PRODUCE THE GOODS

BY MILO McLAUGHLIN
READY?
To produce the goods, you have to make a start.

And once you’ve started, you need to keep going until you finish.

It’s as simple as that.

And yet, it’s not simple at all.
This is the most important section of the Career Masterplan for Mad Geniuses.

Because if you don’t produce anything while you’re holed up in that basement surrounded by bubbling test tubes, smoking potions and mechanical body parts, well you’re not a genius, you’re just mad.

Frankenstein created a monster. Murakami wrote about talking cats. Dylan “vomited out” the words to Like a Rolling Stone in one inspired session. Hugh MacLeod drew cartoons on the back of business cards and it became a business. Tina Fey wrote and performed the TV comedy series 30 Rock. The Blue Man Group blue themselves. (Ahem. with apologies to Arrested Development.)

It doesn’t matter WHAT you do as much as you might think. What matters more is that you DO SOMETHING.

It sounds easy, doesn’t it? Just do the f**king work.

But it’s not easy. Not at all.

There are plenty of mad geniuses who left out this part. They have nothing to show for their time on this earth.

Maybe they decided to get drunk and ricochet round the dive bars of their town, or sink ever further into the folds of their sofa while the TV numbed their natural instincts. Instead, they could have been putting in the hours.
You might be struggling too. Why?

Because of distractions. Like social media, or email, or demanding cats or TV or your own ‘monkey mind’ whirring with 100 thoughts a minute.

Because of ‘the resistance’ or ‘the lizard brain’, or the little critic who lives inside your head. It doesn’t want you to succeed.

Because of fear and doubt and confusion, all of which feed the resistance.

Because it feels so hard you want to weep.

I get it.

I’m battling it right now, as I write these words.
“Art is the act of doing work that matters while dancing with the voice in your head that screams for you to stop.”

Seth Godin, 
The Icarus Deception
The resistance is telling me now: “why are you writing about this? Steven Pressfield, Seth Godin, Julia Cameron and many more have covered this to death. It’s been done.”

Why bother?

Because this is probably what most creative people struggle with most (even after they’ve read *The Art of War, The Icarus Deception and The Artist’s Way*). It’s probably the biggest barrier of all to reaching our creative potential.

And boy, have I struggled with it.

It’s been so difficult that I had to delay writing and publishing this chapter of The Career Masterplan until I felt I had overcome this issue to at least a reasonable extent, because I didn’t want to preach something that I wasn’t practising.

And whilst I’m now able to reliably meet client deadlines and also create my own content for my blog and ebooks, I’ve still got a long way to go to be the ultra-productive, creative powerhouse I aspire to be.

So I’m writing this as a declaration of intent, a promise to myself, and to you.

I will use these words, this piece of work, and everything I’ve learnt in the process of writing it, to teach myself to produce the goods, every day, from here on in.

And to remind me not to stall any longer in my quest to fulfil my true creative potential and become the artist I was meant to be.

Will you join me?
GET WERKING.
Sometimes I prefer silence, or ambient coffee shop sounds, but often I find music really helps me concentrate, especially if there are other noises and distractions around me.

However, any music that is very wordy isn’t good when I’m writing, so for that I go to my favourite krautrock pioneers, Kraftwerk, whose simple lyrical motifs and hypnotic rhythms are perfect for sustained creative work.

In tribute to Kraftwerk and other hypnotic sounds, I’ve compiled a Produce the Goods Spotify Playlist with a few other great tracks for your listening pleasure (apologies if you can’t access Spotify where you live).

You may enjoy listening whilst reading this guide, or using it to fuel your own productivity.

There are even a few tracks included that could be ideal for taking a short ‘dance break’!
DON’T WAIT FOR PERFECT.
Do you feel like you can’t ever quite get everything in place in order to focus on your creative work?

If only, you tell yourself, I had a week in a log cabin in the forest with no distractions, maybe then I could focus. Maybe then, like Henry David Thoreau or Bon Iver, you would create your masterpiece.

So you book yourself a retreat and go to the log cabin in the forest. You sit down, with your pen and paper, or guitar, or easel and paintbrushes. Then you hear a strange noise outside. Hmmm. All those horror movies you watched as a teenager flash through your mind. You decide what you need is a stiff drink to calm your nerves. You pick up the whisky bottle.

Next thing you know, you’ve woken up on the floor of the cabin the next morning, an empty whisky bottle and a dead goat by your side, and no creative work has been done. Clearly, you need a week just to recover from the hangover now, plus what do you do about the goat?

No, that isn’t autobiographical by the way - but the truth is we’ll never find the perfect moment, or the perfect home office setup without any distractions. We’ll never find the hours of interrupted time we think we need, unless we make it happen.

Maybe we just need to fit our creative work into the gaps and spaces that happen every day. We could write a page of our novel every day on the bus, or at lunchtime at our desks. We could record our podcast into our phones while we’re out walking the dog, or walking to work in the morning. We could practice our drawing techniques while we eat breakfast - as my friend Michael Nobbs suggests in his book Drawing Your Life:

“There’s no need to change your life in order to start to draw it. It is perfect and unique and interesting just as it is.

That boiled egg you ate for breakfast is the art. That cup of tea you drank with a slice of cake is the art. Embrace it all. Record it all.”
PRODUCE THE GOODS

When it comes to your personal creative projects, there’s always a ‘reason’—an excuse—to put them on the back burner.

