

ZERO TO ONE

MAKING IDEAS WORK FOR YOU

by Marc Köhlbrugge

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Student ID: 1119711

Thesis instructor: Drs. W.S. Eikelboom

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“The beginning is half of every action.”

–Greek Proverb ¹

PREFACE

I've always had a lot of ideas. Ideas for creative projects like websites, movies, consumer products, even companies. From small ideas that would only take a few days to implement to big projects that would take a life-time. I loved having ideas. I loved writing them down in my notebook and re-reading them the next day. I loved talking to people about all the ideas I had come up with. It seemed like a magical thing. But slowly a problem arose, the ideas started to feel empty. I started to feel I should do something more with them.

The thing I loved about my ideas was their potential. The potential of creating something new. Using my creativity to bring something new to the world. But I realized my ideas were worthless if they would never find their way to the real world.

I tried starting to develop my ideas, but that didn't seem to work. As soon as I started to work on them they didn't seem all that interesting anymore. I would quickly come up with new ideas to distract me from working on the current one. I tried to remedy this by reading a lot about productivity and creativity. I even learned myself a few habits which to be honest did make me more productive, but at other things. I still didn't work on my own ideas. It seemed like productivity was not the issue here. It wasn't creativity either. I came up with the most creative ideas. No, it was something else. But I wasn't exactly sure yet what it was.

Then one day I came across a presentation called 'Towards patterns for creativity'² It was a presentation by Merlin Mann, author of a popular productivity-blog called '43 Folders'³. He started his talk about how many people seem to be fixating on all these tools about productivity and all "this stuff how fun it is to make stuff." But people who actually make stuff don't spend time on thinking about how to be creative. They just start working.

That was a small revelation to me. Instead of coming up with new ideas, visiting all these website about creativity and reading all these books about productivity I could just start working.

I did. And it worked. It may sound a bit strange, how can something as obvious as that get me to start working? I think it was something I knew all along, but that presentation just said it right in my face, which motivated me to actually get working. But I knew I couldn't rely on that motivation being there the whole time. I knew it would weaken slowly and I needed some structure to keep me creating.

I now have done some research on this subject and I think came up with something that works pretty well to keep myself from dwelling in the creativity mode. I would like to share it with you because I know I'm not the only one with this problem out there. I know there are plenty of ideas waiting. All they need is a creator who knows how to bring them to our world.

If you want to be this kind of a creator and have plenty of ideas but don't seem to be able to implement them. This article is for you. If you don't recognize yourself in any of the stated problems you still might be interested in how the gap between having an idea and implementing it is bridged.

Before I go on, I want you to think about the project you would like to work on right now. Now put this article aside and start working on that project. Do it now. Yes, I know you want to keep reading this article. You have all these reasons why you can't work on that project right now, but in reality you can. You think your reason really is valid, and this is meant for other people. It isn't. You can work on that project, right now. Do it. If you really get stuck, you can always come back later.

How did that feel? I'm assuming you actually did get something done, which felt great, but it didn't last or you wouldn't have come back. I will try to give you a way to make it last. But first read this carefully:

You are probably already reading too much about solving your problems, instead of just solving them. In his presentation Mann talked about how reading about creativity makes you feel creative, but in the end you still didn't make something. I agree, too often reading is just a quick fix. An escape from the real world. Don't let this article be another escape. So don't just read this article. Instead question it. Put it to the test. Try out the described methods. No text will create for you, you have to do that yourself. But I will try to guide you through the process.

The article is divided into two parts:

1. In the first part I will discuss what I think are the most important elements of creativity and making ideas happen. The underlying concepts and the psychological side of things. You will find some practical tips here and there, but it's mostly focussed on the theoretical part.
2. The second part will turn all this theory into practical advice. It's like a guide you can use when working on an idea. It's related to what Mann calls "design patterns for creativity"².

"Each pattern described a problem which occurs over and over again in our environment, and then described the core of the solution to that problem in such a way that you could use this solution a million times over without doing it the same way twice."

–Christopher Alexander⁴

I won't be stating every problem explicitly, but the solutions I am providing are universal, they can be implemented in your own way. They are something you can use while working on an idea. This is the good stuff. If you want, you can skip right to it, but the theory from part one gives you the insight on why things work as they do which also gives you the possibility to create your own design patterns based on this theory.

