

The Hidden Habits of Genius

What's in it for me? Discover the traits that define genius

Michelangelo. Shakespeare. Toni Morrison. Mary Shelley. When we hear these names, a single word probably springs to mind to explain their abilities: genius. But what is it we mean when we call someone a genius? We know they exist – but what sets geniuses apart from the rest of us? What are their defining habits and traits? Looking closely at the lives of people as diverse as Leonardo da Vinci and Albert Einstein, these blinks boil genius down to a few key ingredients. And, while it might not make geniuses of us all, following the advice they lay out might just bring us a little closer. In these blinks, you'll learn

what was on Leonardo da Vinci's to-do list; why Vladimir Nabokov wrote in a parked car; and which author wrote a classic novel while still in her teens.

Look at the world through the eyes of a child

There are few Halloween villains more familiar than Dr. Frankenstein's famous monster – but did you know that his creator, Mary Shelley, was only 19 years old when she finished writing her iconic novel? In fact, she actually began work on the novel *Frankenstein* when she was just 18. After making a bet with her soon-to-be husband, poet Percy Shelley, and his friend Lord Byron about which of them could create the scariest story, the idea for the book suddenly seized her – and like that, a literary classic was born. There's no denying that writing *Frankenstein* as a teenager is evidence of Mary Shelley's genius – but maybe we're wrong to look at Mary Shelley's age as an obstacle she overcame. Maybe the fact that she wrote when her childhood wasn't far behind her actually proved to be an advantage. The key message here is: Look at the world through the eyes of a child. Whereas Mary Shelley produced her finest work as a teenager, another genius, the artist Pablo Picasso, produced masterpieces even as he grew old. Unlike Shelley, Picasso isn't primarily remembered for just one youthful creation – but that doesn't mean that he can't teach us something about the value of a childlike point of view. As a child, Picasso was mentored by his artist father, whose teaching helped the young Picasso to produce astounding and technically brilliant works of art from an early age. But there was a problem. For all his paintings' precision, they still lacked something key: real creativity and innovation – exactly what we mean when we use the word “genius.” So how did Picasso break out of the mold his father had set for him and begin painting in the daring way we're familiar with today? It's simple: he embraced a kind of childishness. Picasso himself said, “It takes a lot of time to become young.” The great artist had to learn how to channel childlike impulses in his art, and began experimenting with bold lines, cartoonish figures, and daring colors. So maybe we should think twice before encouraging children to grow up. As the examples of Mary Shelley and Picasso prove, a fresh, young, and somewhat childlike view of the world is often closer to genius than a grown-up perspective.

Cultivate a strong sense of curiosity

If you were asked to name a genius, who would spring to mind? Einstein, maybe? Shakespeare? What about one of the greatest figures of the Renaissance – the multitasking Leonardo da Vinci? To many, Leonardo encapsulates everything we mean when we use the term “genius.” The famous Italian artist was a painter, a sculptor, an engineer, an architect, an anatomist, and more. More importantly, Leonardo didn’t just fulfill these roles; he excelled in them, far exceeding the efforts and expectations of his peers. But the thing is, Leonardo wasn’t a well-educated man by the standards of his day, having received no instruction in Latin or Greek – which were thought of as the backbone of prestigious schooling. In the absence of an elite education, how can we account for Leonardo’s genius? It boils down to curiosity. Here’s the key message: Cultivate a strong sense of curiosity. Curiosity takes many forms, and different people are curious about different things. Some take an interest in stamp collecting. Others like baseball. A few learn about the great military campaigns of ancient civilizations. But what distinguishes rare geniuses like Leonardo from the rest of us is that they seem to be curious about almost everything. Take, for example, the entries on Leonardo’s to-do list for a single day in Milan. His tasks included calculating the area of the city and its suburbs; finding a book describing the area’s churches; learning how to square a triangle mathematically; examining a crossbow; finding out how to repair a canal lock; and asking a man about the measurement of the sun. And those are just the highlights! Leonardo’s restless mind was constantly struggling to learn about and understand the world around him – and it was precisely this great curiosity that drove him toward the achievements that made him famous. Few of us will turn into Leonardos – but we can all try to be more receptive to the world around us. If you want to develop your sense of curiosity, then try to adopt an open and eager attitude to experiencing new things. If you’re in a new city, let yourself wander around; if you’re in a bookshop, choose something you wouldn’t normally take an interest in. Curiosity makes the world a richer place.