Your full-time job. Your freelance work. Household chores. A particularly compelling episode of Real Housewives of New York. Your friend’s birthday party and your work colleague’s wedding. Catching up on the latest gossip via Twitter and Facebook.

Stop with the excuses!

I once read an inspirational quote (you might have noticed there are a few of them going about online) that said something along the lines of “you can either have what you want, or your excuses for not having it.”

It’s a fair choice—either go after what you want, or keep your excuses and accept that you aren’t willing to do the work you need to achieve your goals. Neither choice is wrong, but at least now you can’t complain about the outcome.

For some of us, ‘excuses’ are in fact very valid reasons for not being able to achieve as much as others - we may have physical or mental health issues or significant responsibilities like caring for children, a partner or our parents.

If this is the case for you, be compassionate with yourself. Maybe you won’t write thousands of words a day, but you could write one hundred. Every little counts.

One project I did was to create an album of ‘song sketches’ that I sang into my mobile phone when I was walking home from the pub, or in random moments during the day. It may not have been a chart-topper, but it inspired someone in New York City to make music again after a break of many years, and he even mentioned me in one of his songs.
DON’T RELY ON DISCIPLINE.
“When writing his most recent book, Tony Schwartz structured his day into 3 90 minute writing bursts that allowed him to complete the book working only four and a half hours a day for 3 months.

Our brains, Schwartz discovered, become easily fatigued. They need breaks in order to refuel, to be able to refocus, create and produce.”

Jonathan Fields - Uncertainty

Research suggests that we all only have so much self-discipline. It actually gets used up during the day, so if you go for a run in the morning, you might be less likely to also write 1,000 words in the evening.

Still, there are a few things you can do to increase the chances you will get things done. Most of them are to do with keeping your natural energy as high as possible but also balanced throughout the day.

Sleep

I’ve often struggled with bad sleep habits, whether it’s staying up too late watching the aforementioned horror films, or waking up in the middle of the night and not being able to get back to sleep until I’ve read sixteen chapters of the latest instalment of a Song of Ice and Fire.

I’ve learnt a few techniques that help - a hypnosis recording and a few other techniques from Paul McKenna’s book I Can Make You Sleep and a meditation mp3 that comes with the Headspace app both help. As does cutting down on caffeine (you might not be as immune to the effects of caffeine as you think you are - you’ve probably just built up a resistance so you don’t notice it), and alcohol (it might help you fall asleep, but it isn’t the restful kind and you’ll wake up dehydrated).

Sticking to a regular routine where possible also helps, but I’ve found the best way to ensure a good night’s sleep is to get some “vigorous” exercise.
Negative Self-talk

Of course, I cover this topic further in the first microguide, Refresh Your Mindset, but let’s have a quick.. refresh.

The way we talk to ourselves can make a massive difference to how we experience our life, and often we’re unaware of what we’re saying to ourselves because it’s so habitual.

If you ever catch yourself using critical language against yourself, then make a mental note that it’s happening. You could then replace negative words with kinder ones.

Ever made a tiny mistake and shouted ‘you f*cking idiot!’ at yourself?

Would you speak to your friends or family like that over such a small transgression? Or at all? Probably not!

Another problem is catastrophic thinking. This is the equivalent of ‘making a mountain out of a molehill’. If something happens to us and we label it as “a complete disaster” in our minds, this gives our subconscious mind the message that it’s time to panic.

This reduces our ability to cope with the problem which is probably not half as bad as you’re imagining. But because we’ve convinced ourselves it’s the end of the world, we panic, and things go from bad to worse - and prove our original hypothesis right!

This kind of thinking can also be exhausting, as everything becomes a bigger effort than it needs to be, especially if we are in panic mode, where our adrenaline kicks in.

We can often have self-limiting beliefs too, many of which are inherited.

For example if we constantly received the message that ‘we’re not good enough’ as a child, we may be quietly telling ourselves that on
a daily basis! Imagine the effect this can have on your ability to be productive!

A good example of how the words we choose can have an affect on our productivity is this experiment in which those who were told they did well because they were smart were more likely to give up than those who were told they did well because they worked hard:

_Praise for intelligence can undermine children’s motivation and performance._


“Fifth graders praised for intelligence...displayed less task persistence, less task enjoyment, more low-ability attributions, and worse task performance than children praised for effort.

Finally, children praised for intelligence described it as a fixed trait more than children praised for hard work, who believed it to be subject to improvement. These findings have important implications for how achievement is best encouraged.”
Food

It’s all too easy to forget how much what we put into our bodies affects how we feel, and our energy levels. Not only that, but our diet massively affects our positivity and mental wellbeing.

Traditional ‘diets’ rarely work and are mostly a way for unscrupulous companies to make money. It’s far more important to ensure you are eating good food regularly - and this usually means fresh, non-processed food.

I do try and stay as healthy as possible and eat lots of veg, but I’m definitely at danger of eating too much sugary things (like cake!) and easy meals like pasta.

We’ve all experienced a sudden drop of energy in the afternoon, and the food we eat (as well as a lack of physical activity) is likely to blame. Of course, we can’t be high energy all the time, and a nap could be the ideal solution for this!

A lot of people rave about the raw food diet and juicing as ways to dramatically increase energy levels and this might be something worth investigating if you know you need to revamp your eating habits (juicing requires some investment - a decent juicer and buying a lot more veg than you normally would).