PART 1

“A creative’s natural instinct is to want to remain only in idea-generation mode, but embracing sweat and as a critical element of production is the defining factor between creative and creation.”

–Behance Magazine ⁵

THE (UN)IMPORTANCE OF CREATIVITY

There is this stereotype big businesses all around the world are killing creativity in their workplaces because of closed minds, fear of change or whatever you want to name it. We, creatives, look down upon them. We all know it better. We all have these wonderful ideas which one day will shock the world because of their creativity. At least, that's the idea. In reality only a few of us really make their ideas happen. The rest of us put our "ground shaking" ideas on the back-burner. For later, when the time is right. Which of course, it never is.

If you don't produce any work, you will get obsessed with your ideas and the 'creativity' that made it possible because it's the only thing you have. But creativity and ideas aren't that important. An idea without action is like a Ferrari without gasoline. Sure it might look pretty but in the end you want more than just look at it. You want to use it.

If you really are open minded like you probably tell yourself, be open to the fact we might be able to learn something from those big businesses focussed on results and "killing creativity". I'm not saying they have found the holy grail of implementing ideas, but they do know there way around unfolding an idea into something real. That's something we can learn from. Don't worry about wasting your creative genius. It will show itself when you're actually working. The real creativity happens when transforming that initial thought, that idea, into something real. Which leads me to something called the open and the closed mode ⁶.



OPEN AND CLOSED MODE

We see a closed mind as something bad. A closed mind now and then is not a bad thing though. In fact, it's essential when implementing ideas. Luckily, we can have both an open mind and a closed mind. Not at the same time, but we can train ourselves to switch between them. John Cleese speaks of an open mode and a closed mode ⁶. A research he was involved with showed the secret behind most successful businesses is the ability to switch between the two modes.

I like to see the open mode as a creative playground. Everything is possible. No pressure, just brainstorming, coming up with crazy ideas. It's about the process itself. The closed mode, on the other hand, is about implementation, always focussed on the end-result.

Cleese tells us the best way to utilize these two modes is in a cycle. You start in the open mode, come up with an idea, then you switch to the closed mode to implement the first bit. Then back into the closed mode looking back at your work and see if it is going into the right direction. Then again, back into the closed mode to implement those changes and the cycle repeats itself.

That all sounds wonderful, but we are not robots. We cannot flip a switch and go from an open mode to a closed one. If it was that easy, there wasn't any problem. This is the real challenge. This is what the article will focus on.

Cleese argues creativity is not possible in the closed mode. That's something I have to disagree with. While I agree the mode does not promote creativity, it does exist. It does exist in another form however. It happens on a subconscious level. When a problem arises, let's say you're writing a book but your computer crashes. Deciding to call yourself and dictate everything in your voicemail inbox is a creative solution which will probably have an impact on the actual writing as well. I still see this as the closed mode because you keep moving forward. You keep focussed on the end result.

But perhaps that's even not that important. What is important though, and it's one of the most important discoveries I made when doing research for this article, it that there is not a clear line between the open and close mode. In other words, there is no clear line between the idea and implementation phase. The so-called idea phase already contains a lot of implementation-work and when in the implementation phase you're still reshaping the idea. The **whole creation process** is about **implementing an idea**. These are two things you cannot break apart, therefore we shouldn't treat them as such.

“You’ve got to get in there and do.”

–Twyla Tharp⁷

THE FIRST STEP

The first step, the one after you've come up with the idea and need to actually do some work, is for most people the hardest part of the whole creation process. Jack Foster describes these people in his book "How to Get Ideas":

*"They get an idea, they tell some people about it, the people all say, 'Wow, that's great!' and then they go on to something else and never do anything more about the idea they told people about. I think the reason is: "Wow, that's great!" is reward enough. It gives you that nice warm glow that comes from knowing you got a really good idea, that everybody thinks you're a whiz."*⁸

Foster has a point. For me just telling people about my ideas was rewarding enough. Just looking through my list of ideas at my own felt good. If that's all you want, that's fine. No need to pursue your ideas if you're happy with just "having" them. For me that didn't last though, slowly my ideas seemed less important to me and stuff I actually created, whether it was client work or something for school, felt more worthy. Even if the initial ideas weren't that original or clever, the fact I actually made something felt good. The intrinsic value of an idea faded away, I needed to develop them. Depending on your wants and needs, you can decide not to make the first step at all. But if you're reading this article you probably want to get more out of your ideas. In that case "Wow, that's great!" is not enough. You're not fulfilled, something else is holding you back. Resistance. This is what Steven Pressfield writes about in his book "The War of Art":

*"There's a secret that real writers know that wannabe writers don't, and the secret is this: It's not the writing part that's hard. What's hard is sitting down to write. What keeps us from sitting down is Resistance."*⁹

Of course, that 's not just true for writers, but for all creatives. Working on our projects isn't difficult. But beginning to work on them is.