Give your work your complete attention

Let’s stick with Leonardo da Vinci for a minute. We’ve already seen that he had an extraordinary sense of curiosity about the world around him. But that on its own isn’t a recipe for genius; in order to create an artistic ability as great as Leonardo’s, a few more key ingredients are necessary. Chief among them: outstanding powers of concentration. When it came to creating works of art, Leonardo favored a slow and deliberate manner. Instead of rushing in and beginning straight away, he could agonize for weeks about seemingly trivial details, like a fold of clothing or a shaft of light. When an abbot complained about how long it was taking Leonardo to paint *The Last Supper*, he replied that great geniuses require time to form the “perfect ideas” that they then manifest with their hands. So what’s the lesson here? The key message is this: Give your work your complete attention. The ability to concentrate at great length and with intense focus is common to many geniuses. Take Albert Einstein. When you imagine him devising his groundbreaking theories, you probably picture him in a silent study or at a dusty chalkboard in a lecture hall. In reality, Einstein was able to concentrate no matter where he found himself. A friend described visiting Einstein in 1903, when he’d recently become a father, and wrote that, although the place stank of diapers and stale smoke, the great thinker was totally unfazed. With his child on one knee and a notepad on the other, he’d jot down equations and rock his baby at the same time. Although every genius seems to recognize the importance of intense concentration, not all of them are able to tune out background noise like Einstein. Many of the greatest geniuses go to great lengths to minimize disruptions while they work. The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy

made a habit of locking the door while he wrote. Vladimir Nabokov wrote *Lolita* in the back seat of his parked car, declaring it the only place in the world with no drafts and no pesky noises. Whether concentration comes easily like it did to Einstein, or whether a genius needs a distraction-free environment like Nabokov, the ability to focus entirely on the task at hand lies at the heart of any genius's ability.

Dare to break the rules

When Andy Warhol arrived in New York to work as a commercial graphic artist, he couldn't help noticing that something felt off. The works he saw displayed in galleries seemed out of touch: there was a disconnect between the real, money-driven city he knew and the kind of art hanging on the walls in front of him. A merely talented artist would have seen the discrepancy between the art world and the real world, and followed the implicit rule: If this is what sells and wins applause, this is what I should paint, too. But not Warhol. Like most geniuses, Warhol wasn't a great fan of orthodoxies and rules – far from it. Instead of ignoring the face of modern New York, he chose to make the city's consumerism his subject. The key message here is: Dare to break the rules. Warhol took everyday commercial objects like a Coke bottle and a Campbell's soup can and made them his focus. By going against the grain and breaking the rules, he secured a prominent place in the history of twentieth-century art. But there are other rule-breaking geniuses, farther back in time, who took even greater risks than Warhol – history-shaping geniuses like Martin Luther, the former monk who turned against the Catholic Church and ignited the Reformation. When Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses, a list of objections to established Catholic practices, to the door of a German church back in 1517, he broke all kinds of rules – but in his mind, the fate of Christianity depended on his disobedience. By the end of his life, Luther had founded a new Christian sect with its own theology and practices, established the right of clergymen to marry, and set in motion religious tensions that would boil over again and again in Europe for years to come. Few geniuses have played a historical role as significant as his – but had he played by the rules, the modern world would look very, very different. Geniuses can cause trouble. They rock the boat. They make us feel uneasy. They change our world, whether we like it or not. And they definitely don't do it by obeying the rules.

