, as well as my on [Time Management for Creative People](#) (it’s free to download and share) and start experimenting with the ideas.

Creativity can be pretty boring

Another part of Alisa’s description caught my eye, reminding me of something I’ve heard from many coaching clients:

I want the process to be the creativity, the product to be the result of an amazing experience. With the kind of projects I am working on, the process needs to be soulful, mindful, thoughtful so the product I put forth will be too.

I know how you feel Alisa, and sometimes creative work can be an amazing experience. But sadly that’s not always the case, otherwise I guess everyone would do it. Creativity can be incredibly frustrating — think of the days

when things just won't flow or fall into place, no matter how hard you try.

And sometimes creativity can be downright boring. Imagine doing the grouting on [Notre Dame Cathedral](#) or the Taj Mahal. Or proofreading *War and Peace*. Or stitching all the chainmail on the Bayeux Tapestry.

I used to draw elaborate Celtic knotwork designs. They took forever. It got so boring I listened to entire audiobooks, just to get through it. But people were impressed with the results – “I wouldn't have the patience,” they said.

Last year, I visited a silversmith's workshop, at [Cockpit Arts](#). I saw some elaborately patterned silver bowls, and was told each one was hammered out of a single sheet of flat silver. Apparently, you have to do it one tiny tap at a time, otherwise the metal will split. “How long does it take?” I asked. “Weeks” came the heartfelt answer.

In each of these examples, a boring, nit-picky, uninspiring process led to a product that was received with surprise and delight by its audience. I'd much rather have it that way round than vice versa.

I'll leave the last word to the novelist Gustave Flaubert, who knew a thing or two about producing amazing work:

Be regular and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work.

6. The Inner Critic

This chapter is by Marelisa Fábrega.

Your Inner Critic is that little voice inside your head that's usually trying to stop you from creating. It uses phrases such as the following: "Who are you to think you can create anything?"; "Why would anyone want to read anything you write?"; and "This poem doesn't even rhyme. Just give up already". The Inner Critic is always lurking in the shadows of your mind, ready to appear whenever you get the urge to create.

It knows just how to push your buttons, too. Of course, it has an unfair advantage, since it's privy to your innermost thoughts. You can almost see it leaning back on an overstuffed blue and white striped chaise longue, taking copious notes on its Moleskine of what you consider to be your major faults and shortcomings, tucking the knowledge away for a future date when it might come in handy. Is that a smirk on its face? Miserable Critic. (And where on earth did it get a chaise longue and a Moleskine?)

The Inner Critic is such a commonly encountered obstacle that it was no surprise that several Lateral Action readers told us about it in the course of this project:

Self-doubt. I have an idea, then I start analyzing and criticizing it... 'Can I really do this? Do I really want to do this? Will people really want this? Isn't there is too much competition? Why waste my time on something that's going to fail?' ... then in my despair I move onto something else without taking action.

Philip Riggs

Self doubt – 'Will my ideas fly and am I good enough?'

Nicole Sims, [Coley Sims](#)

I think my biggest creative block is getting to a stopping point, seeing that everything looks great, and then being afraid to continue, for fear of ruining

it... I suspect it has to do with my Inner Critic and perfectionism, and I have some techniques I use to trick myself, but would surely love to hear more ideas!

[Paula Swenson](#)

Getting stuck at the theory stage – this takes many forms, but I often get stuck in the mindset of ‘This idea I’ve had is going to look rubbish, so I’m not going to attempt it. I’ll wait until a better idea comes along.’

Michael Radcliffe, [Artbizness](#)

Fortunately, there are ways to get around your Inner Critic; in fact, you might even be able to persuade it to help you. Below you’ll find four ways to silence your Inner Critic so that you can get to work and start creating.

Method 1 – treat the Inner Critic as a partner

The image created above of the Inner Critic is that of ‘Inner Critic as evil troll or gremlin’. However, Chris Cade from the blog [Inscribe Your Life](#) suggests that we give the Inner Critic a different role: that of an overly protective mother-type character that’s just trying to help, albeit in a very misguided way. He explains that your Inner Critic acts out of love: it’s trying to protect you and keep you from getting hurt.

Therefore, the answer is not to reject your critic, but rather to ask it to allow creativity to flow freely for now, without judging or critiquing the process. The critic can then participate at a later stage of the project, by pointing out grammatical and spelling errors, noticing where the writing doesn’t flow well, or letting you know if something doesn’t make sense and needs to be explained in a different way. Chris adds that we should embrace our Inner Critic and take it on as a partner.

Method 2 – trick your Inner Critic

[Mark Forster](#) is the author of the fabulous book on productivity [Do It Tomorrow](#). He explains that, often, what our rational mind decides to do and what we actually end up doing are two entirely different things. For example, we may decide to sit down and get to work on our novel, but we end up filing papers, organizing our desk, and balancing our checkbook

instead. What Foster calls “the reactive brain” — which is responsible for sidelining our best-laid plans to create — is very similar to our Inner Critic.

One way for the rational mind to take control of the situation is to trick the Inner Critic. For example, if you want to write a novel, your Inner Critic might perceive this as a threat: it’s probably going to be difficult; it’ll take you out of your comfort zone; it’s going to be a lot of work; it worries that you won’t find a publisher; it reminds you that you might get a one-star review on Amazon and then your life would basically be over; and so on.

So you trick your Inner Critic into thinking that you’re not really going to write a novel, you’re just going to gather the necessary materials and set them down on your desk. A few minutes later you tell your Inner Critic that you’re just going to work on creating the profile for your main character. That’s all, just create a character profile. Then you can continue to work on the project in timed bursts, creating a scene, coming up with names for secondary characters, deciding on a setting, and so on.

Getting your Inner Critic to go along with working on small chunks is a lot easier than getting it to ‘write a novel’ with no limits set to make the task appear easier and more manageable. In this way you can write an entire novel without letting your Inner Critic know what you’re up to.

Method 3 – banish your Inner Critic

When she was ten years old, [SARK](#) – Susan Kennedy – announced to her mother, “I’m supposed to be a beacon of hope to the world and write books.” Today she’s written over fourteen books which combine bright, scribbled pictures and handwritten pages, and which encourage everyone to be more creative. She says that she loves it when someone looks up shyly at her and tells her, “I’m a writer.”

SARK confesses that she’s struggled with her Inner Critic all her life — she calls her Inner Critic “The Pusher” — and offers the following suggestions for dealing with your Inner Critic:

- To get past your Inner Critic you have to slide on your stomach under the gate with your identification papers in your mouth.

- Make little signs that say “Yes!” and post them all over your house, even while your Inner Critic screams “No!”
- Banish your Inner Critic to Madagascar on an expedition to search for rare lemurs.

SARK adds that your Inner Critic needs to criticize and work, because that’s what Inner Critics do. However, it doesn’t really matter what the work is. So come up with mundane tasks for your critic to do while you get on with the task of writing.

Method 4 – use affirmations to deal with the Critic’s negativity

[Eric Maisel](#), Ph.D. is a San Francisco-based creativity coach and trainer of creativity coaches. He has worked with creative and performing artists for more than twenty years and has written many excellent books on creativity. In addition, he’s a family therapist.

In [Write Mind: 299 Things Writers Should Never Say to Themselves \(and what they should say instead\)](#), Dr. Maisel suggests that you use positive affirmation as a way to deal with the negativity of the Inner Critic. He explains that when you hear yourself saying things such as “There is far too much going on in my life right now to write”, you should immediately counter this negative statement with a “right mind statement”. Your right mind statement in this case could be “I will write first thing every morning”.

For many people, the Inner Critic has a powerful voice which can have a strong negative impact on their attitude and on their sense of self. Instead of just passively accepting what the Inner Critic says, you can choose to believe something else. Write down everything you hear your Inner Critic say and develop a positive affirmation to replace the criticism. Here’s another example offered by Dr. Maisel:

- **Wrong Mind:** “Somebody has the answer, and if I read enough books on writing and attend enough workshops, I will learn to write well.”

- **Right Mind:** “I learn to write well by writing.”

Conclusion

You can take a quiz to rate how strong your Inner Critic is — which was adapted from the book [Embracing Your Inner Critic](#) by Hal and Sidra Stone — by going [here](#). Hal and Sidra explain in their book that our Inner Critic develops early in our lives, absorbing what we hear from others and what society expects from us. It’s not a voice that’s meant to go unchallenged, but rather a part of ourselves which we can choose to ignore or confront. In addition, we can choose to listen to our Inner Critic only at the appropriate stage of the creative process.

Encourage your Inner Critic to lie back on the chaise longue and take a long nap. Sing it a lullaby if that will help. Then, while it’s fast asleep, steal the Moleskine and run for your life.

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Marelisa blogs about creativity, productivity, and getting the most out of life over at [Abundance Blog at Marelisa Online](#). She’s the author of [“How to Live Your Best Life — The Essential Guide for Creating and Achieving Your Life List”](#).

7. “I don’t know what to say”

Every creative medium has the equivalent of the writer’s blank page – an empty space waiting to be filled. And every creator knows the numbing feeling of staring at that space without a clue what to do or say next. The possibilities are endless – so many, that it’s impossible to choose. So many, there might as well be none at all.

The feeling gets worse the more you look at the work of your creative heroes – what could you possibly add to what they have said and done in the field?

So it was no surprise when this issue cropped up in the Creative Blocks series:

I’m a good photographer. I can take a technically well executed and interesting picture. I’ve sold images, for hundreds of dollars, been successful in competitions, had a gallery show, have images part of a traveling, internationally curated exhibition. So I can take a picture.

I’m currently frustrated and blocked in that I don’t know what I want to take pictures of. Or have anything to say with the pictures I do take. I’ve worked at this and been frustrated by it off and on for several years, trying to work on projects (with some success – a couple of books produced as a result)

But I still feel that same block, that the pictures aren’t interesting, or worth showing or bothering with. There is always something lacking, some element of emotion or anything to make them worthwhile or actually say something interesting. I think I might be struggling with the fear of trying to break out of the style I’m in, but don’t really know how to go about it.

Any ideas?

[Gordon McGregor](#)

I’m currently attending a poetry workshop with [Mimi Khalvati](#), at the [Poetry School](#). It’s an advanced workshop, so we’ve all been writing for a while. One of the things Mimi does very well is to challenge us to go beyond simply producing ‘good writing’. Here’s a typical bit of feedback from Mimi, one that I’ve been on the receiving end of:

This is a well crafted poem. If you look at every line, see it's well-written. The form, the rhythm, the rhymes and syntax are all well handled.

But the trouble is, you knew everything in it before you sat down to write. You didn't surprise yourself, you didn't discover anything as you wrote. Nothing happened.

And that's why Poetry has yet to walk into the poem.

Ouch! But she's right. Like Gordon, who can take a "technically well executed and interesting picture", if I want to progress with my writing, I need to recognise that technical skill is a necessary-but-not-sufficient condition for success. When I sit down to write a poem, I need to let go of everything I know and be open to what happens.

And like all the best things in life, it's scary – but exciting.

Scary, because the Inner Control Freak starts, well, freaking out. It's only his job. And exciting, because the thrill of discovery, or suddenly finding something magical happening with the words, or not knowing exactly what it is but being intensely curious to follow it and find out – is exactly why I started writing poetry in the first place.

And the thing is, you can't plan for magic. You can only chant your little spell and hope the spirits are listening. You can't plan ahead and anticipate "what you want to say" or " what [you] want to take pictures of". If the words or pictures are going to be worth paying attention to, they need to be as fresh a discovery to you as to your audience.

Or as Theodore Roethke put it, "I learn by going where I have to go".

Hugh MacLeod wrote a great piece about this at the end of last year ['Don't worry if you don't know absolutely everything before starting out'](#):

iii. Interesting destinies rarely come from just reading the instructions manual.

Yes, Louis Pasteur did say, "Fortune favors the prepared mind." On one level, he was right. That being said, the stuff you learn beforehand will never be one-tenth as useful as the stuff you learn the hard way, on the job. All the former can do is help train you to deal with the reality of the latter. The real truth is always found in the moment, never in the future.

So what does this mean for you in your studio / office / workshop / atelier on a Monday morning?

Don't plan

Plans are good for some things. Buildings. Savings. Exercise. Some bits of some businesses. But they have their limits when it comes to creativity. After all, if you're only going to execute on a plan, you haven't really *created* anything, have you?

Preparation is fine. Research is fine. Practice is fine. Rehearsal is fine. Learning your craft is fine. But there comes a point when it's time to face the stage, the page, the canvas or the blank screen.

At that point, you need to leave your plans behind.

Let go

You heard me. Let go!

Experiment

Start fooling around, playing with your materials. Splash the paint on. Scribble the words down. Point the camera wherever. Sing the first thing that comes into your head.

Where's this going? What will you get out of it? Who cares? Have fun.

'Why do you want to write poetry?' If the young man answers, 'I have important things I want to say,' then he is not a poet. If he answers, 'I like hanging around words listening to what they say,' then maybe he is going to be a poet.

(W.H. Auden)

Notice when you surprise yourself

Experiment for long enough, and chances are something interesting will happen. Maybe not something amazing, like hearing an inner voice reciting 'Kubla Khan' or suddenly realising why that apple just fell to the ground.

But something interesting, something you didn't expect, something that may have potential.

Quite often, you won't notice it at the time. This is why many writers have separate times for drafting and editing their work. And why so many photographers love digital photography – take as many shots as you like, without worrying about using up the film! You can go back and pick out the good ones later.

When you return to your draft/sketchbook/memory stick, what you find can give you a clue to what to do next. You notice where the writing catches fire, and it's easy to pick up the thread and add a few more lines in the same vein. Or you suddenly realise what you find interesting about that old building, and can't wait to go back and snap a few more shots from the same angle. Or you keep playing around with that one good riff until you find the next one growing out of it ...