So while creative work is beautiful, it gives us a way to express ourselves and if we're lucky we can even make a living doing it, it does require a great deal of effort as well. Staring at that blank canvas can be daunting. We have to stay focussed, not to fall prey to all distractions that enter our lives. We can't let Resistance hold us back. But what exactly is Resistance?

**“Whatever you can do, or dream you can,
begin it. Boldness has genius, magic and
power in it. Begin it now.”**

–J. W. von Goethe ¹⁰

*“Resistance cannot be seen, touched, heard, or smelled. But it can be felt. We experience it as an energy field radiating from a work-in-potential. It’s a repelling force. It’s negative. Its aim is to shove us away, distract us, prevent us from doing our work.”*¹¹

Pressfield goes on explaining how Resistance seems to come from our environment.¹² We locate it in other people or situations we don’t have any influence on. But that’s a lie. *“Resistance is self-generated and self-perpetuated. Resistance is the enemy within.”*

If you want to realize your ideas, you have to be aware of this. You have to be aware of how Resistance manifests itself in your life. *“Resistance will tell you anything to keep you from doing your work.”*¹³ Don’t let that happen. Fight it. That’s the struggle that comes with creativity. Take it or leave it.

When you do decide to fight it and you sit down and commit yourself to working on that idea, new doors of opportunity will open which would have stayed closed otherwise.

What this means is you can never blame someone or something else for you not working on your ideas. The Resistance is within you and the only way is to attack it, head-on. Just begin, even if your situation or resources are not ideal. When you begin, things happen.

“Concerning all the acts of initiative (and creation) there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would not otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision raising in one’s favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no man would have dreamed would come his way. I have learned a deep respect for one of Goethe’s couplets: ‘Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, magic and power in it. Begin it now.’” – W. H. Murray¹⁴

You only see a glimpse of the idea when it’s still in your head. But as soon as you act on it, as soon as you begin the creative process, the idea will become clearer and new possibilities will emerge. One of reasons starting is so difficult is because we don’t know where to start. We’re overwhelmed by all the work we have to do. We just cannot wrap our minds around it, we do not know where to start so we do not start at all. So the first part is to learn where to start, then we have to make starting a habit. Something we don’t think about anymore, but just do. So that we don’t have those internal discussions with ourselves anymore. We have to make starting a routine.

Work every day.

THE ELEMENTS OF A CREATIVE LIFE

ROUTINE

Every creative professional has its own ways of working. So has dancer and choreographer Twyla Tharp, but she decided to write a book about it: *The Creative Habit*.¹⁵ Tharp is a true artist. Her whole life is about her art. Like Murray, Tharp argues beginning is one the most important steps in any creative endeavor.¹⁶ When she talks about it in her book she doesn't necessarily mean the beginning of a project, but the beginning of her workday. Tharp has developed a morning ritual:

*"I begin each day of my life with a ritual: I wake up at 5:30 A.M., put on my workout clothes, my leg warmers, my sweatshirts, and my hat. I walk outside my Manhattan home, hail a taxi, and tell the driver to take me to the Pumping Iron gym at 91st Street and First Avenue, where I work out for two hours. The ritual is not the stretching and weight training I put my body through each morning at the gym; the ritual is the cab. The moment I tell the driver where to go I have completed the ritual."*¹⁷

She then goes on explaining *"it's vital to establish some rituals—automatic but decisive patterns of behavior—at the beginning of the creative process, when you are most at the peril of turning back, chickening out, giving up, or going the wrong way."*¹⁸

The rational mind doesn't like to start. It's the Resistance we talked about earlier. So the solution is to make starting a habit. It will take some discipline at first, but in time it will turn into a routine. That's when the problem is solved.