The film ‘Fat, Sick and Nearly Dead’ is a good place to start if you’re curious about this. It’s very moving and inspiring look at how the food we put in our bodies can affect our general wellbeing.

I can’t claim to completely practice what I preach when it comes to this - yet. I just love cake too much! But it’s something I will be looking into more in the future.
**Exercise**

Not all of us feel comfortable or confident in the gym, but even if it’s just going for a brisk walk every day, some kind of exercise will help energise you and refresh your mind.

If you’re low energy, something like a gentle type of yoga (e.g. Hatha), tai chi or gentle swimming is probably a great place to start.

If you feel a bit more energetic, running outside is a cheap way to break a sweat and get your body moving.

Try something like the couch to 5k method to get started, as I mentioned in my post on ‘claiming new ground’.

Of course each type of exercise has different benefits and maybe a few downsides too, especially if you don’t read up on best practices (e.g. you need to make sure you stretch if you’re running regularly).

If you want to get seriously into a sport, or make specific changes and improvements to your fitness, it’s worth doing your research, joining a class or hiring a personal trainer. But it doesn’t have to be complicated.

**Dr Mike Evans** found that 30 minutes to an hour of exercise per day, even if it’s just walking, significantly reduced susceptibility to a wide range of serious health issues.

**Managing Addictions and Bad Habits**

Some of us have a more addictive personality than others, but I would venture we all have at least one vice or bad habit!

Whether it’s watching too much TV/Netflix, drinking too much, undisciplined internet use that leads to wasted hours, or a tendency to negative self-talk (see above) - these types of habits can really interfere with our ability to get something done.
You may need to seek help from a qualified professional or a support group for this kind of issue but you could also try introducing positive replacement habits like exercise and meditation.

**Hooked on Tech**

The technological distractions that now come as standard for most of us (at least for those lucky enough to be able to afford them) such as email, social media, and phone and tablet notifications, have also become somewhat of an addiction.

Apparently, because they give us frequent small rewards (such as receiving a like from your Facebook crush) these notifications give us the same dopamine rush (or good feeling) as playing fruit machines.

There’s only one way to deal with this, I’m afraid. Turn em off. Turn em all off.

At least until you finish what you’re trying to do!

You might want to also try leaving your device in a different room.

I sometimes use useful apps like Freedom and Self Control that either block the internet entirely or just specific sites.
What Do We Focus On?

Our Great Work. Not our mediocre work, not our reasonably good work. Our Great Work. So says Michael Bungay Stanier in his book of the same name:

“Great work is what we all want more of. This is the work that is meaningful to you, that has an impact, and makes a difference. It inspires, stretches, and provokes. Great work is the work that matters.”

Some ways to decide:

1. Are you excited by it? I mean, really excited by it? Like does it feel almost impossible?

2. Are you scared by it? I mean, terrified enough that you convince yourself you don’t want to do it at all? That’s probably a good sign you need to do it.

3. Do you want to do it for the pleasure of the activity itself, rather than for any expected results? That’s probably a good sign too.

It’s great to think big, but on a short-term basis I think it helps to be realistic about our current situation in order to decide what to do next.

What does this mean? It means seeing reality for what it is. Seth Godin has a few words to say about this in The Icarus Deception:

“Our preconceptions and our fear conspire to make it difficult to see the world as it is. Buddhists call it prajna - accepting reality as it occurs instead of interpreting it as part of our ongoing narrative.

The trick isn’t coming up with an interpretation of events that allows you to maintain your worldview; it is to accept what happens without stopping to interpret it according to your biases.”
So, clearly we need to work out what is most important for us to do. But at the same time, ‘great work’ seems pretty daunting. What if we’re not even capable of Great Work? What if we don’t even know if we can do ‘barely passable work’?

That’s where what Ira Glass calls ‘the gap’ comes in. For some of us it might feel more like an uncrossable chasm. The big difference between what we’d like to be capable of, and what we can actually do, right in this moment.

Bungay Stanier acknowledges this:

“Great Work is also a place of uncertainty and discomfort. The discomfort arises because the work is often new and challenging, and so there’s an element of risk and possible failure. Because this is work that matters, work that you care about, you don’t want it to fail. But because it’s new and challenging, there’s a chance it might”.

Jonathan Fields wrote an entire book about the challenge of working and living in a extended state of ‘Uncertainty’ - something that will be familiar to most creative people trying to discover their place in the world.

This state is particularly heightened for full-time freelancers or those who make their living in unpredictable ways. I can report that it does get a lot easier to cope with, however at first it can be really, really tough to get accustomed to.

In the end though, we have to believe it’s worth it, in order to follow our instincts and our dreams, and to find something that we can call our great work.

The aim of course, is that by pursuing ‘our great work’, we end up with a body of work. Something we’re proud of.
A Body of Work (& Bad Art)

Apart from charitable contributions and any offspring you might have, as a creative person your body of work is your legacy, or your life’s work.

(Unless your life’s work means you will leave behind a trail of dead bodies, in which case please turn yourself into the nearest police station immediately.)

Now phrases like ‘great work’, ‘body of work’ and ‘life’s work’ sound like a lot of pressure don’t they? For one thing, the word ‘work’ can make the best of us feel a little nauseous.

You’ll also probably feel the pull of perfectionism. That little voice saying “shit, well it had better be perfect then. I’d better not reveal any of my creativity to the public until it’s perfect”.

