

Tools for Navigating (Yourself Through) the Creative Process

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The tricky thing about generalizing tools for navigating the creative process is that we are all different and approach being creative in different ways. Malcolm Gladwell has a great article about this in *The New Yorker* where he compares the vastly different processes and experiences of writers Jonathan Safran Foer and Ben Fountain. For Foer, novels seem to emerge almost fully formed, effortlessly. For Fountain, it's a long and arduous grind. Yet neither would be successful using the other's process. Why they are both successful is they each seem to understand how to navigate their own particular selves through the process.



Very apropos to ITP, navigating yourself through the creative process is a practice where you are your own authority. This applies to determining the tools that best suit you. Writing this article has forced me to think about my own tools, and while they are a continual work in progress, the following have emerged as feeling like the most important. I've included some suggestions for trying them out yourself, and some reminders for myself to make sure I'm practicing what I preach.

Find What Gets You In the Mood: I often get my best ideas while exercising, meditating, or taking a shower. What I see as a common thread here is I often have to let go of trying to come up with an idea for the idea to emerge, particularly when I get stuck. I find quieting the mind and getting the blood flowing seem to help. Think back on times you've been particularly fertile in generating ideas or answers. Where were you and what were you doing? What could you do to recreate those circumstances? (Note to self: Figure out how to exercise, meditate, and take a shower all at the same time!)

Find your Muses: It's hard to be creative by yourself. Creativity often arises in response to something or someone. Books and films can certainly be helpful, but I have found that there are some particular friends with whom a conversation almost always gets the creativity flowing. Whom are those people for you? When is the last time you gave them a call? (Note to self: Call Mark!)

Do Something Else That's Creative: If you're writing a novel, take a break to make music, or draw a sketch, or re-arrange the furniture. Creativity tends to lead to creativity in a virtuous cycle, and it doesn't make a difference how you are being creative as long as you are being creative. (Note to self: Keep working on that new song!)

Treat Yourself Like a Child: My son is starting to learn how to walk. I cheer him on with every

awkward stumble. If only I did the same thing for myself when I'm trying to figure something out for the first time. Yet it's so easy to slip into the perfectionist trap and expect things to emerge faster and more well-formed than they often do. The result is often being overly self-critical, which is the death of creativity. So if you find yourself feeling self-critical, just remind yourself that you are learning to walk. (Note to self: I am learning to walk with this article!)

Borrow (But Don't Steal): Creativity is often associated with wild originality, yet a work can be very derivative and still very creative. Especially when starting out, it's a lot easier to find your voice riffing on other's work than it is to try and be an original voice. Beethoven and Mozart both wrote many "*inventions*" – variations on a musical piece written by someone. What is a creative work that you could do your own invention on? (Note to self: It's great that the new song reminds you of a Beatles song!)

Find your Energy: Being creative takes energy! Odds are if you are tired you will not only be less creative but also more self-critical. Get enough sleep. Eat well and be mindful of foods that cause blood sugar spikes and crashes. Pay attention when you're hungry – skipping meals almost always takes more time in the long run. (Note to self: Why the bread and hash browns for lunch? Why??)

Have Faith: As you learn to walk you will stumble. You will bang your knees. You will have many moments where you think, "*Why did I ever think I wanted to give up crawling?!*" But if you keep at it, you will learn to walk. And when you do, you then might think, "*Walking! How am I ever going to top that?!*" That's another moment when you need to have faith that your next creative accomplishment will come. So enjoy this one now. (Note to self: I finished the article! Woohoo!)

Again, creativity is a practice. The only way to get better is to keep working at it, with plenty of self-compassion.