So how do you get this routine? Work every day.

*"Do something about your idea every day. Open your computer or your folder or your notebook and do something. Every day. Even if it's only to review what you did yesterday, do it. At the end of a month you'll be surprised at how much you've accomplished. At the end of a year you'll be astounded."*¹⁹

Tharp talks more about the importance of a routine:

“After so many years, I’ve learned that being creative is a full-time job with its own daily patterns. That’s why writers, for example, like to establish routines for themselves. The most productive ones get started early in the morning, when the world is quiet, the phones aren’t ringing, and their minds are rested, alert, and not yet polluted by other people’s words. They might set a goal for themselves—write fifteen hundred words, or stay at their desk until noon—but the real secret is that they do this every day. In other words, they are disciplined. Over time, as the daily routines become second nature, discipline morphs into habit.

It’s the same for any creative individual, whether it’s a painter finding his way each morning to the easel, or a medical researcher returning daily to the laboratory. The routine is as much a part of the creative process as the lightning bolt of inspiration, maybe more. And this routine is available to everyone.” ²⁰

COMMITMENT

Have you ever worked on a project you didn’t really want to work on anymore, but you kept going anyway because you already had invested so much time in it? You just couldn’t quit project, even when you knew the project was going nowhere or you just had lost interest.

That sounds bad. And you shouldn’t continue a project when it’s going nowhere. However, that’s not what this article is about. First you have to know how to stick with a project, through good times and bad. Then you can learn about when to quit. So for now, let’s just disregard the fact that sometimes quitting is the right answer and instead look at this from a positive angle.

If you invest something, your subconscious can’t stop working until it gets its investment back in one way or another. The same principle is applied in Las Vegas, people keep playing the slot machines because they want their money back. It’s a strong human trait we can use to our advantage. For example, Foster talks about committing yourself by committing your money:

“Take some money out of your savings account or borrow some money from your brother-in-law, open up a checking account with it under the name of your idea, and spend some of it on something you need to do to get your project going.” ²¹

This works two ways.

1. As soon as you try investing money you will know if you're committed to your idea. If you can't even invest a little money, how can you invest all your time and mental capacity?
2. If you do in fact invest money, you will want to get a result somehow which forces you to complete the project.

A more extreme form of commitment Julius Caesar and other generals used when invading foreign countries was to burn their boats. By doing this retreat was impossible, the troops knew they had to conquer the country or they would die.²² Now I don't recommend you start burning boats and all, but the underlying principle is very useful indeed. Namely, forcing yourself to go through with something. For example by forcing deadlines upon yourself, something which I will talk a bit more about in a next section.

There are other ways of investing as well. You might not realize it, but when you're working on a project you're investing your time and energy. If you keep reminding yourself of all the time already invested you will want to finish the project. In part 2 we'll create something to do exactly that.

STAYING MOTIVATED

If you use a to-do list to manage all your tasks you know how nice it feels to cross off an item as done. It seems like such a silly thing, but knowing you can cross off another item when you have finished the task gives enough motivation to actually do it. Looking at your list full of crossed off tasks at the end of the day feels really good as well. But *"when you complete a list of action steps, your instinct might be to throw the list away. After all, the work is completed! However, some creative professional teams take a different approach; they relish their progress. Some go so far as surrounding themselves with it."*²³

So by surrounding yourself with progress, you will stay motivated. You will know all the hard work in the past has paid off and so will the hard work you do now.

Besides looking back, you have to look forward too. Envision your idea fully realized. How will it look? How will it work? How will people react? This will give context to your idea and provides clarity.

Additionally, it also reminds you what you're really working for. If you can find a way to visualize the outcome you hope to achieve, for example a drawing on your desk, you will stay motivated even during the hard times. Because you will know what you're working for.

DEADLINES

A deadline is a funny thing. On the one hand it restricts us. We only get a fixed amount of time to complete our work. On the other hand it focusses us on getting things done. It's different for everybody, but if I don't have a deadline it can take ages before I complete something.

But what if you're working on your own project? Of course you can set your own deadline, if that works: good! If it doesn't, we need to find another way to set a deadline. F. R. Upton, one of Edison's closest associates says Edison often got himself in trouble by purposely publishing something prematurely, so that he would have a full incentive to get himself out of trouble.²⁴

Edison set his own deadline and held himself accountable. We can apply this principle to our own projects as well.