But that’s the opposite to what you really want to do. Because, as Brene Brown makes clear in her book *Daring Greatly*, perfectionism is the enemy of creativity:

“Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving for excellence. Perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth. Perfectionism is a defensive move.

It’s the belief that if we do things perfectly and look perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame.

Perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield that we lug around, thinking it will protect us, when in fact it’s the thing that’s really preventing us from being seen.”
If anything will guarantee you won’t create a body of work, it’s perfectionism. It’s when we let ourselves do bad art, bad work, rubbish, terrible, flawed work, that.. we become creative.

We circumnavigate the critical voice inside our head and dive into the mudpool of imaginative mayhem that is the mad geniuses’ birthright and spiritual home.

So what’s the easiest way to start creating a body of work?

**Give yourself permission to MAKE BAD ART!**

When I started making music, I was **shouting nonsensical lyrics over illegally sampled TV theme tunes.**

Within a couple of years, I was playing gigs, performing my own original songs and had even attracted record company interest.

And when I became a music journalist, the experience meant I could write about music with a lot more insight than a critic who has never attempted to make something themselves.

You never know where beginning with bad art might take you.

Pin the phrase ‘make bad art’ up above your mirror. Get it tattooed to your forehead. Go forth and multiply the badness. Let others witness the shitness. Don’t be afraid to fail.
DES IDÉES POUR 
#CHANGERLEMONDE
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“A moment’s insight is sometimes worth a life’s experience.”
Oliver Wendell Holmes

The first stage in producing the goods is of course to have some ideas in the first place. These ideas can come to us in the form of insight, or inspiration.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines insight as “the power or act of seeing into a situation” or “the act or result of apprehending the inner nature of things or of seeing intuitively”.

Where do insights come from?

Like the creative process, insight is still viewed as something mysterious and perhaps a matter of luck rather than judgement.

In his 2011 book How to Be Creative - Six Psychological Principles of Creativity, Jeremy Dean says:

“When the academic Brewster Ghiselin studied great scientific, musical and artistic minds, his conclusion was that the creative process is mostly automatic.

When we introspect, creativity seems to happen outside our conscious awareness with just the product - a striking new image, idea or innovation, floating up for conscious inspection.”

The Eureka moment


[It’s important to point out that Jonah’s work should be taken with a pinch of salt, as he was later found to have fabricated quotes and certain other details in his books and articles. Thankfully much of the research he refers to is also published elsewhere.]
According to Lehrer, the process that leads to insights begins with an impasse or mental block (possibly after spending a certain amount of time thinking about a specific topic).

Later, as if from nowhere, the idea or insight arrives in the mind fully formed, accompanied by a “feeling of knowing” - that sense of certainty that yes, this is the solution to the problem, or a correct deduction that did not exist previously.

This is similar to having a name on the tip of your tongue but not being able to remember it until later.

Most of us can relate to that moment when a good idea strikes whilst we least expect it, usually when we’re doing something entirely unrelated.

**How to stay open to new insights & inspiration**

So, let’s look at a few ways we can increase the likelihood of experiencing our own eureka moments:

1. **Relax!**

   According to Lehrer, Psychologist Joydeep Bhattacharya of Goldsmiths University of London has identified a brain signal that allows him to predict whether someone will have an insight up to 8 seconds before it happens. The signal is a steady rhythm of alpha waves emanating from the right hemisphere.

   What I found most heartening is that the brainwaves that Bhattacharya identified are closely linked to relaxing activities, for example taking a warm shower.

   Which leads me to happily conclude that relaxing is a great way to gain new insights!

2. **Reflect!**

   It could be that this relaxed state of mind is more likely to result in insights because we’re more likely to point our attention inward, and therefore more likely to notice the messages being emitted by our brain.
Given the importance of ‘inward attention’, it’s no surprise that many creative people are introverts. As Susan Cain says in her brilliant exploration of the power of introversion, *Quiet*:

“Some of our greatest ideas, art, and inventions—from the theory of evolution to van Gogh’s sunflowers to the personal computer—came from quiet and cerebral people who knew how to tune in to their inner worlds and the treasures to be found there.”

3. Be mindful when you first wake up

As with warm showers, the early morning, shortly after waking is also a good time for insights.

Psychologist John Kounios recommends setting the alarm a few minutes earlier to allow yourself to pay attention to the heightened right brain activity at that time of day.

4. Use Beginner’s Mind

Jeremy Dean points out that expertise is not always necessary, or even optimal, when it comes to being insightful:

“Early Gestalt psychologists thought knowledge could hinder the ability to solve insight problems. Experts are good when new problems follow similar patterns to old ones, but can become blocked when they don’t.”

Approaching problems with a beginner’s mind, then, could help you find more insights.

Alternatively, diving into new topics and unfamiliar tasks might spark some useful ideas.

5. Daydream (and take notes!)

Whilst gazing out of the window and daydreaming isn’t encouraged at school or work, anyone who is creative already knows that it often leads to insights.
Jonathan Schooler’s research has shown that people who daydream regularly (and are aware of it) score higher on creativity tests than those who rarely daydream, or don’t notice when they do.

Again, mindfulness is important here. After all, you need to notice the insight when it occurs for it to be of any benefit.

**Insight, foresight, moresight, the clock on the wall reads a quarter past midnight**

So there we have it - whilst a more focused approach is clearly necessary to turn our ideas into reality, reflection and relaxation can boost our ability to see the big picture and invite new insights about our work.

