

3 Steps to Heighten Your Creativity

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Creativity is one of those words difficult to define. Merriam Webster Dictionary makes it sound simple: “*The ability to make new things or think of new ideas.*” But let’s break that down further, as anyone can “*make things*” but to create something new is bit more elusive. I suggest three ways to increase creativity: first, create a lot (ie, paintings, music, writing), second, think divergently and, the kicker – my third way – procrastinate.

My first suggestion may strike you as obvious, but as a professional artist, I have felt stuck working for other people, perfecting the techniques and materials needed for their artistic applications. So, I followed the advice of Picasso, “*Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.*” In order to rediscover my personal creativity, I decided to create a painting every day for a year. I noticed through this exercise, I began drawing on obscure sources of inspiration that opened the door to new ideas. My illustration teacher, David Macaulay (author of *The Way Things Work*) at the Rhode Island School of Design, recommended that his students never use the first sketch for the final composition of an illustration. When forced to create a lot of sketches, the ideas eventually come from a free-flowing thought process.

Increasing creativity by the simple act of creating is similar to divergent thinking. When I am busily creating art in my most creative state, I am creating the artwork in my head before actually putting brush to paper. Divergent thinking is helpful to weed out ideas that might not work, especially when coming up against a deadline. For example, I was recently helping a fellow artist on a mural in Oakland. The deadline on the mural was very tight and ideally the painting would be complete in 2 days. The assignment was to project industrial design sketches of furniture and buildings on to a chalkboard wall, copy them in chalk and then paint them in white paint. The first day was used to project and trace 50 sketches onto the wall. I imagined painting these individual illustrations with the white paint, and I knew that we would not complete the project in one day. We brainstormed the idea to use the chalk lines as a guide for drawing with color pencils instead. It made sense because we had become familiar with making the lines and shapes using the chalk. Introducing paint at this point would mean translating the line work from a drawn line to a painted line, creating an extra step. There was no time to experiment on the wall and there was no time to create a sample, so imagining multiple solutions virtually was the only option. Of course the more experience an artist has with creative materials the more successful the “*virtual painting*” becomes, resulting in a better end product.



My third and perhaps most confounding suggestion for increased creativity is (don't tell your teenagers!) the use of procrastination. In an illuminating NYT article, *Why I Taught Myself to Procrastinate*, Adam Grant writes that, "Nearly a century ago, the psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik found that people had a better memory for incomplete tasks than for completed ones. When a project gets completed, it gets filed away. But when it's in limbo, it stays active in our minds." This notion of active procrastination, keeping the file open and editing it in our minds, can also be seen as ruminating. For an active procrastinator, rumination translates to thinking of a problem, turning it around and around virtually, increasing familiarity with the problem and then the solution often becomes apparent.

The process is similar to a sculptor who gets to know the block of marble intimately, long before the chisel connects with the stone. As Michelangelo wrote, "The sculpture is already complete within the marble block, before I start my work. It is already there, I just have to chisel away the superfluous material." - Michelangelo Buonarroti

Some might call this daydreaming, however, I think of it as a gestational period for generating ideas. There is a point, though, where divergent thinking has to converge and funnel down into action. To be more creative, create. To be even more creative, think, ponder, daydream, then create!