Steal Like an Artist

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How does an artist look at the world?
First, you figure out what's worth stealing, then you move on to the next thing.

What a good artist understands is that nothing comes from nowhere. All creative work builds on what came before. Nothing is completely original.

Every new idea is just a mashup or a remix of one or more previous ideas.

The artist is a collector. Not a hoarder, mind you, there's a difference: Hoarders collect indiscriminately, artists collect selectively. They only collect things that they really love.

Your job is to collect good ideas. The more good ideas you collect, the more you can choose from to be influenced by.

You have to be curious about the world in which you live. Look things up. Chase down every reference. Go deeper than anybody else—that's how you'll get ahead.
Google everything. I mean
everything. Google your
dreams, Google your problems.
Don't ask a question before you
Google it. You'll either find
the answer or you'll come up
with a better question.

Don't worry about doing research. Just search.

Carry a notebook and a pen with you wherever you go. Get used to pulling it out and jotting down your thoughts and observations. Copy your favorite passages out of books.

In my experience, it's in the act of making things and doing our work that we figure out who we are.

You're ready. Start making stuff.

Nobody is born with a style or a voice. We don't come out of the womb knowing who we are. In the beginning, we learn by pretending to be our heroes. We learn by copying.

First, you have to figure out who to copy. Second, you have to figure out what to copy.

Who to copy is easy. You copy your heroes—the people you love, the people you're inspired by, the people you want to be.

Gary Panter say, "If you have one person you're influenced by, everyone will say you're the next whoever. But if you rip off a hundred people, everyone will say you're so original!"

What to copy is a little bit trickier. Don't just steal the style, steal the thinking behind the style. You don't want to look like your heroes, you want to see like your heroes.

A wonderful flaw about human beings is that we're incapable of making perfect copies. Our failure to copy our heroes is where we discover where our own thing lives. That is how we evolve.
So: Copy your heroes. Examine where you fall short. What's in there that makes you different? That's what you should amplify and transform into your own work.

The best advice is not to write what you know, it's to write what you like. Write the kind of story you like best—write the story you want to read. The same principle applies to your life and your career: Whenever you're at a loss for what move to make next, just ask yourself, "What would make a better story?"

The manifesto is this: Draw the art you want to see, start the business you want to run, play the music you want to hear, write the books you want to read, build the products you want to use—do the work you want to see done.

The computer is really good for editing your ideas, and it's really good for getting your ideas ready for publishing out

into the world, but it's not really good for generating ideas. There are too many opportunities to hit the delete key. The computer brings out the uptight perfectionist in us—we start editing ideas before we have them. The cartoonist Tom Gauld says he stays away from the computer until he's done most of the thinking for his strips, because once the computer is involved, "things are on an inevitable path to being finished. Whereas in my sketchbook the possibilities are endless."

Try it: If you have the space, set up two workstations, one analog and one digital. For your analog station, keep out anything electronic. Take $10, go to the school supply aisle of your local store, and pick up some paper, pens, and sticky notes. When you get back to your analog station, pretend it's craft time. Scribble on paper, cut it up, and tape the

pieces back together. Stand up while you're working. Pin things on the walls and look for patterns. Spread things around your space and sort through them.
Once you start getting your ideas, then you can move over to your digital station and use the computer to help you execute and publish them. When you start to lose steam, head back to the analog station and play.

I think it's good to have a lot of projects going at once so you can bounce between them. When you get sick of one project, move over to another, and when you're sick of that one, move back to the project you left. Practice productive procrastination.

Creative people need time to just sit around and do nothing.

Take time to mess around. Get lost. Wander. You never know where it's going to lead you.

Tomlinson suggests that if you love different things, you just keep spending time with them. "Let them talk to each other. Something will begin to happen."

It's so important to have a hobby. A hobby is something creative that's just for you. You don't try to make money or get famous off it, you just do it because it makes you happy. A

hobby is something that gives but doesn't take. While my art is for the world to see, music is only for me and my friends. We get together every Sunday and make noise for a couple of hours. No pressure, no plans. It's regenerative. It's like church.

Don't throw any of yourself away. Don't worry about a grand scheme or unified vision for your work. Don't worry about unity—what unifies your work is the fact that you made it. One day, you'll look back and it will all make sense.

This is actually a good thing, because you want attention only after you're doing really good work. There's no pressure when you're unknown. You can do what you want. Experiment. Do things just for the fun of it. When you're unknown, there's nothing to distract you from getting better. No public image to manage. No huge paycheck on the line. No stockholders. No e-mails from your agent. No hangers-on.

But there's only one not-so-secret formula that I know: Do good work and share it with people. It's a two-step process. Step one, "do good work," is incredibly hard. There are no shortcuts. Make stuff every day. Know you're going to suck for a while. Fail. Get better. Step two, "share it with people," was really hard up until about ten years ago or so. Now, it's very simple: "Put your stuff on the Internet."

You don't put yourself online only because you have something to say—you can put yourself online to find something to say. The Internet can be more than just a resting place to publish your finished ideas—it can also be an incubator for ideas that aren't fully formed, a birthing center for developing work that you haven't started yet.

Show just a little bit of what you're working on. Share a sketch or a doodle or a snippet. Share a little glimpse of your process. Think about what you have to share that could be of some value to people. Share a handy tip you've discovered while working. Or a link to an interesting article. Mention a good book you're reading.

Your brain gets too comfortable in your everyday surroundings. You need to make it uncomfortable. You need to spend some time in another land, among people that do things differently than you. Travel makes the world look new, and when the world looks new, our brains work harder.

The golden rule is even more golden in our hyperconnected world. An important lesson to learn: If you talk about someone on the Internet, they will find out. Everybody has a Google alert on their name. The best way to vanquish your enemies on the Internet? Ignore them. The best way to make friends on the Internet? Say nice things about them.

Remember "garbage in, garbage out"? You're only going to be as good as the people you surround yourself with. In the digital space, that means following the best people online— the people who are way smarter and better than you, the people who are doing the really interesting work. Pay attention to what they're talking about, what they're doing, what they're linking to.

"Find the most talented person in the room, and if it's not you, go stand next to him. Hang out with him. Try to be helpful."

So, I recommend public fan letters. The Internet is really good for this. Write a blog post about someone's work that you admire and link to their site. Make something and dedicate it to your hero. Answer a question they've asked, solve a problem for them, or improve on their work and share it online.

Not everybody will get it. People will misinterpret you and what you do. They might even call you names. So get comfortable with being misunderstood, disparaged, or ignored—the trick is to be too busy doing your work to care.

Try it: Instead of keeping a rejection file, keep a praise file. Use it sparingly—don't get lost in past glory—but keep

it around for when you need the lift.

The thing is: It takes a lot of energy to be creative.
You don't have that energy if you waste it on other stuff.

Eat breakfast. Do some push-ups. Go for long
walks. Get plenty of sleep.

A logbook isn't necessarily a diary or a
journal, it's just a little book in which you list the things you
do every day. What project you worked on, where you went
to lunch, what movie you saw.

The way to get over creative block is to simply place some
constraints on yourself. It seems contradictory, but when it
comes to creative work, limitations mean freedom. Write a
song on your lunch break. Paint a painting with only one
color. Start a business without any start-up capital. Shoot
a movie with your iPhone and a few of your friends. Build
a machine out of spare parts. Don't make excuses for not
working—make things with the time, space, and materials
you have, right now.