You might want to show this chapter to your boss the next time they try to work you too hard!
TAP INTO CREATIVE LUNACY
Let’s get something out of the way—I’m not here to persuade you to become an ultra-productive corporate machine.

That would be a waste of your talents. Rather, I want to help you ‘unleash your inner mad genius’.

Once you can tap into the part of you that brims with creative lunacy, the words will flow. The paintbrush will take on a life of its own. Your hands will sculpt new creations as if of their own volition.

Demian Farnworth of Copybot.com once tweeted that “Your first draft should read like a letter from a lunatic”.

I love this, because it gives me permission to bury my inner critic whilst I conjure up ideas!

It’s only when I access this slightly deranged part of me that I begin to enjoy being creative.

**Can I Get Away With This?**

I know I’m on the right track when I come up with an idea or angle on what I’m doing which feels so silly and stupid that I ask myself “can I get away with this?”

Once I hit that inner ‘funny bone’ I start to feel a sense of glee. Instead of worrying about people’s reactions, I begin to gleefully imagine how horrified, bewildered or dismissive they are going to be, and the more amused I feel by my silly idea.

I also retain the faint hope that a small section of the world’s population will be as delighted by the silliness as I am, but I no longer worry so much about what people think. I feel elated.

That’s how I felt when I wrote the original Career Masterplan for Mad Geniuses micro-manifesto. It was a lot of fun. Prior to that, I had ‘intended’ to write a manifesto for about two years but never got round to it.
Calling it a ‘micro-manifesto’ also helped. Now, if it was to live up to its description, it needed to be short and simple, not something large and cumbersome.

It suddenly felt much easier to do. And I suspect it feels more accessible to readers too.

It didn’t quite work with these ‘microguides’ though, which haven’t really ended up as ‘micro’ as I intended!

Your Inner Mad Genius Only Wants to Play

So tapping into your inner mad genius is the best way to get inspired, but let’s face it, that crazy sprite who lives somewhere in our internal universe is not easy to manoeuvre into position.

If you can trick him into thinking he’s playing, then he’ll get to work. But the minute she senses any kind of obligation, she runs and hides under the sofa and won’t come out even if you bribe her with chocolate biscuits. (Yes, our inner mad geniuses can swop genders at a moment’s notice - of course!)

Is Procrastination bad or good?

If you’re chronically procrastinating rather than completing a task, maybe there is a message there you can learn from? Here are 3 ‘good’ reasons for procrastinating:

1. You don’t want to do it. In fact, your inner mad genius would rather poke his own eyes out with a thermometer than do it, and he’s in a rage, smashing up the lab. Maybe this task just isn’t what you’re meant to be doing with your life?

2. You don’t know how to do it properly. Maybe you need a new approach. As Fabian and I explore in The C.A.K.E. Method, ask someone for help, feedback and advice, or try to think of a better way to get started.

3. You doubt yourself. The only way to get over this is to ignore those doubts and take a leap of faith. You’ll eventually develop the confidence, but you’ve got to get started!
How not to be a flake

If you’re having difficulty with Producing The Goods, it’s probably because your conscious intentions aren’t aligned with your subconscious desires or beliefs.

Yes, I sincerely believe that your inner mad genius lives in the realm of the subconscious mind, and therefore has to be coaxed and encouraged, not beaten with a big stick.

There is a sweet spot to be found where you can satisfy both, but it’s an extremely delicate balance.

Sonia Simone has some fantastic advice about this in a post she wrote for her own blog called ‘The Complete Flake’s Guide to Getting Things Done’.

Now none of us like the thought that we might be a ‘flake’—after all, it’s only human to struggle with balancing all of our commitments.

But if you’re not getting your creative or client work or day job duties done, or if you’re failing to reply to emails promptly on a regular basis (and I’m guilty as charged on more than one occasion), then you probably do fit into Sonia’s definition of a flake.

So, after encouraging us to admit to ourselves that we have perhaps not yet reached the pinnacle of personal productivity, she acknowledges that the mysterious motivations of our subconscious minds are often the reason we become derailed from achieving our goals.

To get past this frustrating state of stuckness, Simone suggests entering into a dialogue with our elusive inner genius and asking ourselves:

“OK, unconscious mind, gigantic pain in the ass that you are, thanks for keeping me from doing something I don’t want to do. Could you do me one more favor and let me know what about it I don’t like? Thanks.”
She says to ask yourself this before you go to bed, and then wait and see if an answer appears (she obviously understands the process behind insights!).

Another way would be to meditate on it (our inner mad genius speaks with a very quiet voice at first if we’ve been ignoring him for a long time).

**The Joy of Self-Directed Creation**

The entire point of being a mad genius is to experience the joy of creating something for ourselves.

But how do we get to the fortunate position of being able to make a living through self-directed creation?

Now don’t get me wrong—I still want what I create to be useful and for people to be inspired by it, and in fact I think that is essential for any kind of success as an online content creator.

For me, it’s about getting the balance right between entertaining and useful. If I can include a few lines or ideas that make my inner mad genius chuckle, then I know I’m on the right track as far as entertaining goes.

As for usefulness, well the bulk of effort when it comes to (non-fiction) writing is often taken up by research—especially if you can include the time spent actually having personal experiences that you then proceed to learn important lessons from!