Geniuses can turn a weakness into a source of creativity

The idea that there's a connection between genius and insanity is an old one, going back at least as far as ancient Greece. The Greek philosopher Aristotle noted that there is "no great genius without a touch of madness." He wasn't alone in his observation, either: centuries later, the renowned English poet John Dryden wrote that "great wits are sure to madness near allied." In other words, there's a fine line between being a genius and losing your mind. But for those of us who don't have any creative madness stimulating our imaginations, what can we learn from the famous men and women who did? Here's the key message: Geniuses can turn a weakness into a source of creativity. The idea that creativity can be linked to mental distress is a common one, but it's not just a stereotype. A study into the lives of eminent British writers and artists concluded that, of all creatives, poets were by far the most likely to experience mental health issues. In fact, it found that famous poets were 30 times more likely to suffer from

manic-depressive illness than the rest of the population. So how do we account for this staggering disparity? The answer seems to be that geniuses find a way of turning what could be a weakness into a strength: by using it as a well of creative inspiration. The Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama is a case in point. Now in her 90s, Kusama resides at a psychiatric hospital in Tokyo, and spends the days working in her studio across the street. She describes her work as “psychosomatic art” – in other words, art caused by her mental difficulties. Far from allowing her troubles to paralyze her, Kusama uses them as grist for her artistic mill, transforming her hallucinations into paintings. In creating art, she says, “I have been trying to cure my disease.” Kusama’s technique is instructive. For geniuses, difficult and often painful mental health conditions can be harnessed for artistic purposes. Instead of regarding a disorder as an obstacle to their work, geniuses find a way of turning it to their advantage – seeing their troubles as a source of creativity.

Make time for relaxation

When is it that your best ideas strike you? Is it when you’re at your desk? Or when you’re answering emails? Probably not. If you’re like most of us, inspiration probably strikes when your mind is disengaged – while you’re taking a shower, going for a walk, or even while you’re in the depths of a dream. We’ve already discussed concentration as a key element of genius. Isaac Newton, for example, had the ability to hold a problem in his mind and meditate on it for hours at a time – leading to revolutionary breakthroughs in the world of physics and astronomy. But genius isn’t just about being able to focus. It also involves the opposite of hard work and concentration: the ability to relax. The key message is this: Make time for relaxation. Judging by the creative habits of many geniuses, the best way to arrive at new insights is to disengage from your work for a while, letting your weary mind slacken and relax. One of the most common ways of doing this is by getting some exercise. This isn’t a new idea. Legend has it that a Greek philosophical sect called the Peripatetics carried out their arguments and discussions while walking around the grounds of Aristotle’s school. In more modern times, novelist Charles Dickens is said to have walked up to 15 miles a day while working on *A Christmas Carol*. But there are more relaxing states than walking – and the most relaxing of all is surely sleep. In the depths of our slumber, as we dream, we enter a phase called REM, or Rapid Eye Movement, sleep. During REM sleep, the far left and right sides of our prefrontal cortex, which play a key role in logical thought, power down. At the same time, the parts of our brain connected to memory, emotion, and images go into overdrive. The result is the bizarre phenomenon we call dreaming – a state during which geniuses from the artist Salvador Dalí to the Beatles’ Paul McCartney experienced some of their most important creative breakthroughs. But, geniuses or not, there’s a lesson for the rest of us as well. The way to arrive at new ideas and insights isn’t by exhausting yourself with never-ending work. For optimal creativity, times of concentration need to be combined with stretches of deep relaxation and rest.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: We can trace the same key elements in the lives of many geniuses across vastly different cultures and times. At root, genius involves the ability to combine intense concentration with creative downtime, to turn personal difficulties into strengths, and to find the courage to break traditional rules. On top of

that, geniuses have a daring, childlike point of view – and an insatiable curiosity that always prompts them to learn more. Actionable advice: Go for a leisurely walk. Walking played a key role in the creative routines of geniuses like Charles Dickens and the Peripatetic philosophers – but if you are going for a stroll in search of inspiration, be sure to stick to a moderate pace. Scientists say that if you raise the speed of your walks from a leisurely pace to a more exerting one, you break the spell. That’s because if you move too quickly, your mind fixates on the mechanics of walking rather than roaming freely, and you lose the creative benefits a walk can bring. Got feedback? We’d love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with The Hidden Habits of Genius as the subject line, and share your thoughts!