... at that point, you're no longer worrying about "what you have to say", you're having too much fun saying it.

Get good amazing feedback

Sometimes, we don't even notice the good stuff afterwards. In Gordon's case, for instance, given his achievements, and some of the great work on display on his [blog](#) and [Flickr page](#), I find it hard to believe that his past achievements are limited to "technically well executed and interesting picture[s]".

Now, I'm not a photographer, so I can't give him the kind of feedback he really needs, but there are people out there – experienced photographers, editors, teachers – who would be able to look at Gordon's portfolio and see things in it that he hasn't noticed yet. Their words could open up entire new creative vistas for him. If he can find someone like that, their advice will be priceless.

That's why I go to Mimi's class. She's told me things about my writing I would never have noticed myself – or not for a very long time. And because the group is composed of experienced poets, I also get great feedback from

them, that I wouldn't get from non-writers, or even experienced prose writers.

Make it a priority to get this kind of feedback for yourself. Don't settle for everyday compliments or even [very good](#) feedback. Seek out someone who knows far more about what you're trying to do than you do. And do what it takes to get their honest, considered opinion on your work. They won't tell you "what you have to say" – but they'll point you in a direction where you can find out for yourself.

Enjoy not knowing

This last one can seem a bit subtle at first, or even impossible. Surely 'not knowing' is the problem we're trying to get over here?

Actually, no. The real problem is 'resisting not knowing', or 'wanting to know everything beforehand'. Drop that, and 'not knowing' isn't a problem at all. In fact, it's a big relief.

Stop and think for a moment about all the day-to-day situations where you're expected to know what you're doing, when you're doing it, how you're doing it, and why you're doing it. All those expectations. All that accountability. All that pressure.

Sometimes, the weight of knowledge can feel a little heavy.

Isn't it nice to have one small corner of your life where you *don't* know what you're going to do, or what's going to happen? Where there are no expectations and no one will hold you to account?

Hugh calls this "[personal sovereignty](#)". Another word for it is 'freedom'.

Sure, freedom can feel a little scary, at first. But once you get the hang of it, it can be a lot of fun.

If you know exactly what you are going to do then what is the point in doing it?

Picasso

8. “All blogged out”

In the last chapter we looked at the problem of getting started, when you don't know what you want to say. But you can also get blocked further down the path. When you've been working in a creative medium for several years, you may reach a point where you feel like you've said or done everything you can.

This is the situation described by experienced blogger Heather Allard:

Hi Mark!

I've been blogging over at [The Mogul Mom](#) for 3 years, covering every topic imaginable for mom entrepreneurs.

Lately, I feel like I'm "all blogged out". I feel like there's nothing left for me to write about. I find myself referring to old blog posts when my readers ask me questions I've already answered. I feel like Forrest Gump when he says, "That's all I've got to say about that."

Is being "all blogged out" a creative block?

Thanks so much!

Heather Allard, [The Mogul Mom](#)

First of all, I wonder whether you're putting too much pressure on yourself to keep reinventing the wheel? As Sonia Simone pointed out a while ago, [repeating yourself can be a very good thing](#). Linking back to your old blog posts is an excellent strategy, especially when you have a blog as rich in quality content as [The Mogul Mom](#). Newer readers won't have seen those pieces first time round, and even those who have been with you from the beginning can probably do with a reminder from time to time.

Having said that, as an experienced blogger you still face the pressure to 'make it new' every week, which can be hard when you're feeling "all blogged out". So for the rest of this piece I'll focus on ways you can recover

the sense of freshness and enthusiasm you need to be at your most creative.

And I'll start by letting you in on a little secret...

Towards the end of last year, I started to feel the same way. I'd been blogging about creativity and related topics for four years, with over a year of writing at least one substantial article a week for Lateral Action. I still had plenty of ideas stacked up, but new ones weren't coming quite so thick and fast. Like you, I didn't want to get to the point where I was repeating myself or my energy started to flag.

Fortunately, after all that time investigating creativity, I had one or two ideas about how to solve the problem.

Here's what I did – and what you can do any time you start to feel you've run out of things to say.

Take a break

I was very pleased when the Christmas holidays rolled around last year. It was wonderful to have a few days with the family and without my laptop. You may also have noticed that we've had a few more guest writers at Lateral Action this year, which gave me the opportunity to step away from writing the blog for a few weeks.

As we know, ideas are much more likely to come when we're relaxing than trying to force them. I've had lots of little moments of reading something or talking to someone and thinking "that would make a great piece for Lateral Action". So my little notebook of ideas for blog posts has been filling up nicely, almost without me trying.

Takeaway: Take a break. Even if – especially if – you feel like you're too busy. If you can't manage a fortnight in the Bahamas, try a weekend with family or friends, or even a weekday afternoon in a cafe, gallery or strolling in the park.

Change subject

They say a change is as good as a rest, which was lucky for me, as I had

more of the former than the latter, when Brian, Tony and I spent an intensive few months putting together the [Creative Entrepreneur Roadmap](#). It was actually harder work than writing the blog, but it felt fresh and different, because of the change of topic.

Instead of writing mostly about the business of creativity, we were working on the creativity of business – marketing, entrepreneurship, business models, intellectual property, stress management and so on. This gave me a more well rounded view of the topics of creativity, business and personal development, triggering several more ideas for the blog.

Takeaway: Explore a new topic or revisit an old one. Or combine learnings from different topics to create a new synthesis.

Change media

It was a refreshing change to spend time recording audio lessons for the course. I hadn't recorded many interviews for a while, and it was great fun to get into the flow of conversation, from which lots of new ideas emerge spontaneously, as well as the material with planned in advance.

Takeaway: Work in a new medium, or revive an old one. If you've been writing, experiment with audio, video, graphics or photography. Even if you're not an expert in the new medium, it will show you new ways of thinking, and looking at the world.

Collaborate

Another great thing about recording the course was that instead of sitting alone at my laptop, I was working closely with Brian and Tony, zipping emails back and forth and recording the interviews themselves. I learned a hell of a lot from interviewing Brian about his fields of expertise, and listening to the conversations between Brian and Tony. And when Brian interviewed me, his questions prompted me to look at my material afresh, and drew out some new ideas that would never have occurred to either of us in isolation.

Takeaway: Collaborate on a project with someone else, preferably someone

who has skills and expertise that are complementary to your own. You won't be the first to discover that $1 + 1 > 2$.

Change form

Writing worksheets for the course made a welcome change from writing blog posts — I was pleasantly surprised to discover how much I had to say in this new format. And by the time I'd done the final worksheet, I was very happy to get back to writing blog posts!

I've also devoted a little more time to writing poetry in recent months, and was delighted when several poems virtually 'wrote themselves', with a form and tone quite different to anything I'd written before.

Takeaway: Write something completely different. If you're a blogger, write a short story, or a sonnet, or a news report, or an instruction manual. The same applies to other media – portrait photographers, have a go at crowd scenes or insects. Classical musicians, jam with a punk band.

Listen to your readers

Part of the feeling I had about my blogging was the same feeling I get when I'm teaching a seminar, and I feel like I've been talking for long enough and it's time to hear what the audience think. At that point I'll invite questions or feedback to open up the conversation.

And at that point on the blog, I had the idea of doing the Creative Blocks series. Primarily, I wanted to make the blog as helpful as possible to our readers, and help you all with the creative challenges you face. As well as the articles in this series, your comments and emails have triggered lots of new ideas for things to write about on the blog...

Takeaway: What do your readers want from you? Read their comments, Tweets, emails. Talk to them in person. Ask them!

I'll leave the last word to Heather herself – who took a proactive approach to solving her block by interviewing a number of prominent bloggers about how they avoid [“feeling blogged out”](#).

9. Taboo

Supposing you had a secret. And supposing that secret carried a big social stigma, that could cost you your job if it were ever known. And supposing you were a writer, and that secret was at the heart of what you wanted to write. So writing your book meant exposing your secret to the world, and risking the consequences.

How would you feel about sitting down to write?

Not so easy, huh?

This is the situation described by 'Alex' (pseudonym):

Thank you for your thread re: creative blocks. It came at a perfect time for me as I am starting to feel the need to write in my heart – but making excuses not to.

I am a [occupation] by day. I love it, and I am good at it. But my TRUE love is for writing. My minor in college was writing (with an emphasis on screenwriting), but I never felt like writing could “pay the bills.” It’s always been more of a hobby.

It is my desire to write a book, screenplay or compilation about a life-issue I deal with day to day. It, of course, is one of those things with a large stigma. And the point of the project would be to lessen the stigma by being honest about it. Here’s the problem: I don’t want to jeopardize my day-job by being TOO honest.

This is crazy thinking – for a few reasons:

- 1. I can’t assume ANYONE would read my book. For the number of books that are written, only a small percentage gain widespread popularity.*
- 2. There is no rule that says that if I write it, I have to get it published. (At least until I am ready.)*
- 3. Really, it’s just hypocritical, isn’t it?*

Do you have any thoughts about my block?

‘Alex’

Firstly, I'd like to point out that I don't know what issue Alex is referring to when s/he talks about "one of those things with a large stigma". Alex didn't tell me, and I haven't asked. For the purposes of this article, it's actually better that I *don't* know – otherwise it would become a distraction from the central question of being afraid to express a taboo subject.

We may not all be wrestling with an issue that carries a large stigma, but we all have [secrets](#) (NSFW), and most creators can probably recognise the feeling of being afraid to reveal too much about themselves in their work.

Now to reply to Alex:

No, it doesn't sound hypocritical to me. In an ideal world, we would all be free to be ourselves and tell the truth about ourselves. No-one would lose their job over an issue that had nothing to do with their work. But this isn't an ideal world. People make judgments, and sometimes the consequences can feel very harsh. So it sounds perfectly natural for you to be cautious about revealing your secret.

On the one hand, it sounds like part of you is pushing for total honesty of expression, and it would be a big relief to get the issue off your chest. But on the other, you need to earn a living, and honesty alone doesn't pay the bills. It must be very painful to be caught between the two.

There are no easy answers to your dilemma, but here are a few suggestions to help you find a way forward.

Don't assume anything

You say "I can't assume ANYONE would read my book", which is true. I'd push this further and say that even YOU can't assume you know how this book is going to turn out. As we saw in chapter 7, part of the magic of writing is that you can never predict exactly what you're going to say. Once you start writing, the words can surprise you by taking you an entirely different direction.

It's quite possible that the life issue you mention will indeed be the main subject of your book. But it's also possible that this issue could turn out to be just one theme among several. You may even find yourself writing a

completely different book from the one you imagined at the outset.

A couple of chapters back, Gordon felt he was blocked because he didn't know what he wanted to say – it sounds like you have the opposite problem: “I think I know what I want to say and people will disapprove of it”. As a first step, I'd suggest you put this thought to one side, and don't assume it's true.

It sounds as though this is your first book. I've met a lot of writers, some of whom have 'hit the jackpot' at the first attempt – but most of us have several attempts before we produce something we are happy with, and that is of a publishable standard. I don't want to discourage you, but to encourage you to look at writing as an ongoing process, rather than investing too much in any one book or project.

Finally, writing a book usually takes a long time. Who knows what will happen in the meanwhile? You could change your job or career, find a completely new way to earn a living. Don't assume you'll be facing the same circumstances when it comes to deciding whether to publish.

Draw a magic circle around your writing

There is no rule that says that if I write it, I have to get it published. (At least until I am ready.)

Nail on head. Writing and publishing are two different activities, requiring different mindsets – and involving different decisions. In fact, it's impossible to decide whether it's a good idea to publish your book until you've written it and know exactly what it contains.

Before you start work, draw a 'magic circle' round your writing, by promising yourself that you won't show it to anyone else until you've (a) finished the first draft and (b) given careful consideration to the consequences.

So when you sit down to write, you're free to write anything you like, knowing that the words are for your eyes only. Enjoy the freedom. Let the words out. See where they lead you.

Talk to someone you can trust

Once you've written the draft, choose a good friend or [mentor](#), and tell them about the book, and your dilemma. Make sure it's someone you trust, who knows you as a person, and who understands your professional circumstances. When you're ready, show them the draft.

Ask them three things:

1. What they think of the book itself
2. What would be the likely consequences of publishing?
3. How they think you would handle the consequences

You may want to do this with several different people before coming to a decision. If you can get an agent, they should be in a position to give you good advice. And if you go with an established publisher, you should at the very least have an editor who is sensitive to the issues and can advise you of your options.

Consider a pseudonym

Lots of writers have adopted pseudonyms, for creative or practical reasons. If you're really concerned about losing your job, then publishing under a different name would give you both freedom of expression and an extra layer of protection.

A pseudonym doesn't guarantee anonymity of course, as several writers have discovered to their cost ...

What's the worst that could happen?

One of my favourite stories about social stigma concerns a man who ran into financial difficulties and was unable to keep up the payments on a three-piece suite. He received a letter from the furniture company beginning

Dear Mr Smith, what would your neighbours think if they saw the van coming to collect the furniture from your home because you had failed to keep up with your payments ...?

He wrote back to them and said:

I've asked my neighbours what they would think, and they said 'What a horrible furniture company, I would never to buy anything from them!'

So sometimes the demons in our mind are more scary than the reality. By taking a positive attitude and showing we won't be intimidated, we can get people around us on our side.

Sometimes, however, the consequences of revealing all can be horrendous.

The blog [Girl with a One Track Mind](#) (NSFW) details the sex life of 'Abby Lee', the pseudonym of a young woman living in London. Over the past six years it has attracted over 7 million readers. In 2005, the blog's popularity led to a book deal – which in turn attracted the attention of the “gutter press” who couldn't resist revealing Abby's true identity, with predictable consequences for her privacy and personal life.