For that reason, I write about things that 1. I want to know more about, or 2. I wish I’d known about a lot sooner! That means what I’m writing is inherently useful to at least one person—me - both my present self and myself a few years back.

And thanks to feedback from readers of my blog, I know for a fact that I’m not the only person who has faced the challenges I have faced in the past or that I’m struggling with right now.
DO SOMETHING EVERY DAY
Every day is a tall order. What about duvet days? Mental health days? Off days? Holidays? Busy days?

Momentum is a powerful thing. If you can move forward a small amount every day, you create momentum. You become unstoppable.

Jerry Seinfeld suggests setting a daily goal, and then crossing each day off the calendar. It becomes a chain, and you won’t want to break the chain.

This is a worthy goal, but dammit it’s hard. If you miss a day, or even two, that’s natural. Just get back on the horse. Keep going. Leo Babauta of Zen Habits suggest you try to never to miss more than two days of a particular habit or you might fall into a lull. And believe me, lulls can last for years.

100 days passes surprisingly fast. It’s just over 3 months. What if you did something every day for the next 100 days - you’d either have 100 new things, or 100 parts of one big new thing.

Either way, you win.

If you don’t do it, you can be certain someone else is, and who knows what opportunities they’re creating for themselves.

You have to be in it to win it!
The Golden Hour

Carve out a golden hour for your creative work during your day. Just one hour. At least to begin with.

You need to create the right conditions for this golden hour (no-one’s going to do it for you).

You need a clear space, with all the tools you need to create set up and ready to go. You need to make sure there won’t be any distractions. That includes the internet, hunger, thirst, phone calls.

You might have to get up at 5:30am or wait until midnight for your golden hour. You might have to squeeze it in throughout the day in 3 installments - including on the bus, during lunch, and at the kitchen table before dinner.

Make it happen. Keep making it happen.

Good. Eventually, you might be able to double it and do two hours. But don’t rush it. Wait until that hour is so ingrained in your day that it would feel weird not to do it.
DON’T LET DEADLINES GET YOU DOWN.
On Deadlines

Are you the kind of person that needs a deadline to get you motivated? (I am.) In the C.A.K.E. Method, we even use this to good effect with Kreation day, when we all get together to work on our projects.

However be careful when it comes to your job, or freelance clients. A work deadline in the next 48 hours may well inspire a sudden rush of epic productivity, but it’s not a sustainable way of working.

If you leave everything to the last minute, all it takes is one family emergency, one particularly unpleasant dose of the flu, or just a day when you don’t feel up to it - to derail everything. Suddenly you’ve missed your deadline, sullied your reputation and made yourself feel like shit.

As with insights, most creative work benefits from ‘sleeping on it’.

Put it in a drawer for a while and then come back to it with fresh eyes.

Or pass it by someone else in case they spot something you didn’t. (Everyone gets ‘can’t see the wood for the trees’ syndrome when they’re closely involved with something, which is why even creative coaches hire their own coach!)

Last minute splurges make this additional, crucial round of checks and improvements impossible. “It’s great” becomes “it’ll do”.

This way of working has knock-on effects too - there goes your 20 minutes a day habit of working on your novel. There goes your exercise regime. There goes your meditation practice. Everything else has to be abandoned in the mad rush to get the project finished.

Of course, this is bound to happen to all of us from time to time, but as a regular work routine it sucks. You need to break your deadlines down into smaller chunks and leave some extra room to manoeuvre.
THE BEAUTY OF SYSTEMS
The Beauty of Systems

Ideally, you want to get ahead of yourself, and you’ll need to be organised if you want to do that.

I have resisted systems for so long. I’ve considered myself incapable of following them. “I’m creative goddamnit! I’m a free spirit, a spontaneous soul, a rebel! I can’t be governed by the rules of ordinary society!”

It’s a great way to be - unless you want to get anything done.

I’m now beginning to learn the beauty of systems. If you can find a proven system to follow, it truly is a gift.

Why? Because you can benefit from the experience and expertise of others who have tried and tested the technique many times before it reaches you.

Because all it takes is making a solid commitment to follow the system at the beginning - and then you are freeing up your decision making and willpower muscles each day to focus on other things. You just need to follow the system.

In the last year, I’ve used other people’s proven systems to learn and practice meditation (Headspace) and to train to run two half-marathons (Hal Higdon). Another example is ‘Book Yourself Solid’, Michael Port’s system for getting more clients.

Productivity Systems

Which, sadly, brings us to this. Productivity systems. Two words which make most creative people reach for the sick-bag.

The one bonus about being a creative person, and having projects you are genuinely passionate and enthusiastic about, is that you will have additional motivation. That kind of
natural passion and energy can go a long way and help you get a lot done even without good productivity habits and systems.

However if you want to take your creativity to a professional level, you are going to have to do some tasks that you might not enjoy or aren’t passionate about, such as attracting clients, setting up a website, and doing taxes.

Or within a good creative job there may still be many things you’d prefer not to do. A productivity system is the only way to make sure that those things get done.

The Basics

I’ve spent so much time trying to find the ideal productivity system for me. I’ve read countless books, downloaded countless web and mobile apps.. started countless to-do lists.

I’m no man machine, but some of it has stuck.

Getting Things Done or GTD is the gold standard of productivity systems, based on the book of the same name by David Allen.

One of my previous bosses in the civil service encouraged the staff to read this book, despite being the most disorganised person I’ve ever met!

