

## HOW TO BE A SUCCESS AT EVERYTHING

# WHY YOUR CREATIVITY NEEDS BOUNDARIES TO THRIVE

CREATIVE WORK TAKES A LOT OF TIME. AND IF YOU DON'T CONSCIOUSLY SET ASIDE THAT TIME, IT WON'T HAPPEN. THAT MEANS FINDING BALANCE AND SETTING BOUNDARIES.

BY JANE PORTER

**The first few years after I decided to take my creative writing** seriously, I couldn't overcome the nagging feeling that my fiction was simply a glorified hobby--like knitting or fishing. Plenty of people helped reinforce that. I'd be at a party filled with people who worked sensible office jobs when someone would find out I was writing a novel and tell me they'd been meaning to take up the hobby themselves--if only they had more time.

**"Lots and lots of people are creative when they feel like it, but you are only going to become a professional if you do it when you don't feel like it."**

But it's hard to justify carving out time every day in your busy schedule for "just a hobby." Music wasn't just a hobby for Lou Reed. Inventing wasn't just a hobby for Steve Jobs. They dedicated their best work to their creative endeavors. Seth Godin might have put it best when he said: "Lots and lots of people are creative when they feel like it, but you are only going to become a professional

if you do it when you don't feel like it."

Creative work is hard. It's painful. It takes a whole lot of time. And if you don't consciously set aside that time, it won't happen. That means finding balance and setting boundaries.

An interview with Godin appears in the book, *Manage Your Day-to-Day*, put out by 99U. The book includes insights from artists, entrepreneurs, academics, and psychologists on how to carve out a daily creative practice. Here are five key takeaways

from the experts featured in its pages:

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### **1. PUT CREATIVE WORK FIRST.**

Setting aside time every day to do creative work keeps your momentum going. One way to do this is creating "hard edges" for when your workday starts and ends, suggests [Mark McGinness](#), a U.K.-based creative business coach. Within that framework, prioritize your creative work first. "The single most important change you can make in your working habits is to switch to creative work first, reactive work second," McGinness says.

Cal Newport, a writer and professor at Georgetown University, calls these periods of uninterrupted creative work "daily focus blocks." Put them on your calendar and treat them as you would a formal appointment. Newport recommends starting out with an hour of uninterrupted work time and gradually adding 15 minutes every two weeks, never allowing distractions like email or Facebook to interfere.

### **2. YOUR INBOX CAN WAIT. SERIOUSLY, IT CAN.**

Most of us compulsively check email without stopping to think about it. Why? The same reason it's hard to resist piling your plate high with bad-for-you foods at a buffet. It's right in front of you, waiting to be nabbed up, says Dan Ariely, professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University. Email and social media also offer what Ariely calls "random reinforcement." Usually when you check your inbox or Facebook, there's nothing exciting waiting for you, but occasionally, there is--that random excitement keeps us coming back compulsively.

**"It's better to disappoint a few people over small things, than to surrender your dreams for an empty inbox."**

Resisting the urge to check email and social media while concentrating on creative work can feel next to impossible, especially first-thing in the morning. But your inbox can almost always wait. "It's better to disappoint a few people over small things, than to surrender your dreams for an empty

inbox," says McGinness.

### **3. RECOGNIZE YOUR BODY'S LIMITS.**

Our bodies follow ultradian rhythms, cycles that last around 90 minutes--at which point most people max out their capacity to work at their optimal level, according to Tony Schwartz, president

and CEO of [The Energy Project](#). In other words, your body can only take so much concentrated work at a time before you start seeing diminishing returns.

That means getting enough sleep (more important than food, Schwartz says) and taking breaks is essential if you want to be at your creative best. Instead of slumping over your Facebook or Instagram feed, get away from your desk and phone. "Screen time feeds into a vicious cycle of chronic stress in a way that most of us don't even realize," according to writer, speaker and consultant, Linda Stone.

#### **4. SET BOUNDARIES AND DIVE DEEP WITHIN THEM.**

Try making rules for yourself and see what happens. George Harrison, lead guitarist of the Beatles, told himself one day that he would pick up a book at random, open it and write a song about whatever words he read first. Harrison saw the words "gently weeps," set down the book and wrote "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," long considered one of his best songs.

"Whether or not they're created by an outside client or you yourself, a set of limitations is often the catalyst that sets creativity free," says Scott McDowell, founder of the consulting and executive search firm, [CHM Partners](#).

#### **5. START TODAY.**

Striving for perfection in everything you do can be so daunting it keeps you from getting started in the first place. "To a perfectionist, settling seems worse than not completing the piece, which is why perfectionists often produce very little," says Elizabeth Grace Saunders, time coach and author of [The 3 Secrets to Effective Time Investment](#).

Stop worrying about getting the beginning right and just start. You'll need to experience chaos before you reach the calm. Define the minimum requirements needed to finish whatever you're working on and use those as a way to press on, suggests Saunders. Keep moving forward. Relinquish your fear of negative feedback and see it instead as an opportunity to learn and grow.

--**Jane Porter** writes about creativity, business, technology, health, education and literature. When she isn't busy freelance writing or editing, she's at a desk somewhere in Brooklyn, NY, toiling away at

her own fiction writing.

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