These days, Zoe Margolis is a successful author, journalist and speaker who continues to blog and is about to publish her second book. You could argue that her story has a happy ending, and she has clearly shown a lot of courage in standing up for their principles and continuing to speak out on behalf of women's right to express their sexuality. But she's had to put up with an intolerable level of abuse and intimidation along the way; enough to give anyone pause for thought before speaking up on a taboo subject.

The inspiring thing about Margolis' story is that it shows that even when the worst happens, it's possible to face it down and come out the other side with your head held high. Usually, it won't be the end of the world, even if it feels like it. You'll pick yourself up and carry on somehow.

So where does all this leave you? Assuming you get to the point of having written something you're intrinsically happy with, I suggest you consider the following questions carefully, before deciding whether to publish:

- Supposing you keep it to yourself – what's the worst that could happen? Could you live with that? What would you do next?
- Supposing you publish – what's the worst that could happen? Could you live with *that*? What would you do next?

10. Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll

Many creative people hate to feel themselves constrained by the rules and conventions of society. Moderation and common sense are all very well for the bourgeoisie, but the Bohemian quarter has traditionally been a place of indulgence and tolerance, its cafes, bars and louche hotels the setting for all kinds of debauchery.

The 'sex, drugs and rock 'n'roll' lifestyle is a lot older than rock 'n'roll, and many see it as an inevitable part of a creative career. But does it really make you more creative? Or is it at best a distraction – at worst, the pathway to self-destruction?

This is the question posed by [Iva Tanackovic](#):

This isn't my personal creativity block (thank heavens), but I have a big problem trying to prove people that their creativity issue is more likely an issue of not having creativity or a very wrong way to solve what really blocks it.

I run a website for a musician and a lot of musicians gather on my forum. A lot of them encourage drug use and explain how that makes them inspired and creative. Can you prove that this approach is stupid and that they should dig deeper for the true source of the problem instead?

Thank you for writing in with such an altruistic block!

You ask whether I can “prove that this approach is stupid” – I assume you mean whether I can prove it to the musicians and persuade them to change their ways? My answer is “Probably not – but I can offer a different perspective that may change the way they look at it”.

Once upon a time, I worked as a substance misuse counsellor, with people who were overindulging in various drugs, legal and illegal. My clientele included people whose habits were endangering not only their health but their lives. And it was remarkably difficult to persuade some of them that continuing was not a good idea. The reason is that human beings are pretty

impervious to well-intentioned, sensible advice. They often have to find out for themselves whether or not something is a bad idea. And that's doubly true when it comes to 'rebellious' behaviour like taking drugs.

And setting aside the question of health and well-being, I'd probably have a hard time persuading the musicians that intoxication never leads to inspiration. I'd imagine they'd be pretty quick to cite examples such as The Beatles, [David Bowie](#), Janis Joplin and [Led Zeppelin](#) as evidence that the sex drugs and rock 'n' roll lifestyle goes hand-in-hand with creativity.

It's not just modern rock stars – Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously described how the inspiration for his poem 'Kubla Khan' came to him in an opium reverie, while 17th century poet and libertine John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester could have given Keith Richards a run for his money when it came to partying.

It's not even limited to the artistic types – biochemist Kary Mullis has said that insights from his experiences with LSD were central to his development of the Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR), for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

So it's indisputable that some outstanding creators have credited psychoactive drugs with a positive effect on their creative thinking. But does that mean drugs offer a reliable source of inspiration? And is inspiration enough for creative achievement?

A quick glance at the numbers should give us pause for thought. There are a lot of creative types out there living the rock 'n' roll lifestyle, with a vague sense that William Blake must have been right when he said "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom". And lots of them claim to have amazing insights and experiences along the way. But there aren't quite so many people creating truly amazing artwork or music or literature or scientific breakthroughs or whatever.

[Hugh MacLeod](#) has some strong words on the subject:

It's a familiar story: the kid reads about Charlie Parker or Jimi Hendrix or Charles Bukowski and somehow decides that their poetic but flawed example somehow gives him permission and/or absolution to spend the next decade or two drowning in his own metaphorical vomit.

Of course, the older you get, the more casualties of this foolishness you meet. The more time they have had to ravage their lives, the more pathetic they seem. And the less remarkable work they seem to have to show for it, for all their “amazing experiences” and “special insights.”

...

So the bars of West Hollywood, London, and New York are a wash with people throwing their lives away in the desperate hope of finding a shortcut, any shortcut. And a lot of them aren't even young any more, they had B-plans having been washed away by beer and vodka years ago.

Meanwhile the competition is at home, working their asses off.

(Ignore Everybody)

The thing is, even if drugs do bring you a bit of ‘inspiration’, inspiration is often the easy bit of creativity. As I’ve said right from the beginning of Lateral Action, [creative thinking is not enough](#).

To return to our earlier examples: Coleridge, The Beatles, Joplin etc. Yes, they did have some pretty amazing insights on their psychedelic trips, and yes, these did contribute to some of their best work. But those moments of inspiration were only the tip of the creative iceberg. Look below the surface, and in each case you’ll see years of dedication, practice, learning their craft and assimilating the influences of other artists.

Take away all that hard work and discipline, and the drugs most certainly would not have worked. They’d have been no more remarkable than the next guy at the bar mumbling into his beer about his undiscovered genius.

So if your musicians are pursuing drugs as a path to creativity, I’d suggest they are looking in the wrong place. I’ve worked with hundreds of artists, musicians and other professional creatives, and almost invariably, the ones with the most ‘inspiration’ are the ones who work the hardest at what they do. Some of them like to have a good time as well – but usually at weekends, and not to the extent that it interferes with their artistic practice.

If I were talking to your musicians, I would ask them how much of the following they are doing:

- listening to great music – and not just the kind they normally play
- practising
- challenging themselves to try new things, technically and stylistically
- playing live
- listening to their own music with a critical ear
- going to gigs
- watching and learning from undisputed masters, past and present

If the answer is 'not much', then I'd gently suggest that drugs are not likely to be the magic bullet. As Hugh points out, there are no shortcuts to creativity.

If the answer is 'lots, all the time', that would indicate that they at least have their artistic priorities right. In that case, I'd suggest that, while the drugs may feel like the icing on the creative cake, the cake itself is more important. Cake without icing can be delicious, but if you're tucking into a bowl of icing on its own, you probably have a problem.

11. When inspiration runs out

Inspiration is often seen as the Holy Grail for creative people. All of a sudden, something magical happens – words, images sounds or rhythms appear in your mind as if from nowhere, entrancing you in their spell.

All you have to do is get it down on paper, canvas or the digital screen, as easily as if you were taking dictation. It's effortless, delightful, surprising and exciting. It's also mysterious. When you've been visited by inspiration, you feel special.

But it doesn't last. It's a will-o'-the-wisp that vanishes when you pursue it. Some days, you wonder whether it exists at all. Or whether it's off visiting other people. Meanwhile, you're sat there like a lemon, with your notebook or computer in front of you, or your guitar lying silent in your lap.

So what can you do when you run out of inspiration? This is the question asked by Felipe Lira:

Let me start by thanking you guys for the blog and the creative blocks series, the "Fear of getting it wrong" post (one of my major blocks) helped a lot and was a great incentive.

I'm a young guy from Brazil who just decided to make of writing a career path. I always wrote, but just from the middle of last year I started showing my scribbles only on the internet, for fun. Since I started posting those I came across some big blocks despite the short time I've been doing it.

My major block is my disappointment with the amount of the story/plot I came up with. When I first get the idea for a story it might seem complete in my head, but when I sit to write it down I realise that all I have a a few complete scenes and the general plot, so I write what I can and get stuck to link scene A to scene B, I get so disappointed that I drop the story for long periods of time before going back to it.

This also has to do with another associated block I go trough. Although I love writing (and other process like playing/writing music, drawing and reading) there are times when doing those thing simple don't give me the pleasure they did just the week before, a few weeks later I might get excited for those again but I doesn't really last long. I need to seek constant inspiration in

works and artist I appreciate and admire to get that felling back.

Filipe Lira

Everybody knows the story of Newton's inspired insight about gravity, when he saw the apple falling from the tree. We don't hear so much about the years of study that prepared his mind for that moment.

And to revisit an example from the previous chapter, lots of people have read the story about Coleridge's inspired composition of the poem 'Kubla Khan' while in an opium trance, but not so many have gone through Coleridge's notebooks and seen how much reading and writing had prepared him for such a virtuoso performance.

One of the biggest mistakes a creative person can make is to hang around waiting for inspiration. I should know. I spent years waiting for it, wondering when it would hurry up and strike. Occasionally I would get a fitful burst and write the words down excitedly. And then wait for the next bit to come along, leaving the manuscript unfinished.

It was only when I started attending classes and applying myself to writing more regularly, practising the basics like form, meter, rhyme and syntax, that I started finishing poems that I was proud of, and getting them published.

These days, the harder I work, the more inspiration I get. In fact, I can walk into my office feeling very uninspired, but if I stay there long enough, tinkering with the words, toying with different combinations, then sooner or later something starts to happen.

There are several explanations why this is so. One is that creativity is a bit like fitness training – the more you do it, the stronger, faster and fitter you get. Another is that your unconscious mind needs to be 'primed' with knowledge and experience before the ideas start to flow – this is what you achieve by reading, research, and plain old hard graft and hard thinking.

Another, older idea is that the Muse doesn't waste her time on idlers. She expects us to do our bit to help ourselves before she comes to our aid.

So how can you get past this block?

Treat inspiration as a bonus

It's wonderful when it arrives, but don't bank on it every week.

Roll your sleeves up and get on with It

Treat your writing like a job of work. A meaningful job, that can be enjoyable and even exciting. But just like any other job, it can be boring, frustrating and disappointing at times. Many creators find that [a regular daily routine](#) is the best way to approach their work. See if it works for you.

Face down the Resistance

[Steven Pressfield](#) would say that waiting for inspiration is a form of Resistance – the invisible, insidious force inside us that tries to make us avoid tackling the difficult challenges we set ourselves.

So whenever you feel disappointed with the amount of story you have, don't let Resistance get the better of you – keep writing for another 30 minutes, to see if things get easier. If not, take a break for 10 minutes and do something completely different. Then go back and attack the writing for another 30 minutes. If that doesn't work, leave it until the next day, and keep going until you make a breakthrough.

Learn about story structure

As a poet, I need to know about things like rhythm, meter, alliteration, rhyme and so on. As a fiction writer, you need to learn about story structure – once you understand the basic principles of plot and narrative, you'll know what questions to ask yourself at key points when you get stuck.

The best books on the subject I know of are [Story](#) by Robert McKee and [The Writer's Journey](#) by Christopher Vogler, based on Joseph Campbell's classic study of mythic story structures, [The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#). The first two books are written specifically for movie screenwriters, but all three will be helpful for storytellers of any description.

Watch out for discoveries along the way

You'll be pleased to know that it's not all hard work and determination. As we saw in chapter 7, not knowing what you have to say in advance can actually be a very creative, liberating state of mind.

J.R.R. Tolkien once described his masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings* as “a children's story that grew up” – he had set out to write another children's book like *The Hobbit*, but “the tale grew in the telling” and he found himself writing for much longer, darker and more serious book.

One example he gave was when the Hobbits stayed the night at the Prancing Pony inn at Bree. As he described the main public bar, Tolkien found himself writing about a mysterious figure sitting in the corner of the room. At this stage, even the author had no idea who this person was. He turned out to be Aragorn, one of the most important characters in the book.

Don't worry so much about planning everything in advance. Trust the story to take you where it wants to go.

Become a pro

In [*The War of Art*](#), Steven Pressfield says the way to overcome Resistance is to 'turn pro'. The difference between the amateur and professional is that the amateur is put off by the boredom, disappointment, frustration and failure that are an inevitable part of the creative process. The professional feels just as bored, just as disappointed, just as frustrated and just as much a failure as the amateur – but unlike the amateur, he accepts it all as just part of the job. And carries on regardless.

So the next time you experience those feelings, remind yourself that this is your chance to become a professional.

12. Taking on too much

If you're not careful, one of the greatest blessings of the creative mindset can turn into a huge curse.

You see opportunities everywhere. Things you read, people you meet, places you go, experiences at work, at home, even in love – all of them are liable to spark a new idea for a great project. You imagine how great the finished outcome will be, and enthusiastically start work. But if you keep doing this, day after day, you will inevitably find yourself starting more projects than you can possibly finish. It's the creative equivalent of having 'eyes bigger than your stomach'.

And if you have a thriving [network of creative contacts](#), new ideas and opportunities will come to you every day, in your inbox, in meetings, text messages and casual conversations. Because of the way our [mirror neurons](#) work, it's easy to get infected with other people's enthusiasm; and you're a nice person, so you hate to disappoint anyone by saying 'no' when they come to you with a proposal.

All of which adds to the pile of projects on your desk. You feel stressed, overloaded, guilty, rushing around yet feeling that you're getting nowhere. Something has to give. And that something is your creativity.

Stress, guilt and anxiety take up the mental bandwidth that used to be reserved for imaginative thinking and focused execution. You may be cranking stuff out, but it's less and less remarkable. It can get to the point where your commitments become so overwhelming that you procrastinate to avoid contemplating it – which only makes things worse.

This is the situation described by Mats, in response to our invitation to [tell us about your creative blocks](#):

My problem is all about execution, I get too excited at first, involved in too many projects and then I get overloaded with things to do. This makes me procrastinate, do other less important things and many things don't get completed. This in turn makes me more overloaded, feel bad about myself and the threshold to to do what needs to be done gets huger and huger like

an evil circle.