I do recommend the book as it contains some brilliant points, and is exhaustive, but beware that it can feel overwhelmingly difficult to implement unless you can clear a fortnight in your calendar to focus only on revamping your entire life.
1. Collect your ideas

As a mad genius, your ideas are like your children. If you lose one of them, you’ll get the ‘League of Creative Minds’ social services dept. coming round and having words, plus you’ll be very upset with yourself.

Keep a note of all your ideas using something you always have with you, e.g. Your smartphone or a notebook.

I’m currently using Vesper on the iPhone for this, but you might prefer Simplenote or Evernote (both cross-platform).

The idea is that all of your ideas are kept in the same place and are easy to find.

2. Take action on those ideas!

Remember, it’s all very well having lots of ideas, but maybe you’d better pick one of them and ‘bring it to life’. Make it a habit to go back to your treasure trove of inspiration and make something happen.

3. Corral and Schedule Your Tasks

Ideas are things you might want to act on. Tasks are actions you have to take in order to make those ideas become a reality, which this guide is mostly concerned with.

I’d advise treating your tasks in the same way you do your ideas though, and make sure you record them all in the same place so you can see them easily.

Use a notepad and paper everyday to write down what you need to do, and set reminders in a calendar or productivity app to remind you when they need doing.
Of course, if you’ve given yourself unrealistic amount of tasks you will soon get over-whelmed (see the coming chapter on simplifying your life). Realistically, you can probably only get 1-3 significant things done per day!

4. Cut out crazy-making distractions

Set clear boundaries with colleagues, friends and family as to when you can be disturbed. Limit the number of inboxes you use for incoming ‘stuff’ and turn off notifications unless completely necessary.

You’ve got email, various social media accounts, and of course a physical inbox.

The more of these you have, the more distracted and all over the place you will be and instead of creative lunacy, you’ll just end up deranged and unhinged.

Try to have just a few places to check into every day if possible.

5. Establish routines and rituals

One way to help yourself become more productive is to establish routines.

The most common we hear about are morning and evening routines, such as “every morning I get up at 5:30am, do yoga, meditate and then write 10,000 words” and “every evening I relax by having a bath, drinking a nice cup of hot chocolate and reading a book of Rumi’s poetry before drifting off into a restful sleep at 7:30pm”.

Now if you’re a night owl who prefers a large glass of whisky and the latest episode of the Walking Dead before bed, or is regularly out and about socialising, then you might not be able to establish these kind of routines.

They’ve eluded me so far, but I can see why they would work so well, and maybe one day I will manage it!
There are also rituals that you can establish when it comes to your working habits.

For example getting everything you need in place before you start and having a nice cup of coffee or tea when you sit down to make your art can all be helpful in preparing you for the work ahead.

Others even swear by more mystical approaches, such as chanting or offering a sacrifice to the Gods of creativity. (So that’s what happened to the goat.)
SIMPLIFY

YOUR LIFE
I’m struck by how, except when you’re young, you really need to prioritise in life, figuring out in what order you should divide up your time and energy. If you don’t get that sort of system set by a certain age, you’ll lack focus and your life will be out of balance.

I placed the highest priority on the sort of life that lets me focus on writing…

Haruki Murakami
What I Talk About When I Talk About Running
Simplifying your life may be ‘simple’ in theory but it sure isn’t easy in practice. It requires self-discipline and decisiveness.

It is however, essential if you’re really committed to producing the goods in a consistent manner.

**Make Space For It**

If you can’t find the space in your life to produce the goods right now, you need to stop doing something. You might need to stop doing a lot of things.

Space in your life could be time, or it could be your mental capacity or ‘brainspace’.

We can only fit in so many things during our day. Our minds only have enough attention for so many things. We also only have a limited amount of willpower each day.

If you’re going to make a new commitment to create art every day, you need to reduce your other commitments.

**You Will Never Get Caught Up**

I used to listen an audio book by silver haired success guru Brian Tracy on the way to work to psyche myself up for a day of misery ahead of me. One part of it particularly stood out:

“You will never get caught up”.

This isn’t what I expected to hear from a motivational tape, but it’s true—most of us are never going to complete our to-do lists. Before we have two things ticked off, another ten have been added on.

This is especially true if you’re working full-time hours and trying to also achieve a side project of any kind, whether it’s freelancing, trying to get fit and healthy, or a personal creative goal.
Something will always fall by the wayside—it could be your physical health, as you shove yet another packet of Jaffa Cakes down your gullet whilst trying to write the next 50 Shades of Whatever bestseller.

It could be your mental health, as the stress and hard work drives you to breaking point. It could be that you are so focused on your work, your family life or friendships suffer.

Something like this happens to us all at some point or another.

You HAVE TO cut something out. We all have to make sacrifices. Sorry, but it’s true.

You might as well choose what you’re sacrificing in advance, rather than let it happen accidentally and by the time you realise it’s happening it’s far too late..

In an interview with Chris Guillebeau for the 99u website, Jocelyn K. Glei describes the ‘four burner theory’:

“David Sedaris (describes) sort of an adapted ‘carpenter’s triangle’ : ‘One burner represents your family, one is your friends, the third is your health, and the fourth is your work.’ The gist is that in order to be successful you have to cut off one of your burners. And in order to be really successful you have to cut off two.”

Now no-one could accuse me of being an over-achiever career-wise, but what I’m not willing to give up is my mental and physical health.

