

How to Turn a Creative Spark Into Something Real

The hunt and capture of inspiration requires patience, craftiness, and sometimes brute force. We asked three creatives about the traps to set for when inspiration comes your way and how to hold on for dear life once you've got it.

1. Pay attention.

It sounds obvious, but it's one of the most important tenets of continuous output. Inspiration is all around if you know how to look. Start by cultivating a state of mind "where you remain open to ideas from unexpected places," says Adobe's Kyle T. Webster, an illustrator who has drawn for The New Yorker, TIME, and The New York Times. The key is to keep one's eyes open, process stimuli as they come at you, and then shape it into something original.

Webster has trained himself to continuously pay attention – even on vacation. During a recent trip to the beach with his family, he stepped on a jagged seashell and cut his foot. It hurt, but also led to a new idea for a children's book about pain and "all the ways kids hurt themselves when they are very young," an age where the world is large, overwhelming, and full of "ouch" moments.

2. Write it down.

When inspiration does strike, write it down write it down write it down. The act of recording bridges the gap between the stream-of-consciousness chaos that can generate creative ideas and the structure required to turn them into something real.

"Keep a sketchbook," says Kelli Anderson, a designer. "Your good ideas aren't going to come on a schedule," so make sure you're prepared to capture them at all times. That way the next time you need a spark, either for your own project or for client work, you'll have a trove of ideas to sift through.

It's the act of recording that's important here – a sketchbook might work for you, it might be more convenient to take notes on your computer or phone, or dictate

them on an audio device. Whatever the medium, just make sure it's accessible and on you, always.

3. Put a stake in the ground.

Once you have an idea you want to develop, it can help to make the pursuit public, particularly if the project lacks clear-cut deadlines. Emily Spivack is an artist, author, and journalist. Nearly a decade ago, she decided to write a book. Knowing the logistics were going to be complicated, time-consuming, and, at times, discouraging, she started a website announcing her intent to become an author. "That was me putting a stake in the ground," Spivack says, along with a platform that encouraged forward momentum. While the website was more for herself than anyone else, making her progress public prompted her to take the project more seriously and hold herself accountable.

4. Create boundaries.

Many creative projects come with built-in deadlines and parameters, particularly if they are for a client. Sometimes onerous, under the right circumstances these constraints can be a boon for creativity: boundaries give you something to work within and against.

"I enjoy a deadline," says Stevie Remsberg, which is lucky because, as the art production director at New York Magazine, she gets a lot of them. Remsberg also thrives on thinking her way out of boxes: "I think my favorite type of creative work is being confined in what I am allowed to do." Restrictions, such as having to work in black-and-white or using obscure photographs, can produce unexpected and compelling results. "I love a challenge," she says.

For personal projects, Remsberg often creates her own boundaries. Recently, she began teaching herself motion graphics in Adobe After Effects. Knowing a blank screen is a recipe for inertia, she gave herself a clear-cut goal – animate a spirograph drawing – with built-in deadlines.

5. Ask for feedback.

Creativity is often portrayed as a solitary endeavor, in which an artist's singular vision is the key to a work's success. But creativity also thrives on collaboration. A sounding board can help you refine your vision, making the end product stronger.

"Explaining what I'm doing to another human being" is part of Anderson's process. Typically she tries to boil down the concept into a seven-sentence explanation so she can share it and then gauge people's reactions.

Remsberg also relies on feedback to inform how she approaches an assignment. In the beginning, she likes to jump in and move quickly. Early on, she'll share the initial concept with a coworker. At this point in her career, Remsberg is "able to deal with the criticism." In the end, negative reactions save her time, allowing her to recalibrate early and often rather than blazing off down a road that leads to a dead end.

6. Map it out.

Waiting for a creative idea to hit can be like watching a pot boil. But while the initial creative spark might be difficult to add to your calendar, once the project is established, a schedule is your friend.

When Anderson embarks on something new, whether it's for a client or a self-directed project, she sets a final deadline, and then breaks down the project into stages. "I draw it out visually," she says, sketching out each phase in proportion to how long it should take. Next, she maps the visual sketch onto an actual calendar, translating periods of time into numerical blocks. Even the best laid plans can go awry, however.

"The schedule is just a suggestion," Anderson says, one she regularly refines. "If you are indulgent and you spend too much time on one part you can oftentimes make it up later at another stage."

7. Go down rabbit holes.

Creativity is fueled by curiosity and passion. So follow your interests – and before starting something of your own, make sure the idea still genuinely excites you.

Every month or so, Webster pores over the notes he's made over the past few weeks to see whether he's stumbled on anything worth pursuing. Most ideas, while intriguing in the moment, have grown stale. "My hit percentage is low," he says. But a few still light a spark. These are the ones he invests time into – a sense of excitement is a requisite for pursuing something beyond the idea stage.

Spivack's work has always been centered around obsessive interests. "Something will strike me, I'll want to learn more about it, and I'll go down a rabbit hole," she says. As she digs deeper, one project often organically leads to the next. Sentimental Value, a collection of stories about vintage and second-hand clothing, began in 2007 when Spivack stumbled on a Playboy Bunny outfit while shopping for shoes on eBay. In addition to vintage high heels, a puff-ball tail, ears, and stockings, the costume came with a black-and-white ID of the woman to whom it once belonged. In contrast to the playful, suggestive outfit, she struck Spivack as understated and serious.

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