Family responsibilities and many 'must do's' add to the problem.

Mats, you need to stop taking on so many projects.

That's the answer, but it's probably not much help. I'm sure you know it already. And well-meaning friends and colleagues have probably told you something similar. But if it were that easy, you'd have done it by now, right?

So here's a four-step process to help you cut down your commitments and get back in the creative and productive zone.

1. Stop saying yes so quickly

It sounds like you have plenty of natural enthusiasm, which is a terrific asset. But it's leading you to say 'yes' too quickly and too often.

So the first place to start is to make this your default response when anybody comes to you with a new project:

This sounds a great idea and I'm really excited about it. I think it's got a lot of possibilities, but I'll need to think it over before deciding whether I can take it on. Is it OK if I get back to you tomorrow?

Say this *even if you are 100% convinced that you want to do it*. If it really is a great opportunity, and they really want you on board, they'll wait 24 hours.

This will give you a breathing space, to reflect and consider the implications of taking on the project. 'Sleeping on it' is a great idea, because it allows your unconscious mind time to process all the details, and gives you the opportunity to take a fresh look at it tomorrow morning. In the cold light of day, you may notice a few niggling doubts or concerns that need to be ironed out.

Apparently the Vikings used to make every important decision twice – once drunk and once sober. You may not need to go that far, but beware of making decisions when you're intoxicated by enthusiasm. A little sober reflection could save you from a big hangover.

2. Know when your schedule is full

When you fill a glass with water, it's obvious when it's full, so it's easy to stop before it overflows. If only it were so easy to see when a schedule is full.

Compared to a glass of water, our schedules are invisible. They are made up of bits of information that we can arrange in all kinds of ways – in a diary, calendar, to-do list, or those little scraps of paper that have fallen down behind your desk. We need to find ways of making the information more visible, and gauging when the diary is full.

Step back and look at the big picture of all of your commitments right now. Make a list of the projects you are currently committed to. For each project, estimate how many days work they are likely to take – then add a few on for good measure.

Now look at your diary or calendar for the next three months. Assume that you can only work on one project per day. Mark the deadlines. Now count up the number of days you have available to work on your projects. Compare the number with your estimates for each project. How do they match up?

- If you've got fewer 'project days' than 'calendar days' you may be doing okay – as long as you've got your estimates right.
- If you've got the same number of project days and calendar days you're at full capacity and can't take anything else on for the next three months.
- If you've got more project days than calendar days you need to make some changes: cancel some projects; renegotiate deadlines; get help; become more efficient.

Whatever the outcome, you now know whether you have the capacity to take on any new projects. You know whether your glass is half empty, full, or overflowing.

3. Decide on your priorities

So much for your present capacity. But quantity isn't quality – how can you know whether or not to take on new projects?

The key to good decision-making is knowing your real priorities. And a good place to start is psychologist Abraham Maslow's [Hierarchy of Needs](#) — see the link for the pyramid diagram showing our basic biological needs at the bottom, because these need to be satisfied before you can move up the pyramid to the other needs.

Once physiological and safety needs are taken care of, we are free to focus on social needs such as love, belonging, esteem and status. And once our physical and social needs are assured, we have enough of a solid base to focus on self-actualisation, i.e. becoming all that we can be, by using our talents to the full, for sheer pleasure and achievement. Note that Maslow placed creativity in this category.

Draw your own hierarchy of needs, so that you can use it as the basis for future decisions.

1. Draw a pyramid like Maslow's, with different levels. Start at the bottom, by filling in the things you *absolutely have to do* for your career/business to survive.
2. Now fill in the very top of the pyramid – this is the stuff you would do if you won the proverbial lottery and could spend your days doing exactly what you pleased.
3. Now fill in the levels in between – these represent the finer grades of 'stuff I have to do' versus 'stuff I love to do'. Include things that may not bring you money, but will boost your network and social status – stuff like writing a blog, speaking at a public event, or helping out in your professional community.
4. Your pyramid shows you your priorities. Pin it up above your desk, make it your screensaver or get it printed on your duvet – whatever will keep it front of mind.

I am *not* going to tell you to start at the bottom and work your way up. That may sound a sensible option, but if you take it too literally you'll spend all your time on grunt work and none on the stuff you really enjoy!

Have another look at your diary. Promise yourself that over the course of the next three months, you will give yourself a reasonable balance between all the different levels of your pyramid. You'll be doing everything you need to to fulfil your responsibilities, keep everyone happy and keep the cash rolling in. And you'll also be working on things that you find creatively rewarding.

You won't be able to do a bit of everything every day. Some days, you just have to put your head down and crank things out, whether you like them or not. But try to visit every level of your pyramid at least once a week.

4. Start saying 'no'

The last three steps should save you from filling up your schedule with projects you dream up yourself. But what about all those proposals and demands from other people? How can you stop committing to more than you can deliver?

Well firstly, 1-3 will help you decide whether the other person's idea is something you want to do. It will give you the time to think it over, see how much time you have available and whether it's aligned with your own priorities. So when you say 'yes' you can say it confidently, knowing you will keep your promises.

But what if the answer you come up with is 'no'? How can you tell that to the other person without disappointing them or annoying them?

The short answer is that you can't guarantee that they won't react badly. Other people are outside of your control, that's what makes them so ~~annoying~~ interesting. Sometimes they'll fly off the handle or act hurt, or try to guilt you into doing stuff you really know you shouldn't. Sometimes you just have to stand there and take it. Then say "I'm sorry, but the answer's still no". And get back on your real work.

Sometimes you have to risk looking 'selfish' in the short term in order to do

the things that make the most difference in the long term.

If you're worried about disappointing people, then it's better to disappoint them a little bit up front by saying 'no', than to disappoint them a lot later on by not delivering on your word.

But most of the time, it's not as bad as that. Since I started taking this approach, I've often been pleasantly surprised by people's telling me they respect my decision.

And if you weigh up all those little disappointments against the big satisfaction you deliver each time you complete a task on schedule and over expectations, you'll probably find the balance tipping in your favour.

13. Information overload

The internet is a wonderful thing, especially for creative people looking for entertainment and new ideas. Never before have so many different sources of inspiration been so freely available.

But as many of us have discovered to our cost, you can have too much of a good thing. Too many websites to visit, too many blogs to read, too many videos to watch, too much music to listen to, too many links to click on Twitter, StumbleUpon, Delicious, Facebook, Google+... And that's before you've even opened your email!

Some days, it feels like your laptop is a [Pandora's Box](#) – open it and you unleash all kinds of digital distractions, that make creative work an impossibility. Or to change the metaphor, information overload is in danger of crushing your inspiration.

This is the situation described by João Freitas:

One of my creative blocks it's the fact that i always think i've got to see everything that goes on the internet, read everything, all the news, watch all the movies, know all the new music bands that are emerging, etc...

ALL, ALL, ALL

so.....

if i try this "daily actualization" i obvious don't get much time to STOP, THINK and WORK. but i don't know...it's some kinda of a a magnetic force because I'm always doing the same thing.

what do you think? Can you help me? Have you ever felt the same?

thanks for this project

João Freitas

I'll start with your last question: yes, I have felt the same. And I know from talking to my coaching clients that you and I are not alone – information

overload is practically an epidemic right now, and presenting many of us with a big challenge. So what you're experiencing is pretty normal. You might even say it's an occupational hazard for 21st century creatives.

I'm reminded of a story told by Nile Rodgers, the legendary music producer:

When it comes to dealing with women I'm a super, super romantic guy. But I probably have what they call Don Juan syndrome: which is, every time I meet a girl – every single one – on some level there's flirtation involved. I was friends with an actor by the name of Malcolm-Jamal Warner who worked on The Cosby Show. And Bill Cosby noticed that Malcolm had a wandering eye. And he pulled him aside and said to him, 'Son, there are many, many beautiful women in this world – but you can't have all of them.'

Then he said, 'Once you realise that, it will give you peace.' And it's true.

[Guardian interview with Nile Rodgers](#)

It's only human nature to get over-excited when presented with an abundance, whether it's a world full of beautiful women, an all-you-can-eat buffet, or the latest cool things in your Twitter stream.

The important thing to bear in mind though, is that it's not the abundance that's the problem, or even the excitement – it's getting caught up in the excitement, to the point where it becomes an obsession. This is the "magnetic force" you describe.

And you know the solution: "STOP, THINK and WORK". But some things are easier said than done, so here are some tips to help you reduce your information overload and boost your creativity and productivity.

Give yourself some digital downtime

Every morning I spent 30 minutes either staring at the wall (sitting meditation) or walking up and down in the garden (walking meditation). It can get pretty boring.

Many days, I'm tempted to skip it and fire up the laptop, especially when I'm busy or anticipating something exciting happening in my internet

business. But it's one of the most important things I do each day .

By the end of the 30 minutes I feel much more relaxed, alert and clear headed. And when I sit down at the computer, it's much easier to avoid distractions and get down to work.

I also have a rule that I'm not allowed to use my laptop in the evenings, unless I'm working to an urgent. This keeps the last part of the day free for family: playing with my children, enjoying a meal with my wife, pottering around in the kitchen or the garden, or watching a movie. Sometimes it's hard to drag myself away from the computer, but it's always a relief when I finally switch it off.

I'm not saying you need to take up meditation (although [here's a good place to start](#) if you want to). But I suggest you schedule some regular digital downtime in your day – i.e. switch off your computer and phone (and yes, that does include an iPad!) and spend time in the 'real world' of people and things, socialising face-to-face, exercising or doing practical tasks like washing the dishes or tidying your home.

If you really want to break the cycle of information overload, try Tim Ferris's low information diet for a week, as described in his book [The Four Hour Work Week](#): seven days without any newspapers, magazines, news websites, television, books or web surfing (except for essential work tasks).

Notice what's happening

Once upon a time, a Zen student wrote to his teacher, criticizing himself for being 'dim and dull'. Here's the teacher's response:

Your letter informs me that your root nature is dim and dull, so that though you make efforts to cultivate and uphold the Dhamma [i.e. the Buddha's teachings], you've never gotten an instance of transcendent enlightenment. The one who can recognize dim and dull is definitely not dim and dull.

(From [365 Nirvana: Here and Now](#), edited by Josh Baran)

I'm not a Zen master, but I'd suggest the same thing is true for you – the fact that you can see and describe this “magnetic force” driving you to read everything you can find, means you are not completely caught up in it.

Try to look at things from the perspective of the part of you that sees what's happening. Get in touch with the thought or feeling that's prompting you to let go of the magnetic force, so that you're not carried away by it. The more digital downtime you give yourself, the easier this will be.

Schedule time for creating and consuming

As well as scheduling digital downtime in your day, set yourself times for work and times for reading, watching videos and exploring the internet. It might sound a bit rigid to organise your time in this way, but try it as an experiment. You might be surprised how good it feels.

For example, the morning is my 'writing time'. I know that if I'm surfing the web and watching videos during that time, I'm skiving off – which makes it easier to stop. In the afternoons, I've got email and a to-do list to get through, but as long as I deal with that, I can give myself time to read blogs and hang out on social networks. And I like to listen to podcasts while I wash the dishes in the evening. By allotting different times to different activities, you can stop them getting out of hand.

Use filters

When I started my first blog, I read loads of blogs about blogging. In the beginning it was exciting, but after a while, I realised I was struggling to keep up and felt overwhelmed. Then I gradually realised that I was learning the most from just two or three blogs, so I carried on reading them and unsubscribed from all the rest. Big relief!

Start using the 80/20 rule to filter information: make a list of the 20% of websites, blogs, people on Twitter, and other sources that send you 80% of the most interesting media content. Carry on following them – and ditch the rest for a week. Notice what a difference that makes.

Trust your network

A few years ago I read a piece by Ryan Holiday about [filtering information on the web](#), where he made a remark that has stayed with me:

If it's good and you miss it, it will come back to you, I promise.

This strikes me as both funny (how can he possibly guarantee that!) and true. Think of all the times you've come across a great blog post recommended by someone in your network – and then seen the same piece recommended by several other people over the next few days.

If you're connected into a network of like-minded people online, you increase your chances of finding the really good stuff. Try this for an experiment: for the next few days, only click on a link the *second* time you see it recommended by someone in your network.

Let things go

What's the worst that will happen if you miss something? Next time you see a link that you're really tempted to click on, sit on your hands for five minutes. Notice the temptation and resist it.

Can you let it go, close that browser window, and get started on your real work?

14. Kids!

There's a moment in the movie [Lost In Translation](#) where Bob (Bill Murray) is explaining to Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) how his relationship with his wife changed after they had children.

The day they arrive, your life, as you know it, is gone, never to return.

Whether or not that's true of life in general, it can sometimes feel as though it's true of your creativity.

The magic ingredients of the creative process are things like focus, concentration and time to daydream, read books, watch movies, and go out to theatres, galleries and other inspiring places. And these are precisely the things that are in short supply the moment you become a parent.

Your little bundles of joy become the most important thing in your life, shunting everything else into second place. Once you get on the seemingly endless treadmill of feeding, changing nappies, washing clothes, shopping, school runs, helping with homework and a thousand other things, it can feel like you will never have enough focused time and energy (let alone sleep!) to create outstanding work ever again.

Here's Shane Arthur's response to my invitation to send in a creative block:

I have two kids. I can't seem to get much work done anymore. I need GTD for kids creative help. Time is my block right now. I need help stealing some back for creative work. I have not done a video tutorial in about a year.