In fact, I’ve prioritised those over everything else because in the past, as I tried to achieve my creative goals whilst working full-time, I’ve driven myself to do too much and I’ve ended up unwell both mentally and physically.

Whilst I will still work extra hard from time to time and give a last minute push if the occasion warrants it, my body and mind won’t let me behave like that for long.

Now that might mean I earn a lot less money than other people and it might mean I’ll never
reach the giddy heights of the A-List, but that isn’t what’s most important to me.

The ability to sustain my work and my creative output is what’s important and I know that being mentally and physically healthy is the key to that.

**The 100% Test**

In his excellent little book *Get Everything Done and Still Have Time to Play*, Mark Forster suggests a brilliant exercise which I highly recommend you take the time to do:

1. Make a list of “all the areas of commitment and activity you have in your life”.

2. Next, write down next to each item the percentage of time you are giving to it at the moment. Obviously this needs to add up to 100%.

3. Finally however, he asks you to add a percentage beside each item which would “ensure that every item is being given sufficient attention to do it properly”.

If you’ve taken some time over this exercise and been completely honest with yourself, then the likelihood is that you can’t realistically include everything which is currently on your list without going over 100%.

Now, you need to choose which ones to remove from the list so that the total doesn’t go over 100%. And when doing this exercise, we need to keep in mind our own tendency to incorrectly estimate how long things will take.
**The Planning Fallacy**

Here’s what we’ve got to contend with:

“The planning fallacy refers to a prediction phenomenon, all too familiar to many, wherein people underestimate the time it will take to complete a future task, despite knowledge that previous tasks have generally taken longer than planned.”

*Buehler et al*

As if that wasn’t bad enough, every time the planning fallacy appears its nasty little cohort Hofstadter’s Law follows close behind, like a movie villain’s less charismatic but equally unpleasant sidekick.

Hofstadter’s was coined by cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter (he seems to have humbly named it after himself).

According to Oliver Burkeman at The Guardian, this law “asserts that any task you’re planning to complete will always take longer than expected - even when Hofstadter’s law is taken into account.”

Why is it so difficult for us to perceive time accurately? Part of the problem seems to be that we just don’t take our past into account when planning for the future, even though it would be logical to do so.

(Spock would have a field day if he had to deal with freelance writers like myself.)

Not only that, but studies have shown that we fail to take into account all of the steps involved in achieving our goal or any possible obstacles.

And because these biases are so ingrained we don’t just get it wrong once. It happens again and again, ad nauseum.

And let’s face it, there’s nothing more dispiriting than the realization that you’re not learning from your mistakes.
That’s not all, folks! We are also prone to what’s known as ‘optimism bias’.

According to author Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*:

“Most of us view the world as more benign than it really is, our own attributes as more favorable than they truly are, and the goals we adopt as more achievable than they are likely to be.

We also tend to exaggerate our ability to forecast the future, which fosters optimistic overconfidence. In terms of its consequences for decisions, your optimistic bias may well be the most significant of the cognitive biases.”

In short, we’re screwed!

Of course optimism has also been shown to help us cope better and live a happier life in general, so maybe it’s ok to delude ourselves!

**How to Bypass Your Own Bias**

In my search to find a solution I discovered an article in Psychology Today that suggests the following strategy:

“When you’re making a plan and estimating how long it will take, be sure to stop and
1) consider how long it has taken you in the past,
2) identify the ways in which things might not go as planned, and
3) spell out all the steps you will need to take to get it done.”
THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCAKEABILITY
Accountability

Let’s face it, there are limits to what we’re capable of achieving on our own.

Especially for freelancers or those who work from home, all the productivity advice in the world isn’t going to be much help when things just seem impossible and you’ve even run out of milk and Crunchy Nut Cornflakes and you’re fed up with all of your favourite music and you can’t remember the last time you saw the outside world.

At times like these, we need other people. That’s where the idea of accountability comes in. With this approach, you enlist others to help you achieve your goals, and they do the same for you.

Well I’ve been doing that for a while with my friend Fabian Kruse from The Friendly Anarchist.

In fact, he helped me get my site Clear-Minded Creative off the ground in the first place, and I helped him when he was working on his books.

It led to us starting our own podcast about (Un)productivity, Mountain Shores.

The C.A.K.E. Method

And now we’ve launched our first course, The C.A.K.E. Method, which takes everything we’ve learned about using accountability to get our creative work done, and helps other people put it into practice.

It’s the natural development of all the ideas I’ve discussed in this guide.

So if you’re interested in really producing the goods, you might want to check it out!
Thanks for reading. The next microguide will be ‘Share Your Wares’ - but before you can do that - get producing!

If you’re a fellow mad genius in the making, I’d love to hear from you. You can get in touch by emailing me at milo@clearmindedcreative.com or via Twitter - I’m @milomclaughlin

And why not visit the blog at: www.clearmindedcreative.com

p.s. you can still subscribe to the newsletter to get the first three micro-guides for free for a limited time!
PRODUCE THE GOODS

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If you have any feedback or just want to say hi,
email me at milo@clearmindedcreative.com

Disclaimer #1: All advice is taken at your own risk. I’m just a blogger, what do I know?

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Final Disclaimer: No goats were harmed in the making of this guide, the author is in fact an animal lover and really doesn’t believe in blood sacrifices.

Thanks to Melissa, Fabian and Michael or their support and encouragement.

THE END.