CONCLUSION

The problem is clear. We like the idea-phase, but are stuck in it because we don't like the implementation-phase. However, we saw there are no such things. The creation process doesn't exist of two (or more) phases but is a continuous unfolding of the initial idea.

It all starts with a thought, a flash of insight, which is then written down on a napkin as the cliché goes. Then we rewrite the idea into something more formal. Which then transforms into a project plan, to a planning, scope definition, the whole shebang. These documents are then turned into something we can use in our day-to-day work, for example to-do lists. Which are turned into actions which result in the implementation of that initial thought. That's how it really happens. The only "distinction" between the idea and implementation is the time put in. The more time you put in the further it grows and eventually the idea will become a reality. It's like a seed that turns into a flower.

Now, I can just tell you that, but that doesn't help you. You need to experience it yourself. In the next part I will guide you to this thought process in the hope you'll duplicate it.

Oh, and don't forget to have fun!

PART 2

FROM OPEN TO CLOSED

We talked earlier about the open mode and the closed mode. If you're just starting with your idea you're in the open mode and want to head over to the closed one. This is where a lot of people have problems with, myself included.

This second part of the article is here to guide you to that closed mode. We'll start with the initial idea and let it slowly grow into what some people might call a concept. The keyword here is "grow". This concept is still the same idea, but more evolved. Evolved into something we can actually implement into something real.

When we have this, implementing it isn't so difficult anymore. We'll look at a few ways of motivating yourself to continue working on the project and make yourself more committed.

Keep in mind this part will be less about theory and more about practical use. The upside is you can start implementing the discussed methods right now. The downside is not all methods will work for you. Everybody is different, what might work for me doesn't necessarily work for you. The underlying principles still hold up though. So feel free to experiment a bit. Try to come up with your own solutions, based on mine or on the theory from part one. Of course there are plenty of other resources online and in the bookstore as well, but make sure you don't fixate on finding the next best method. In the end it's about implementing that idea, not about finding the best way about doing it. It's probably better to improve upon your current working methods instead of trying to find new ones altogether.

Enough talk, let's dive right in!

“[...] most ideas are stillborn, and need the breath of life injected into them through definite plans of immediate action. The time to nurse an idea is at the time of its birth. Every minute it lives gives it a better chance of surviving.”

–Napoleon Hill ²⁵

THE PROCESS

We've talked a lot about "the process" and we all know what it means, but what does it look like? I think it's important to have a clear understanding of how this process works so you have something to refer to when you're lost in the process. When you're not sure what to do.

Also, my interpretation may differ slightly from yours so I describe mine here so we're on the same page. First of all this article is geared towards "personal projects". Projects you initiate yourself. Most of the theory will apply to client projects as well though.

"The Harvard psychologist Stephen Kosslyn says that ideas can be acted upon in four ways. First, you must generate an idea, usually from memory or experience or activity. Then you have to retain it—that is, hold it steady in your mind and keep it from disappearing. Then you have to inspect it—study it and make inferences about it. Finally, you have to be able to transform it—alter it in some way to suit your higher purposes." ²⁶

A FLASH OF INSIGHT

This is where it all starts. It's the moment where the idea just seems to hit us. Most of the times it seems initiated by our environment. Something we see, hear or experience in another way. Our mind makes a connection between different concepts which results in a new idea.

RETAINING

We generate thoughts throughout the day, but this one is special. Therefore we have to retain it in some way or another. Most of the time we just jot it down on a piece of paper as fast as we can before we forget the idea.

IDEA INSPECTION

While writing the idea down, we had to transform that thought into words. What we now have on paper is not the idea though. It's a reference to the earlier thought. This lets us come back to that thought and think a bit more about the idea. Inspect it.

Continues on next page...

IMPLEMENTATION

Now we have to implement the idea. Transform it into something real. We have to be aware the idea is not a blueprint for the implementation. The idea and the implementation are just different points in time. The idea is the start, which transforms into the implementation.

LOOKING BACK

Then we look back at our process and learn from it. You really have to set time aside for this, now is the time learn from your mistakes. This way you improve your creative process for the next project.