Shane Arthur, [Creative Copy Challenge](#)

I know how you feel Shane. Last night we went to bed a couple of hours later than usual (*Mad Men* on DVD can be pretty addictive) which inevitably meant my kids would wake up and demand their breakfast an hour early this morning. So I'm sitting here minus three hours of sleep, and somehow I need to come up with the goods for you in this article.

I'm feeling slightly hesitant about writing this piece, as I've been a parent for just under a year, and I know you've been at it a lot longer than me, so compared to you and many other Lateral Action readers, I'm a mere beginner!

I'm also aware that everyone's circumstances are different, which makes me wary of generalising from my own limited experience. My wife and I hit the jackpot and had twins last year, which feels like being thrown in at the deep end. But when I consider the challenges faced by the single parents out there, I'm tempted to conclude we have it easy.

However, I have picked up a thing or two in the past year, from my own experience and talking to other parents, so I'll share what I've learned so far with you...

Stop harking back

Parenthood brings plenty of external obstacles to focused work, but one of the biggest barriers is in your mind. It's frustrating enough when you can't devote the entire day to work, but you make it much worse for yourself if you keep comparing life now with the way things used to be.

Another common pitfall is to put too much pressure on yourself to perform to the same standards under radically different conditions. If you're responsible for childcare, even for part of the day, it's simply not realistic to expect yourself to churn out the same quantity and quality of work as you used to. So don't use it as a stick to beat yourself with!

As Bob said, the past is gone, never to return. You can only deal with what's happening now. So stop comparing and pining for your old routine, and start focusing on what's realistic and possible for you today.

And go easy on yourself — instead of berating yourself for not achieving as much as you used to, give yourself credit for being a committed parent, and see whatever work you manage to produce as a positive achievement. Paradoxically, your productivity is likely to increase when you stop putting pressure on yourself.

Find the gaps

A few months ago I was on a panel of writers, and heard an amazing story from one of my fellow panelists, a very successful novelist. She shared her experience of being a single mother to a child with special needs, which meant she only had one hour a day to herself, while her little boy was receiving a one-to-one tutorial.

The moment the tutor sat down to work with her son, she dashed upstairs and started typing furiously away at her first novel. It took her many months, but she succeeded in completing the book in an hour a day — and the book's success launched her career as a writer.

I live just outside London, which isn't exactly renowned for its transport infrastructure. I know lots of people who complain about commuting into town and the inefficiencies of the tube system. Not me. I hardly ever get on a train without a book or notebook, or a podcast loaded onto my iPhone. To me, travelling time is a little oasis in the day, which I can happily devote to learning or writing. I must be one of the few people in the country who sometimes takes the slow train out of choice!

However constrained your daily routine, look closely and you'll find pockets of dead time that you can bring to life with bursts of focused work. It's no substitute for having the whole day to yourself, but it's amazing how much better it you'll feel if you spend even a few minutes a day working towards your goals.

Cut the fluff

All kinds of unnecessary fluff finds its way into our working day — irrelevant websites, email, unproductive conversations and pottering about your home or office instead of knuckling down to work. Once you have kids, you realise you just don't have time for that stuff.

Remember the novelist dashing upstairs and typing furiously the moment she got the laptop booted. I'm not quite that quick off the mark, but my morning 'warm-up routine' — coffee, Google Reader, checking in on Twitter and my web stats — has got considerably shorter since I've been responsible

for getting the kids up and making their breakfast before work.

Have a good look at your working day, and see how many minutes you can shave off by giving up a few digital distractions and cutting down on 'busywork'.

Get help

You're probably doing this already, but I want to emphasise the point, particularly for the new parents out there. Unless you're superhuman, you're not going to be able to do all of this yourself. Swallow your pride and accept any offer of help you can get! And don't be afraid to ask either.

My wife and I have established a daily childcare routine, so I know the times when I'm 'on duty', and can therefore focus on work the rest of the time. None of our parents live nearby, but we've been very grateful when they've come to stay for 'working holidays', helping out with the kids and household to give us some time off. And friends who offer to babysit are instantly canonized.

Another more subtle form of help comes from spending time with others in a similar situation. I'll never forget going to a first birthday party a few months after our children were born. After a few months of feeling pretty isolated in our flat with the children, it made a huge difference to talk to other parents in the same boat.

Spend time with other parents, to share experiences and solutions, and offer mutual support and encouragement. Even better if you can find parents in the same line of work as you.

Savour your work

I have a friend who is a single parent working in a high-powered job. He tells me it feels like light relief to go to work on a Monday morning. I know how he feels. I love spending time with my kids and I certainly don't have my challenges to seek at work. But it always feels like a relief — even a treat — when I close my office door, or take the stage in front of an audience, and start work.

Make the most of whatever time you get to spend on your work. And if you do find yourself harking back to the past, maybe you could remind yourself of the times you used to procrastinate, complain or waste time during your working day. Compare that to now, when you see how precious your work is. Enjoy it!

Learn from your kids

Children are exciting, unpredictable, full of energy, frustrating, contradictory, hilarious, fascinating, perplexing, mysterious and utterly priceless.

Does that remind you of anything?

Surely we could easily replace the words “children are” with “creativity is” and that sentence would ring just as true?

No wonder the Romantic poets believed children were the embodiment of the imagination. Maybe we should take a leaf out of the Romantics’ book and welcome the disruptive, unsettling and unforgettable intrusion of children into our neatly ordered lives?

15. Procrastination

This is one of the most frustrating and puzzling obstacles we encounter whenever we set out to create something remarkable. After all, creative people *love* creating things. Writers love to write, painters love to paint, musicians love to play. So why do we spend so long avoiding and putting off doing the thing we love?

I'll offer my own explanation, but I'd like to start by pointing out that procrastination is virtually epidemic among high-level creators. I used to think I was the only one who did it, and beat myself up over it. But having spent 15+ years coaching creative pros of all descriptions, and heard a virtually identical story from hundreds of them, I'm convinced it's just an occupational hazard.

Procrastination is normal behaviour for creatives. No doubt you've noticed that procrastination featured in several of the blocks we've covered already:

While my 9-5 job is quite creative (arts manager) I struggle to find time to write outside of work hours, writing being what I consider my first and favourite creative pursuit.

When I get home there is always something else to do – housework, seeing friends, spending time with my partner, catching up the news etc. Or else I'm "too tired".

Suggestions and strategies would be great! Aside from "STOP PROCRASTINATING"

[Sholeh Johnstone](#)

At every decision making moment along the way I question incessantly whether I'm doing the right thing. I fear that making the wrong decision will result in my work not meeting the very high standard I expect of it. Hence self-doubt, procrastination, and ultimately creative stagnation creep in. I have a ton of unfinished work. My unwillingness to commit affects not only my music but my ability to make career decisions, to find collaborators – even making everyday decisions on all kinds of things is a struggle!

Anonymous

So what exactly is procrastination, and what causes it?

I think of it as “Doing anything and everything but the work I really want/ need to do”. We all know the telltale signs – instead of knuckling down to work, we spend hours surfing the web, answering emails, tidying the house, rearranging the filing cabinet, talking to friends walking the dog or watching TV.

As for the cause, I think [Steven Pressfield](#) nails it when he says that whenever we set ourselves a difficult challenge, then an invisible force called Resistance arises, which does everything in its power to distract and dissuade us from tackling the work head-on.

Why do we experience Resistance? Because every time we set out to do something amazing, our ego (a.k.a. conscious mind) feels threatened. Threatened from the outside, because we might fail, or attract criticism or ridicule. And threatened from the inside because once you open yourself up to your imagination, you never know what might come bubbling up from your unconscious mind when you [let go of control](#).

So for all of you reading this when you should really be doing something else, here are seven tried and tested ways to blast through that wall of Resistance and STOP PROCRASTINATING.

1. Decide in advance

This is critical. If you leave it until Monday morning to decide whether you’re going to start work on that Big Scary New Project or rearrange your CDs into alphabetical order, then you don’t need me to tell you which is most likely to win.

If you wait until work time before deciding what to do, you can always persuade yourself that it would be better to start the difficult work ‘later’. But if you plan ahead, then when it comes to the crunch you know you’re either doing your real work, or procrastinating.

Decide beforehand when you’re going to start work. Then when the time comes, you’ve got one less excuse for not doing it.

2. Make a habit of it

This follows on from 1. and makes it even more powerful. If you know you're supposed to be painting/writing/rehearsing every day at 8am or 3pm, then it's even harder to pretend you're going to do it 'later'.

I've written a fair bit about the value of [routines](#) and [rituals](#) in getting creative work done, so I won't labour the point here. I'll just highlight a couple more ways they help you to beat procrastination:

- **Momentum** – doing the same thing day after day builds up momentum that crushes procrastination.
- **Association** – you come to associate certain times, places, people and objects with focused creative work. In [Pavlovian fashion](#), each time you encounter the same circumstances, you experience emotions and behaviours associated with creative work.

3. Pretend you're not going to do it

I love this one, from coach [Mark Forster](#) in his fabulously-titled productivity book [Do It Tomorrow](#). When it's time to start a challenging task, this is what you say to yourself:

I'm not really going to start work, I'm just going to get the equipment out.

For example:

I'm not really going to start learning my lines, I'm just going to get the script out.

I'm not really going to the gym, I'm just going to pack my kit in the bag.

I'm not really going to start writing, I'm just going to open the Word document.

I'm not really going to make that difficult phone call, I'm just going to get the phone out and look up the number.

Mark's theory is that telling yourself this kind of white lie somehow short-circuits the part of the brain that resists getting started. Once you start

taking action and get out the kit you need, you'll find yourself starting the task almost automatically, with much less Resistance.

I've tried it, and it works! In fact, I'm so intrigued by this that it's actually fun to do. I tell myself I'm just opening up [Dragon NaturallySpeaking](#) so that it will be ready 'for later'. And just writing the title of the article so I don't forget it. And just jotting down a few quick notes ...

Half an hour later I'm happily absorbed in the writing process, striding up and down the room and dictating to the computer with music pulsating from the stereo. Having so much fun I wonder why I didn't start earlier.

4. Accept that it will never be perfect

Tell your self that you will never get it absolutely perfect. There will always be something you miss, something that could be improved.

And that's OK. Because it's better to finish something imperfect than never to let it see the light of day. Depending on the type of project, you may get a chance to revise or tweak it, and send your customers an updated version.

But even if you don't, even if this is your one and only shot, you still have a choice between shipping something that's 90-99% good enough and learning from the feedback – or never finishing, never shipping, never delighting anyone with it, and never reaping any of the rewards.

I know which I'd choose.

5. Break it down

There's a (possibly apocryphal) story about a man who ate a tractor by grinding each piece down into a fine powder and sprinkling it on his porridge every morning. I don't recommend you try this at home, but you can apply the same principle to your work.

1. Think of a big, complex, challenging project that you're working on at the moment. Imagine all the tasks involved and all the time and effort they'll take. How do you feel? A little overwhelmed?

2. Now isolate out the very first task you'll have to do. Imagine doing that. How does that feel? A bit more manageable?
3. Now think of the very first step of that very first task. E.g. if it involves creating or modifying a computer document, the first step is simply opening it. How does that feel? Piece of cake, huh?

Whenever you're feeling overwhelmed, run through this process – grinding the task down to the smallest possible next action.

6. Sprint against the clock

Use a timer to create an artificial deadline. This is how the [Pomodoro Technique](#) works – you set the timer for 25 minutes and work flat out until the bell rings, then reward yourself with a 5 minute break.

Studies have shown that we can't concentrate on a task for longer than about 20-25 minutes, so dividing your work time up into Pomodoros helps you make the most of your concentration span. The 5-minute break also acts as an incentive to get things done during the Pomodoro, and reduces the temptation to look for distractions.

7. Put yourself on the line

This one is the antidote to the “No-one would ever know if I spent the whole morning reading the paper” excuse. Make a public commitment to one or more people who you will report back to once you've done the work (or not).

Some writers have ‘writing buddies’ who are responsible for egging each other on and holding each other accountable for completing their daily and weekly quota of words.

Coaching clients often tell me that one reason for coming to see me is because they know they are more likely to take action towards their goals when they have to report back to me.

I used the same principle a couple of years ago, when I told my blog readers at Wishful Thinking that I was going to [meditate every day for a year](#) – and

report back to them at the end of the year. Can you imagine how I would have felt if I – the coach, the agent of change! – had had to report back that I didn't see it through? There were a few days when I was really tempted to skip my practice, and one of the biggest thing stopping me was the thought "what will you tell your readers?". ([Here's how I got on.](#))

16. Torn between different ambitions

Creative people tend to have wide interests – it's part of what makes us creative. But sometimes this blessing can turn into a curse, when we feel pulled in so many different directions that we don't know which to pick.

This is the challenge facing reader [Jonathan Price](#):

Any idea what one can do about having multiple, diverse ambitions and the insatiable desire to do them all at once? I feel like I can do many things: draw comics, write novels, perhaps even build an indie game-but whenever I start one I get inspired to try something else because of something I see. I can write, draw and do all kinds of digital work fairly well so I struggle with picking a single medium and sticking with a project until completion.

Thanks for writing in Jonathan. Without meeting you and learning more about your situation, it's impossible to recommend any one path, but here are some options for you to consider.

Could it just be a matter of time?

It's not obvious from your website what stage of your career you're at. If you're nearer the beginning than the end, then it could just be that you are the stage of exploring, experimenting and discovering what works.

Personally I've pursued all kinds of weird and wonderful creative and career interests, and it took a while before they coalesced into a meaningful pattern (and a viable business). So if you are in the early stages of your career, give yourself permission to explore different pathways and stop and smell the roses along the way.

If you're further along in your career, then the question may feel more urgent, in which case you'll want to explore the following options sooner rather than later.

Are you a creative generalist?

Creative generalists are people who are most comfortable and most creative when they have lots of different projects and interests on the go at once. Rather than restrict themselves to a single specialism, they have their fingers in lots of creative pies.

Some people criticise them for being shallow dilettantes, while others vigorously defend the value of creative generalism. There's even an entire [Creative Generalist blog](#), hosted by Steve Hardy.

Here's a question to help you decide whether you are a creative generalist or not:

Does having multiple creative interests make you feel more comfortable or uncomfortable?

A true creative generalist will feel restricted by the idea of narrowing down his options to a few specialisms – you won't feel comfortable without having several things on the go at once.

But if you are a specialist at heart, you are likely to feel overwhelmed by having too many interests, and it feels a relief when you pick one thing and focus on that.

(More on [creative generalism vs specialism](#).)

Or Maybe You're a Whirling Dervish?

In Carroll Lloyd's superb career guide for creative people [Creating a Life Worth Living](#) she describes several different ways of organising your work around your creative ambitions. One of these is the whirling dervish.

A whirling dervish has several different creative careers, which complement and support each other, and which are pursued in rotation, over several weeks or months at a time.

I'm a bit of a whirling dervish. My interests include poetry; writing about creativity and business; one-to-one coaching; live training workshops; and

e-learning. My work goes through phases, where each of these is centre stage for a while, then fades into the background.

I hate [multitasking](#) but I also get bored doing one thing all the time – the whirling dervish gives me the best of both worlds, since I get the stimulation of working in different fields, as well as the satisfaction of focusing on one thing at a time.

An important aspect of the whirling dervish is that you don't just hop from beginning to beginning – you stick with each project to completion.

Okay, we've looked at two different options for keeping your options open – now let's consider some ways you could narrow them down.

What is in your bones?

Twyla Tharp is a world famous choreographer. But she could have been a painter. In her book [The Creative Habit](#), she describes making sketches of dancers and their costumes and realising she was pretty good at it – and then banishing the thought because it interfered with her ambitions as a dancer. She recommends that we ask ourselves which calling we feel *in our bones*.

When I was a kid, I used to draw all the time, and like Tharp, I enjoyed it and was pretty good at it. But it was nothing compared to discovering poetry. I enjoy visiting art galleries and I appreciate good visual design. But when I read a real poem, it goes through me like electricity. It wasn't even a choice: poetry *chose me*.

Stop thinking about your choices and notice how your body responds when you're engaged in each activity – drawing comics, novel writing, game design. **Which one do you feel in your bones?**

What can you be the best in the world at?

In case you're tempted to ignore your real passion in favour of something more 'sensible', consider Seth Godin's proposition that each of us should aim to be [the best in the world](#) at what we do:

The secret to being the best in the world is to make the 'world' smaller.

[Alan Scott](#) was the best community-focused artisan pizza oven builder in the world. A niche that didn't exist before he got there, but one that spread, that engaged people, that created a tribe and that supported him...

It's entirely possible that you will choose a niche that's too small. It's much more likely you'll shoot for something too big and become overwhelmed. When in doubt, overwhelm a small niche.

My original training was in psychotherapy. I'm good at it, and still enjoy working with therapy clients. But I'm never going to be the next Freud or Jung.

I used to work as a conventional business consultant, delivering coaching and training to large corporate organisations. My partners and I had a great little company and we did a superb job for our clients, who loved us. But eventually I looked around and saw several other great little companies like ours, and realised that from the outside, we probably all looked the same.

I've always been good at academic studies. A few years ago I got a distinction for my Masters, and my tutor asked me if I'd like to do a PhD. Part of me was tempted, but I realised I didn't have the passion to make it as a top academic.

It was only when I combined my different interests – in creativity, communication, psychology and business – that I was able to carve out a niche for myself as a business coach for creative people.

The world has plenty of psychotherapists, consultants, academics and even poets. There aren't so many poet-coach-entrepreneurs.

Take some time to reflect on these questions:

Which of your interests could you be the best in the world at?

Could it be a subset of one of your interests?

Could it be a combination of several of your interests, rather than just one?

What would you most regret NOT doing?

If you're still struggling to identify your best way forward, here's my ultimate deadlock-breaker.

Fast-forward in your imagination until you can picture yourself at the end of your career, when you've done all you were going to do. The choices have been made, the options closed down.

Pick each of your creative ambitions in turn, and imagine that you DIDN'T pursue it – then notice how that feels.

So for example, in one scenario you imagine having abandoned comics in favour of novel writing or gaming. How does that feel? How much do you regret never having created all the comics you were capable of producing?

Do this for each of your interests, and notice which one gives you the biggest feeling of regret.

Now do it the other way around – imagining you DID achieve each ambition, and noticing how much satisfaction it brings you.

Once you've done that, your choices should be a lot clearer.

17. Afraid to reveal too much online

Once upon a time there was a clear distinction between our personal and professional identities.

Our professional lives started punctually at 9am on Monday morning when we walked into the office in our smart clothes. Our personal lives were confined to evenings and weekends, when we wore an entirely different set of clothes, mixed with a different set of people and showed them a different side of our personality.

For some of us, it was just as well that our work colleagues didn't find out about our personal interests, beliefs and/or habits, as they could have compromised our professional image. But as our work colleagues never met our weekend friends, it wasn't a problem.

Then along came the internet.

Social media has blurred the neat dividing line between our personal and professional lives, giving rise to a whole new range of social dilemmas: Should you accept your boss's Facebook invitation? What about those photos of your friend's stag/hen party?

You don't have to be breaking a full-blown taboo (see Chapter 9) for this to be an issue. Will your colleagues laugh if they find out you like making ships out of matchsticks or taking part in historical re-enactments? Would they sneer at you for supporting the 'wrong' football team?

This is even more of a problem if you're a [creative entrepreneur](#) and want to attract customers by projecting a professional image online.

How much of the 'real you' should you reveal? Are you inauthentic if you don't share your personal life and opinions? Is it bad for business if you do?

This is the dilemma faced by 'Esther' who sent me the following email and asked to remain anonymous:

I'm actually facing down this creative block for the squau-billionth time this very morning! And, as always, it's winning...

I would like to start a website/blog, online presence, but my mental pattern that stops me is:

- 1. I feel like I have to niche (reasonable)*
- 2. I think I feel like once I choose one, I can't include or "reveal" the other aspects of me in that project...*
- 3. SO, I become paralyzed in picking a niche, and...*
- 4. Have been stuck in this place, therefore doing nothing – for weeks and months!*

I love learning, coaching, teaching, and writing funny but profound emails! (yes). I'm a certified coach, have a PhD and lots of good teaching experience, LOVE to write, want to work at least part of my life virtual, love to move around and "BE" in different places.

SO – I want to start a blog and website, but I get STUCK thinking, well, should it be for COACHING? If SO, then I can't be funny in writing about my personal life and mishaps like I am with friends, because it won't be "professional!" And people won't hire me. I need a "professional persona," I guess is my rolling assumption.

If I DO a slice-of-life, just entertaining-but-profound blog, then I need to use a pen name, because the antics described therein would detract one day from my more "professional" posture on another site one day... AND – what would be THE THEME of THIS blog anyway? And a title? OH – HOW I AGONIZE OVER THEME AND TITLE!!!!

So, here I sit – all this content and enthusiasm, but doing NOTHING because I don't feel like any direction is "RIGHT," you know?

This is an issue faced by many would-be entrepreneurs and freelancers – they have an awful lot to give and express, but until they resolve this question, they feel paralysed, unable to start creating the phenomenal website and online presence they are burning to get started on.

Fortunately, the choice doesn't need to be as black-and-white as it sounds in Esther's description. In fact, the dilemma is based on questionable assumptions about social media and branding.

Authenticity doesn't mean letting it all hang out

One of the big myths of social media is that to be authentic, you need to share all aspects of your life and opinions, from what you're having for breakfast this morning, to your personal relationships, political opinions and philosophical musings.

In turn, this is based on the idea that you have a real, authentic self that is bursting to be expressed – so you're not being true to yourself if you suppress any of your thoughts or feelings.

Having practised psychotherapy as well as coaching for over 15 years, I'm not convinced by this idea. There are many different facets to your personality, they are what make you interesting – and they can't be reduced to a single 'true self'.

You aren't exactly the same person with your work colleagues as you are with your parents, your friends, your partner, your children, or people you meet in other contexts. Every relationship brings out a different aspect of your personality. You don't express everything to everyone, all day long.

So why should social media be any different?

If social media is really about authentic relationships, shouldn't those relationships look a little more like the relationships we have in other areas of our lives?

[Brian Clark](#) likes to say that effective communication and marketing via social media is about telling an **authentic story**.

It's authentic because it needs to be genuine – people can sniff out a fake, so there's no point (or pleasure) trying to pretend to be something you're not. But it's also a story, in that it's a personal account that emphasizes some aspects of who you are while leaving others in the background. Just like your communication with people in every other context of your life.

For a great example of authentic storytelling via social media, see [Tim Siedell's interview](#) on Lateral Action. He points out that he has several different online identities – including funnyman [@badbanana](#) on Twitter and the curator of the [Bad Banana Blog](#) – that could easily be different personalities. And far from revealing everything about his personal life, he enjoys playing with the “theater of the mind” quality of Twitter, “because people are talking about what they’re doing, but you can’t really see what they’re doing”.

In my own case, there more to my life than creativity, but it’s a big passion of mine and Lateral Action is the place I go to express that. I sometimes mention my poetry, since poetry is a creative medium and conceivably of interest to my audience.

But I don’t blog much about the time I spend watching football, playing with my children or hanging out with friends and family, as I can’t imagine Lateral Action readers would be interested. And I still maintain a psychotherapy practice, but again, it’s not particularly relevant to this audience, so I don’t write about it here.

Finally, beware of the temptation to write an “a slice-of-life, just entertaining-but-profound” blog! If you want to do this for your own pleasure, that’s cool. But if you want the blog to help you build your business, remember that VERY few people can pull this off. I know I can’t.

Heather Armstrong has done an amazing job of this over at [Dooce](#), but if you look around at most successful bloggers, you’ll see she’s the exception to the rule. Most bloggers, especially in the coaching sector, succeed by being helpful to their audience.

When it comes to writing a business blog, it’s not about you, it’s about what you can do for them. Which means it’s about who you are for them.

Being professional doesn’t have to be boring

When you say “I need a ‘professional persona’” it sounds very buttoned-up and proper. And to be honest, not very interesting.

What does sound interesting in your description are the little hints you give

about the ‘mishaps’, ‘antics’ and humour in the background. Now I don’t know what you mean by these, and I deliberately haven’t asked – but I’ll bet there’s something in there that contains the seed of a truly remarkable professional identity.

A [unique selling proposition](#) (USP) is a classic marketing concept – it’s about defining what makes you different from all the other people and companies in your industry, and then communicating it to your audience. There are [several different types of USP](#), but if you’re a coach, trying to attract people to work with you one-to-one, then your USP needs to include something about your own personality and idiosyncratic passions.

For example, I used to be a ‘normal’ business coach, wearing a suit and working for large organisations, and doing pretty well. But my career really took off when I ‘came out’ as a poet and started focusing on working with creative professionals.

For another example, Naomi Dunford is a great example of using ‘unprofessional’ language and attitude over at [IttyBiz](#). Apparently she gets quite a few emails from people telling her she won’t sell anything by swearing on her blog. The irony, of course, is that she’s built a successful business precisely *because* of her swearing and irreverent attitude to marketing.

[Havi Brooks](#) has a [duck](#) as her business partner. Not very professional either. But very funny for her audience. And part of what makes them love her.

[James Chartrand](#) attracted an enthusiastic audience at his Men with Pens blog, before revealing that ‘he’ was in fact a [woman](#). Suddenly those posts about [cross-dressing](#) and [Priscilla Queen of the Desert](#) took on a whole new meaning.

[Chris Guillebeau](#)’s personal assistant is his cat Libby. He has also used his blog to speak out on political issues such as healthcare reform in the US. He got his share of criticism and unsubscribes for that – but he also got a lot of respect from his audience who love the way he isn’t afraid to speak up for what he believes in.

You'll probably remember these people, not because they share every aspect of their lives, nor because they stay rigidly professional at all times – but because they tell authentic personal stories that resonate with their audiences. (Even James - read her [coming out post](#) for a moving account of her reasons for writing as a man.)

So throw out the boring 'professional persona' and open the door to a more interesting you...

Who can you be now?

It looks to me as though you have two choices:

A. Craft a professional identity around what makes you unique AND valued by your clients

Once you give yourself permission to project a quirkiest version of yourself on the web, you may start to get an idea of which traits to accentuate in your online portrait.

It's also worth asking your coaching clients what they value about you, and why they chose you/stayed with you as a coach in preference to the legions of other coaches out there.

And if you have a trusted friend, mentor or colleague who knows you and your work, ask them what they consider your most attractive and distinctive qualities. Apart from giving you a valuable new perspective, this should be a great ego boost.

If you like reading, check out Seth Godin's book [Purple Cow](#) for advice on how to stand out from the crowd and create a remarkable business.

Once you decide which of your personal and professional passions to focus on, it should be a lot easier to come up with a name and theme for your blog.

B. Have separate sites/brands for different aspects of yourself.

My first blog, [Wishful Thinking](#), was about creativity. So I figured it made perfect sense to include the odd post about the poetry I was reading.

Big mistake.

Certain members of my audience made it very clear that they weren't nearly as interested in my views on medieval Scottish poets as they were in practical tips to make them more creative. So I took the hint and set up a separate [poetry blog](#).

By having separate sites for different interests, I can take each of them to extremes. Over at my poetry site I'm free to write an entire post [in Middle English](#), or about [the pronunciation of a single syllable](#) in a poem by W.H. Auden, confident that my poetry-geek readers will be as interested in it as I am.