DEVELOPING THE IDEA

How do we get to that closed mode? That mode were we will actually be working on implementing our idea. We can't flip a switch, and even if we could that wouldn't be our answer. What we need is a way to gradually move from the open mode to the closed mode. Gradually, so we don't break the flow we're in. So, how do we do this?

I think the answer is in the idea. The idea starts the whole process. The idea is our vision of the end result. It motivates us. The idea is the core of the project, everything is built around it. The idea is the thing we're really interested in. Therefore, by gradually developing the idea into our final implementation we achieve our goal. All working methods will therefore be based on our idea. So first let's take a closer look at the very beginning. The flash of insight we talked about earlier.

A FLASH OF INSIGHT

You somehow get an idea, then what? In his podcast "Accidental Creative" Todd Henry talks about the importance of having a "specific urgency" when an idea hits you.²⁷ He talks about the three choices you have when this happens:

- **Act on it.** Spend 5–10 minutes developing the idea right here, right now. By developing he means writing it down, brainstorming about it. Expand it into something more. After that, define the next action you have to take. This clears your mind and focusses you on the project.²⁷
- **Queue it.** This is often the more relevant choice, since acting on the idea immediately isn't possible most of the time. So instead, you notate the idea. You also write down the environmental cues. Ideas arise in context. And there are specific things in your environment that cause these ideas to arise. By writing them down, the idea will still make sense when you read it later on. Also, set aside time on your calendar for further development. Preferably the same day, while the idea is still fresh in your mind. Then, spend 5-10 minutes developing it, and set the next actions.²⁷
- **Ignore it.** This is not a valid option. You have to write down all your ideas. Our minds are wired to find patterns, so when you ignore ideas you're saying that's okay, I don't need your help. I will figure this out on my own. You then basically train yourself to ignore ideas. We don't want that.²⁷

Example

Throughout part two I will provide examples of the presented methods. You can find them on the gray pages titled "Example".

THE INITIAL THOUGHT

A way to make conference calls more effective by focussing on a "current topic".

TURNED INTO A CONCEPT

A webbased application for making conference calls more productive. The initiator visits a website and starts a new queue, which is essentially a list of topics that will be discussed during the conference call.

Each queue will have an unique and secret link that can be shared with other participants. This way everyone can see the same list of topics.

Participants can update this list which will be reflected on all participant's screens. When someone remembers a topic he or she likes to discuss, instead of interrupting the conversation he or she can add this new topic to the bottom of the list.

When a topic is finished it can be marked as "done" and the next one in line will automatically become active. The cycle will repeat until all topics are discussed.

To realize this project I will first need to design a user interface for the website based on the features it should have. The coding can be outsourced to another programmer. Then, when everything is working I will need to find a way to market the service.

Revenue can be created by offering annual subscriptions with extra features.

Let's explore a bit more what we mean by "developing an idea".

WRITING IT DOWN

First we need to realize our ideas might sound solid when they are in our heads, when in reality they are broken. The first thing we need to do when we get an idea is to write it down. Write it down on a piece of paper, a digital text file, whatever works for you. You probably already do this as a way to remember your ideas. That's a start, but if your goal is to remember it your writing will just be a reminder to your original thought. This is a good solution when you want to queue it for later, but if you want to start developing the idea you want to rewrite it into something stand-alone. It should be understandable by someone else. This way we force ourselves into thinking the idea through. All the gaps will be revealed and if we're lucky we might even see some new opportunities to take the idea to the next level.

If you do client-work you already do this in the form of a creative brief or project proposal. You have to communicate your idea clearly, because other people are involved. This is something you can put into practice for your own ideas as well. How you do it doesn't matter, but be sure to translate that initial thought into something a layman would understand. You can even take someone in mind you write it to. Then, when you're ready, you need to save the text somewhere so you can refer to it later.



THE DOCUMENT

We'll be writing a lot when we're working on our idea, so it's advisable to start a document to put all our stuff in. This way we can always refer to it later. If you don't mind, I'd like to call it The Document. Perhaps a bit cheesy, but we need a name for it.

Tharp, the choreographer we talked about earlier, does something similar. She uses a box for every project she starts. *"I start every dance with a box. I write the project name on the box, and as the piece progresses I fill it up with every item that went into making of the dance. This means notebooks, news clippings, CDs, videotapes of me working alone in my studio, videos of the dancers rehearsing, books and photographs and pieces of art that may have inspired me."*²⁸

The box makes here feel organized. *"It also represents a commitment. The simple act of writing a project name on the box means I've started to work."*

It's something I recommend you doing as well. You can use a box, or if you're all about digital files you might create a special folder on your hard disk. Whatever you do, make one place for all things for your project you might need at a later point.