If you really think your personal interests would damage your business, and you still want to blog about them, then you might be better off writing under a pen-name.

But if your interests are complementary, or at least not detrimental to your business, then having two different blogs could add an extra dimension to your online presence and actually help your business.

Whatever you do, take the time to make sure you feel genuinely excited at the prospect of writing your blog, and 100% committed to making it a success.

18. The problem with success

Success is hard. And we usually think of it as the finishing line, the end of the story. But once they achieve success, many people are surprised to find it brings a whole new set of challenges.

That's the experience described by 'Arthur' (not his real name), the author of a string of popular books:

Two creative block-ettes (not full on blocks)

1) having a hard time prioritizing projects so end up not working on a really big one. I haven't written a book in like 4 years!

which leads to

2) having a hard time going deep into new material; find myself retreading old ideas, or at least it feels that way, but the time to venture out and play with new stuff seems to have disappeared.

When I asked Arthur whether it was a case of resting on his laurels versus tackling the next big challenge, he said 'no'.

Mark I don't have any sense of resting on my laurels at all! I don't really feel I've accomplished much truth be told, more that I've gotten lucky.

When I think about Arthur's situation, the image that comes to mind is of a mountaineer, having toiled all the way up from the foothills, finally reaching the summit of the largest mountain in an enormous mountain range, and seeing, floating high above him in the distance ... another mountain range, far bigger than the one he has just conquered.

For a few moments, the vista is enough. Its stunning beauty is more than ample reward for the trials he has overcome. He has climbed longer and higher, and seen further, than most people ever dream of. What's not to like?

But after sitting there for a while, contemplating the jagged pinnacles of ice floating serenely above him, an uncomfortable thought occurs to him.

You're not finished yet.

He tries to ignore it, telling himself he's already done more than he set out to do, and he's perfectly happy with that. Anyway, most mountains are pretty similar when you get up close. Once you've climbed one, haven't you climbed them all?

But the longer he sits there, the louder the thought grows.

You're not finished yet. You've hardly started.

Dump the baggage

If you're going to climb a mountain, you want to travel as light as possible. You can't skimp on essential kit, but some baggage you can do without.

For example, it sounds as though you're giving yourself the worst of both worlds. Firstly, I get the sense that you're putting a bit of pressure on yourself, based on your past achievements: you've done it before, surely you should be able to do it again?

And secondly, you're not giving yourself credit for the actual achievements. I guess it's possible that you really did just 'get lucky', but somehow I doubt it. Books don't write themselves, and they certainly don't sell themselves – you've managed to do both, several times.

So supposing you dumped this mental baggage?

Firstly, take the pressure off. Just because you've written books before, it doesn't mean you have to write another one. Not unless you really want to.

Give yourself some credit! You wrote some books that people loved. Many try, but you actually did it. So be glad that you wrote them – and glad you don't have to write them again.

Leave the cardboard you behind

I remember reading an interview with Seamus Heaney when he said that winning the Nobel Prize for Literature made him feel self-conscious and got in the way of his writing for a while – as if he were being followed around by the public persona of ‘Seamus Heaney’.

It made me think of the life-sized cardboard cutouts of famous authors on display in bookshops – when they meet the author, fans only see the cardboard cutout, so after a while it affects the writer’s own self-image.

So if you’re being haunted by the ‘cardboard you’, fold it up and stuff it in a bin. Then run away quick before it can see which way you’ve gone...

Time for something completely different?

Another comment of Heaney’s that has stayed with me is this one about Yeats, whom he regarded as a poetic mentor:

He bothers you with the suggestion that if you have managed to do one kind of poem in your own way, you should cast off that way and face into another area of your experience until you have found a new voice to say that area properly.

(Preoccupations, Seamus Heaney)

Maybe that feeling of “retreading old ideas” is nudging you to make a radical break with your previous work. Maybe you – and your fans – have got so used to seeing you as one kind of author, that you’re neglecting another aspect of your talent?

Ask yourself:

What’s the last thing people expect me to write?

What’s the last thing I expect myself to write?

If I could write like any author, living or dead, who would I pick?

Try a few writing experiments, based on the answers that occur to you.

Don't take them seriously, do them just for fun.

If you're really stuck, change media altogether – start painting, sculpting, singing or playing the drums. No, you won't do it well, but you will do it with the [beginner's mind](#) you had when you first started writing.

If one of these experiments piques your interest, and you want to follow it up, go for it. Maybe it will lead to you reinventing yourself as a writer.

Even if it turns out to be a dead-end, or if you like it but no one else does, it will at least take your writing into a different place. .

Make space for the new arrival

When you say you're "having a hard time prioritizing projects so end up not working on a really big one", it sounds like a classic case of [Resistance](#) – getting lost in the small stuff as a distraction from tackling the big stuff.

Maybe the problem is that you're not sure what the next big project is going to look like. Or possibly you do have an inkling, but it feels uncomfortable to go there. But neither of these is a reason not to prioritise the project.

When they have a new baby on the way, a couple naturally starts to make preparations, even if they don't know its sex or personality. They clear out a room for a nursery, buy a cot and start stockpiling clothes and equipment.

If you *really* want this new book to come into your life, you need to start doing the same. Set aside time for the experimenting and exploring that will lead to its conception. Give yourself permission to achieve absolutely nothing for days or even weeks on end – except devoting time to thinking, scribbling, and waiting for the new arrival to show its face.

As Philip Guston said:

I go to the studio every day because one day I may go and the Angel will be there. What if I don't go and the Angel comes?

19. “Working in a vacuum”

I'd be very suspicious of any artist or creative who claimed they didn't want an audience.

Yes, we may start with the inner creative impulse, but we also want to connect, to share, to hear an echo coming back from the world. To reach an audience and know our work made a difference to them.

This is the challenge described by [Gabriel Novo](#):

One creative block that I've struggled with (and I think all beginning artists do) is working in a vacuum. Pouring yourself into your art, whatever it may be, is satisfying, but there comes a point where you release it into the world to share with others.

Feedback from friends and family can't sustain you forever and eventually you want your work to reach a larger audience. Getting to that larger audience takes time while you still need to maintain a steady level of output. When stuck between those levels you often feel like you're working in a vacuum, shouting your latest creations into an empty room and only hearing your voice echo.

Also at that time your support network might be nonexistent. No one else on your level or pursuing your art with the same passion. There are plenty of those who say they are trying to live the dream, but finding others with true motivating passion is often times difficult. As wonderful as “tribes” can be they are not always easy to find.

So you flail and struggle through an emptiness that is never guaranteed to be filled with like-minded individuals. Personally, I believe this transitional phase is the one that kills most artists trying to make it in the real world.

Now I should point out that Gabriel first sent me this last year, and he's made some good progress since. But after talking it over we thought it worth addressing the subject in this series, both for his benefit and for all the people out there who are starting out and feeling daunted by the challenge of attracting an audience for their creative work.

In the old days, the feedback loop for most creatives was long – and slow. If you were a writer, you would plod away for months or years before submitting your manuscript to an agent or editor. You would then wait several months before the standard rejection slip came through your letterbox, prompting you to ~~make a voodoo doll~~ cross them off your list and send the manuscript out again.

Statistically, you got far more rejections than acceptances. But if you persisted and succeeded, you would have yet another wait in store for you, while the book was edited, printed and prepared for publication. Even then, the chances of your book sinking like a stone, without troubling the review pages, let alone the bestseller lists, were pretty high.

It was a similar story for artists, illustrators, composers, and producers of any kind of recorded, printed or published media. Between the first moment of inspiration, the hours of perspiration and the applause (or otherwise) of an audience, you were in for long wait.

The glaring exceptions, of course, were the actors, musicians, singers, mime artists and other creative performers who got up there on stage to face the audience and look them in the eye. The excitement and the terror of a live performance comes from that visceral connection between the person(s) on stage and those who have come to watch.

Then along came the internet and changed everything.

Writers and other ‘studio artists’ can now have a taste of the live experience, by publishing their work on the web and seeing their audience respond within minutes or even seconds, with page views, comments, Tweets, Facebook likes, and the other equivalents of oohs, ahhs, applause and jeers in the online auditorium.

No, it’s not quite as electrifying as a real live gig, but if you’re used to plying your creative trade alone in your flat, then publishing your work and getting any kind of response the same day can feel as exciting as taking the stage at the Albert Hall or Madison Square Gardens.

If anyone shows up, that is.

This potential for near instant audience response is both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing because it can be tremendously encouraging to see people reading, liking, and appreciating your work.

But it can also be a curse, because we inevitably get too attached to the feedback, and start craving it. At some stage, every blogger develops an unhealthy obsession with web stats, and starts chasing the numbers. Why didn't today's post get as many comments as last week's? How come no one has noticed on Twitter yet?

And when you're just starting out, the numbers can feel frustratingly small. As Gabriel puts it so eloquently, it feels like you're "working in a vacuum, shouting your latest creations into an empty room and only hearing your voice echo".

So what can you do about it?

Get used to it

Remember that it was ever thus. When you start out as an artist of any kind, you're starting from scratch. Making the first mark on the canvas, pressing the first key on the typewriter, or blocking the first tentative notes is always an act of faith, a pure impulse to create with no guarantee of a return.

One of the signs of a true creator is having the courage to create in spite of the fact that you are working in a vacuum. And from what I've heard from my coaching clients over the years, that feeling never really goes away, no matter how many fans and awards you've accrued. So get used to it, and try to embrace it! It's one of the things that keeps creative work exciting – the day it disappears is the day you start to lose your edge.

Remember why you're doing this

Ask yourself why you are doing this. There are easier things to spend your time on. Why this?

Look for the reason that doesn't depend on anyone else's validation. I'm not saying you shouldn't pursue fame and fortune, they are great things to add

to the mix. But you need to start with why this is important for *you*, regardless of what anyone else thinks.

Once you have this reason, even if it's just barely articulated feeling, your work becomes a refuge – the place you go where neither praise nor criticism can touch you. Hugh MacLeod calls this your [personal sovereignty](#).

Don't wait for attention – grab it!

OK so much for following your bliss. Now let's look at how you can get more bums on virtual seats – i.e. visitors to your website and subscribers to your mailing list.

Now technically, this part isn't really a creative block – it's a marketing problem. But it becomes a creative block when the feeling of working in a vacuum affects your enthusiasm for creating.

And a quick glance at the site that's your current focus, [Crafting Comics](#), tells me you are not in fact writing in a vacuum – people are leaving comments! Not in their hundreds, it's true, but this is a sign that people are paying attention.

And no wonder, you have the foundations of a great site. First up, it looks fab. You've got a terrific illustrated header featuring comic characters – if I'm a comics geek, this tells me immediately I'm in the right place. The rest of the design looks very slick, and I love the little touch of having the featured posts appearing with square images so that they look like frames on a comic page.

Delving into the articles, I can see you have some great advice to offer to aspiring comic artists, about subjects such as networking, submitting scripts and the nitty-gritty of the writing and drawing process.

So you're already doing a lot of the heavy lifting. However, the site could be working harder to grab my attention as a first-time visitor. Remember, scientific research has proved that you have precisely one billionth of a second to grab someone's attention when they land on your website, before they hit the back button or their memory is erased by an incoming email.

So you really have to hit me between the eyes with **what** your site is about, **how** it will make my life better and **why** I should stick around.

So firstly, how about building on your great title – Crafting Comics – with a tagline that makes your offer clear? It doesn't have to be a work of copywriting genius. It does have to make me a promise. Maybe something like this?

Practical tips on writing and selling your comics

Or

*Helping you to **finally** write that comic – and get it out there*

Secondly, your About section is pretty good, but it's currently divided between an [About](#) page, a [Who we are](#) page, and a [What we write](#) page. I'd condense it to one page about the site and content, and one about you and your co-writer Mike.

My friend [Brian](#) likes to say your About page is basically a sales letter for your site. Check your stats, and you'll almost certainly see it's one of the most popular pages on the site. So it should lay out exactly what you have to offer me, starting with the kind of problem/opportunity I am facing as an aspiring 21st-century comics creator, and finishing by inviting me to subscribe to your free content.

Thirdly, how about a few more comic illustrations? Your audience are by definition word-and-picture geeks, so give them a few more of your great drawings! Lots of bloggers can write, but not so many can draw as well. This is a great opportunity to create a very distinctive look and feel for your site that is absolutely on-strategy for your audience.

My ex-partner-in-crime Tony Clark did a fabulous job of this back in the day, when he illustrated his [Success from the Nest](#) blog with his cartoons. (He also did some awesome [animated cartoon](#) videos for Lateral Action.)

And fourthly, make those headlines work harder! Now that we've all got the attention spans of goldfish, you have to earn every click by making a compelling promise in every headline you write.

You have to imagine that your headline is one of hundreds scrolling down your (potential) readers' screens – in their inbox or RSS reader, or on Twitter or Facebook. They are eating their breakfast, or trying to empty their inbox, or trying to pass the train journey from hell by reading something on their smartphone to distract them from the strangers' armpit in their face. So you have to give them a reason to *drop everything right now* and read your post.

For a couple of examples:

[*Building Blocks: Collaboration is Key*](#)

[*Networking Essentials: Business Cards*](#)

These are nice and clear, but they don't really get my pulse racing. And the thing is, both articles have some great advice that could benefit me as a comic-creator. But I could miss out on them if you don't spice up your offer a little.

Maybe something like this?

A Marriage Made in Heaven? Relationship Tips for Comic-Writing Partnerships

How to Keep Your Business Card Out of the Wastebasket

Lots more headline writing tips and examples in Copyblogger's series on writing [Magnetic Headlines](#). If you read nothing else about copywriting, you should read this, print it out, and refer to it so often that you practically memorize it.