In this article we'll focus mostly on rewriting your idea using different methods. This will result in a lot of text documents. I recommend using a new page for each part of the process and put it on top of the older ones. This way you get a good sense of the progress you are making as well. You will literally see your idea grow. You might want to put these pages in a folder inside your box.

“A woodpecker can tap twenty times on a thousand trees and get nowhere, but stay busy. Or he can tap twenty-thousand times on one tree and get dinner.”

–Seth Godin ²⁹

AN IMPORTANT QUESTION

Now that you have your idea translated into something tangible, we can really start working on it. But before we continue you need to ask yourself the following question:

Do I want to implement this idea right now?

It may seem like an obvious question, but it is important enough to take the time and answer it consciously. You only have limited time and resources. You cannot expect to realize all your ideas so you have to be picky. Even if it's a really good idea, you have to ask yourself if you want to work on it right now. Can you? Some ideas are better left for later. Others should not be worked on at all.

It's not a shame if the answer is no. It just means you have more time to work on another project. If the answer is positive though, you have to become fully dedicated to it.

DIFFERENT IDEAS, DIFFERENT FORMS

If you decide to keep working on the idea, great! It is now time to take another look at your idea. Ideas come in a variety of forms, here are a couple:

- **Summary:** The idea is a summary of the envisioned end-result. If you're writing a story, the idea might be like the summary of the back of a book. You already have a good idea of what the end-result might look like. You feel you just have to create it now.
Example: "a book about three horses planning world domination"
- **Direction:** A direction looks a lot like a Summary but is more abstract. You're not yet sure what the end-result will look like, but the underlying concept is very clear.
Example: "Mother nature takes back the world." This could become a book, movie, etc.
- **Question:** You are wondering about something, looking for an answer. What happens if ... How can I ..., etc. You're probably not sure what to expect, which makes it an inspiring idea but generates more Resistance since you don't have a good overview of the process ahead of you.
Example: "What happens if I walk through the city in a monkey-suite?"

Continues on next page...

Example

When I look at my previous idea, the website with the queue of topics, the initial thought is more of a **Direction**. It answers the question “*How can conference calls be made more productive?*”. If you look closely the answer is “*focussing on one topic at a time*”. That’s the real idea.

This thought was then transformed into a concept. The concept was much more concrete, more like a **Summary**. This is good because it gives a good overview of what the solution might look like, but it also narrows our view into believing this is the only option.

Let’s forget the concept and try to think of the ideal **Form**. This would probably not be a website, because that would cancel out all mobile phone users. Instead, a better form might be a methodology or set of instructions which can be followed by the participants. One person is assigned “call leader” and he guards the current topic, whenever people go off-topic he asks them politely to save that discussion for later. When a topic is finished the call leader asks the next person in line if he or she has a topic to discuss.

A guide could be made to explain all the steps. And perhaps add a web application after all. For people who don’t know the system, but have access to a computer anyway.

- **Form:** You know what the end-result will look like, but are not yet sure what it is about. This is a tricky one, because normally the form is based on the function or contents of an idea, not the other way around.

Example: “A movie with a film-noir look”

- **Feeling / Intuition:** The origin of some things are hard to find. When doodling you generally don't start with a clear idea, but you are working to an end-result. This is either the easiest or hardest form. It's easy if the idea reveals itself when working, but it's hard if you can't start working but know there's something there. In that case you have to describe what you feel and make it into something more tangible. Even if it doesn't match perfectly, you still have something you can work on and while working on it you can reshape it to your initial intuition.

When working with ideas, be aware which kind of form it has. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. A “Summary” might be easier to implement, because you know what you want, but therefore it's less flexible as well. If your idea is to “write a book about three horses planning world domination”, you already have defined a lot of things that are not necessarily the best choice. Perhaps you only need two horses instead of four. Who knows?

You can translate your idea into another form as well. Take a look at all the projects you have done in the past and what kind of ideas started them. Perhaps some forms works better for you than others. Try reshaping your ideas, even if you don't think it's necessary. This way you force yourself to turn your idea into something more tangible. The new insights might surprise you. However, in the end stick to one final form so you only have one idea to worry about.