Make your website sticky

There's an old saying that your best source of new business is your old customers. And it's a similar story when it comes to web visitors – before you go out looking for new sources of web traffic, make sure you're doing everything you can to get the people who *already* visit to stick around – and come back.

Remember Chris Brogan's advice about [home bases and outposts](#): your audience attraction strategy should be centred around a content-rich website that you own, a.k.a. your **homebase**, which in this case is

CraftingComics.com.

Outposts are other people's websites, including blogs, forums, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other social networks. Use these to network, share content, form relationships and ultimately find your tribe.

So when people land on your website (homebase) one of your primary goal should be to entice them to *come back soon*, by offering a subscription to your free content, in this case your blog, via RSS or email. RSS is nice for the geeks who understand it, but email is more user-friendly for most people, and from marketing viewpoint, more likely to grab their attention. (Everyone checks their inbox every day, not everyone checks their RSS reader.)

Right now, I have to hunt through your site to find an email subscription invitation – buried at the foot of the page! This should be one of the first things I see, after the great design and your latest awesome article. So put it in the sidebar, at or near the top, so I won't miss it.

And currently, every one of your great blog posts ends with an invitation to follow you on Twitter or join your Facebook page. These are nice-to-haves, but you should really be making your blog subscription your primary offer. Otherwise you are driving people from your home base toward your outposts, which is not the main direction you want them to take.

These may seem like small details, but you put a lot of effort into crafting great blog articles, so what you really want people to do is to subscribe and keep reading them over the long-term – that will generate repeat visits and grow your audience more effectively than just Facebook likes or Twitter follows.

Build your network

If you want to grow your audience via the web, then remember you are dealing with social media.

We've all heard that content is King, which is true up to a point, but this doesn't mean that if you just build it they will come. It's a harsh truth that there are thousands of bloggers and creators out there producing wonderful

content that no-one sees.

Content may be King, but connections are Queen. Unless you are networking and connecting with other like-minded people – a.k.a. finding that tribe! – you are missing out on a golden change to grow your audience.

There's really no short cut to this. It takes time to build trust, that's how human beings are wired. Unless you put in the time and show up regularly as a genuinely helpful member of the tribe, your support network won't be all you need it to be.

So where do your tribe hang out?

Well, among the usual [social networks for creative people](#), you might want to hang out in comics groups on [DeviantArt](#) and [Behance](#).

A quick search for '[comics forum](#)' on Google finds several thriving venues – more comics geeks than you can shake a stick at! Are you active (and helpful) on any of them? (With links in your footer to your site, of course.) I'm guessing you should be.

Are you guest posting on other blogs with relevant audiences? If not, it's time to start! You've got a great foundation with your existing content, so guest posting is a great way to put Crafting Comics in the shop window.

When it comes to networking don't start off being pushy, but don't be afraid to ask – or better still offer – once the relationship reaches a certain point.

For example, you and I have known each other online for a while now, when you started leaving some great comments on Lateral Action. We've exchanged plenty of emails and I've dropped a few hints that I'd love you to write for Lateral Action. I'm sure there are plenty of Lateral Action readers who could benefit from your advice and a good few comics enthusiasts who would love Crafting Comics.

So pretty please, write me that guest post!

If you really want a lot of traffic...

Over the years I've found publishing [free ebooks](#) hard to beat as a strategy

for generating a lot of website visitors, links, awareness, word-of-mouth and good vibes.

Last time I checked, [*Time Management for Creative People*](#) had been downloaded over 100,000 times, and some of my others aren't far behind. And that doesn't include all the people who have forwarded the ebooks to their friends and contacts.

So if I were you I'd give some serious thought to releasing a free ebook that sets out your stall and explains what you have to offer subscribers of Crafting Comics.

It needs to deliver a lot of practical value, and to be presented in a format your readers can relate to. So of course it needs to be a comic.

How about the story of an aspiring comic writer, and the trials and tribulations he experiences en route to creating, publishing and marketing his work?

I'm betting a lot of people would enjoy reading a story like that, and not just the comics geeks. Remember the success of Dan Pink's [*The Adventures of Johnny Bunko?*](#)

Of course, it'll be easier to get the ebook into circulation if you've been doing all the networking and guest posting I recommend above. But just to get the ball rolling, if you do write it (or something like it) I promise to feature it on Lateral Action. So there's your first link!

20. Hitting a brick wall

You need to be tough to succeed in a creative career. Unless you're the exception to the rule, you will be criticised, rejected, ridiculed, cheated and disappointed – many times.

So I wasn't surprised to hear this story from 'Sally' (not her real name) in response to my invitation to tell me about your creative blocks. I'm guessing it's a tale many of us can relate to.

I have been struggling with creative block for 5 years now. I used to write prolifically (songs), until I came to a brick wall, artistically and commercially – I had been offered a record deal which fell through, I was then in a girl band with promises of great things that again came to an end etc etc. I seemed to have run out of energy – the momentum had changed and I just felt frustrated and angry!

I then put together a girl band whom I began to write for and promote. 6 months later when the band collapsed (and I was left with £15k worth of bank loans), I had to return to the job I had previously left (and hated) to work full-time to pay back the money.

You could say that from this point on, I had serious battles with my own creativity! My partner was running a studio from our flat which didn't help, as I was working all day and returning home to people singing and recording and sounding great. It felt like it was being rubbed in my face!

I guess when I managed the girl band, I didn't have to face my sliding confidence issues, I could put the focus onto them. Only when that ended, was I left with the financial and emotional debris.

When I hit the brick wall I lost all confidence in my abilities, so much so that when I opened my mouth to sing nothing came out! I did not write a song in 5 years and felt that every time I had an idea I got a sick feeling in my stomach that it was going to be the same old thing again and I hated that I was so predictable. This happened before I even knew where the idea is going! I found it crippling. For a while I was no longer interested in music, art, books, I felt like I had shut off this side of myself completely.

Things have softened a little since then – I have co-written a song with my partner who's a prolific songwriter but I still doubt my abilities to write something of any quality myself. I know that the creative process involves just starting with a small step etc, but I still have those nagging doubts that make starting something so hard. Add to that working 4 days a week and being

mum to a 2-year old, doesn't make it any easier!

I am now listening to music again (which is great) and going to the odd gig. I don't feel so closed off to 'the flow', but still need to kick start it into action!

What we're looking at here is not one setback, but a whole series – artistic, emotional, professional, financial. So no wonder you're feeling battered.

Remember the immortal words of Rocky?

It ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward; how much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done!

(Rocky Balboa, 2006)

So first of all, respect for getting up again and again, and having another go. Many people would have quit altogether, but I get the sense that there is a steely determination in you to make this happen. Give yourself some credit for that.

Let go of your old self

When working with clients who are in a similar situation to you, I notice they often get stuck by looking back, full of nostalgia for their old self, when they were relatively carefree and creating prolifically.

If that's a temptation for you, then let go of the image of your past. That was then, this is now. You will never go back to being exactly the person you were. As Heraclitus was fond of saying, "you can never step into the same river twice".

What have you learned?

One big creative advantage you have over your old self is a wider and richer range of life experiences. You've done more, felt more, suffered more and lived more than your younger self. And that can make you a better songwriter.

You don't have to write about the experiences directly – they may well inform your music at a subtler level. But I'm sure you can think of plenty of songwriters who matured and got better with age, and whose later works resonated with a sense of hard-won life experience.

Ask yourself what you've learned from the past few years. If it helps, make a list or write it out in prose. If a song comes, that's great, but don't pressure yourself. The aim of this exercise is simply to appreciate what you have gained from adversity.

Take back control

One theme I noticed in your description is a loss of control – broken promises, deals that fell through, and financial disaster... All of which left you on the outside, looking through the glass at others pursuing their creative dreams.

So take back control. Be a little selfish. Make *your* art the priority from now on, regardless of logical arguments for pursuing other projects or helping others achieve their dreams.

Of course you've acknowledged that this is scary. For all the downside of the events you've described, the 'upside' is that they've distracted you from having to face up to the terror, responsibility and joy of your own talent. But how much worse can it be than avoiding it for the rest of your life?

Do it for the hell of it

If there's one thing I'm guessing you have learned from your experiences, it's that you can't rely on your music to bring you fame, wealth, opportunities or your dream lifestyle. So much of that depends on other people, and you've seen how they can let you down.

But the only real reason for making music is the joy of making music. Everything else is a distraction or a bonus. If you're not enjoying yourself, what's the point?

So do it just for the hell of it. Lock yourself in a room or go away somewhere

on your own, take out the words and music and play with them. Don't think of it as 'songwriting', just something you're doing to amuse yourself.

Remember what it was like when you first stumbled across songwriting as something you loved to do. Do it like that, and screw the outcome.

Give yourself time

The songwriter in you just wants to write songs. She's curious to see how they will turn out, and is happy to take all the time in the world. So give her time.

I know the 'professional musician' is eager to get on with her career, but she's going nowhere fast unless she has the songs to back up her ambition. She has a wealth of experience and skills, and these will be invaluable when the time comes, but it's not just yet.

Savour the [uncertainty](#) of not knowing how your new songs will turn out. The more patient you can be, the more fully-formed they will be when they see the light. And the more stunning that butterfly will be when it emerges from its cocoon.

21. Why there's no such thing as a creative block

I'm serious.

It might sound a strange claim to make after having written an entire book on overcoming creative blocks, but there really is no such thing.

Think about it. Have you ever seen a creative block?

How big was it?

What colour was it?

How much did it weigh when you tried to pick it up?

Exactly. There's nothing there. The 'block' is just a metaphor.

The block only exists in your mind.

It can become very real, if you let it. But it can also vanish in the blink of your mind's eye.

Look back at every chapter in this book, and you'll see I avoided putting labels on any of the creative blocks sent in by readers. That would just make the block appear real, and it is unreal.

Look again, and you'll see that in every instance I encouraged people to stop thinking about having a block or what the block might be (let alone where it came from) and got them to look at what they were THINKING and DOING that was keeping them stuck.

Then we flipped it round and looked at options for new things they could think and do, that might get them unstuck.

And that's really all you need to do:

1. STOP what you're doing that keeps you stuck.
2. START doing something different, that could get you unstuck.

And when you break it down into specific steps, it's often not that hard to do each step. Sometimes the hardest thing is letting go of the image of the block, or the identity of being blocked.

So next time you are tempted to say you have a 'creative block', stop and ask yourself:

Do I really?

Can I see it? Feel it? Touch it?

What am I thinking that is perpetuating the idea of the block?

What different thoughts could I start thinking right now?

What am I doing that is keeping me stuck?

What could I start doing differently, right now?

Get into the habit of asking these questions, and your days of being blocked could well be numbered...

Your FREE 26-week creative career guide...



This ebook is the tip of the iceberg.

If you're serious about succeeding in a creative career — whether as an artist, creative, freelancer or entrepreneur — then there's a lot more help available via my [Creative Pathfinder](#) mailing list.

When you sign up, you'll receive the **Creative Pathfinder Foundation Course** — a free 26-week course that teaches you the essential skills you'll need to survive and thrive as a 21st-century creative.

Topics covered include:

- creativity
- productivity
- networking
- marketing
- managing money
- intellectual property
- motivation
- presentation skills
- managing others

You'll also get first chance to sign up for my coaching programs, training courses and events — often at a significant discount.

To claim your free place on the course and join thousands of other Creative Pathfinders, just visit the [signup page](#) and enter your email address.

Would you like help getting back in the creative zone?



If you're feeling blocked creatively and would like some help, I'm available to work with you one-to-one to get you back in the creative zone.

Since 1996 I've been coaching artists, creatives, entrepreneurs and other creative people to overcome their blocks. However stuck you're feeling, chances are I've heard it all before.

I work with clients all over the world via webcam. So wherever you live we can work together — we just co-ordinate time zones and book a convenient time to talk.

Everybody's different, so I can't give an exact number of sessions, but most of my clients are back in the creative zone within 1-4 sessions.

To get started, contact me via the form on my [Creative Coaching](#) page.

As well as creative blocks, I specialise in the following areas:

- **Creativity and productivity** — including creative thinking and time management for creatives
- **Internet marketing** — including branding, blogging, networking, list-building and making sales
- **Communication** — including presentations, sales, networking, influencing, and dealing with difficult people
- **Motivation** — including stress management, handling criticism and rejection, and doing what it takes to succeed

If you're not sure whether coaching is the best option for you right now, I'm happy to take questions — use the contact form on my [coaching page](#) and I'll get back to you as soon as I receive your message.

About the author



I'm a poet who earns my living as a coach for artists, creatives and entrepreneurs – and mavericks in various other fields.

It's my job to help you achieve your creative and career goals. I do this in several ways:

One-to-one [coaching](#).

Teaching the [Creative Pathfinder](#) course — it's free, so if you'd like to join the thousands of students currently enrolled, you can sign up [here](#).

Writing and publishing the [Lateral Action blog](#) — for weekly articles about creativity, productivity, communication, marketing, entrepreneurship and personal development for creative people, sign up for [free updates](#).

Teaching online courses including [Money for Creative People](#) and [The Creative Entrepreneur Roadmap](#).

Providing coaching, training and consulting for innovative organisations, such as the BBC, Channel 4, Arts & Business, the Institute for Practitioners in Advertising and Econsultancy. More details on my [Wishful Thinking](#) site.

My own creative medium is poetry — see [MarkMcGuinness.com](#)

For bite-sized inspiration during the working week, follow/like/add me on your preferred social network:



Mark McGuinness

P.S. If you like this ebook, I've written several more — download them [here](#).