Example

The idea clearly is about making people more productive. It tries to achieve this by having conference call participants focus on one topic at a time, but in the end the intention is to make people more productive so they can achieve their own goals better and more efficiently.

We need to keep this in mind when developing our idea. We talked earlier about creating guidelines for conference calls, but they should be understood easily as we don't want to waste people's time with yet another manual to read.

Perhaps the webapplication idea wasn't that bad after all. Sure, it might not work in all instances, but when it does work it works perfectly. If the interface is designed well there wouldn't be a need for a manual or instructions. People are already familiar with a lot of design elements (or "design patterns" if you will) which we can re-use to our advantage.

THE UNDERLYING INTENTION

Depending on the form of your idea, there might be an underlying intention you are not aware of yet. You might think you want to “create a website where people can discuss their favorite books and movies”, but in reality you might want to connect like-minded people. The website is just a way of achieving this underlying intention. Your ideas will take on the forms you know best. So if you’re a web developer you just think in websites. If you’re a painter you think in paintings. Therefore, it’s not a bad thing to immediately think of how the idea will be implemented, it actually means you’re ahead already, but be aware of the underlying intention. This will guide you in all further choices you have to make. Since you can just base them on the underlying intention.

Example

After the previous chapter I've decided to stick with the initial idea of building a webbased application. Sure, it might be inconvenient for a small group of users, but it's very practical for the rest. Plus, it's my expertise.

So we already know one **Weakness**, the idea relies on each participant having an online computer in front of him. Like we saw, this cancels out all mobile phone users. Of course, most mobile phones nowadays do have internet access but you can't always look at you're phone when you're talking. A solution might be to add a subtle notification sound when the current topic is changed.

We have to look out not too add too much notification-"stuff" thought, because we don't want to interrupt the conversation. However, when a topic is marked finished it's not a problem for a small interruption like a notification sound. It's one of the less busy parts of the conversation.

And here we learned something new. The "less busy parts of the conversation" tells us something about conversations I haven't thought about before. Namely, conversations vary in activity. They might start with not much activity (or productivity), people are greeting eachother, etc. Then the activity will rise, until the topic is finished. Then when the new topic starts the activity will rise again, etc. The conversation will probably end less active as well.

This insight gives us some new **opportunities** to work with. When we're developing our webapplication we have to make sure the interface is as clean and easy as possible during these active parts of a conversation. Additional information (for example tips and tricks on using the application) should be provided when there's less activity to be expected.

Of course there are plenty of other **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities** and **Threats** but this gives you a good idea on how to work with them. Try it out using your own idea.

STRENGTHENING YOUR IDEA

Now you should have a pretty solid understanding of your idea. The next action is to take one more critical look at it. There are plenty of methods for this, one of them is called the SWOT-analysis which stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Here's how it works:

You take the underlying intention or objective of your idea. Then you ask yourself the following questions:

- What are its strengths? What makes it a good idea?
- What are its weaknesses? Does your idea lack anything?
- Are there any external opportunities that can help your idea?
- Are there any external threats to your idea? Competitors, for example.

You take a look at your idea from the four perspectives mentioned above. Then enhance its strengths, find solutions to its weaknesses and respond to the opportunities and threats accordingly.

This specific model will not work for all ideas. Partly, it depends on how far your idea has evolved so far. But you can come back to this model anytime you're stuck or feel something needs improvement.

Also, make sure to try out other methods of strengthening your idea. You can ask a friend to make a list of 100 reasons why your idea might fail. That might sound discouraging, and probably is for some people, but it gives you a fresh way to look at things. Every reason it can fail is an opportunity to improve your idea. You can do it the other way around too: 100 reasons your idea will succeed. This is encouraging and also shows you the strengths of your idea which you can improve even more.

The alert reader will notice these methods all refer back to the SWOT-principles. I like them because they provide a very clear perspective on things. Of course you can also just talk about your ideas with friends and family, but don't forget to take notes when you do that.

One last thing you should try is stripping your idea to the bare essentials. Make it as concise as possible. Don't forget to keep rewriting your idea based on all the improvements you have made. Don't forget to add them to your document. Not just as notes. Rewrite the entire idea instead, with the improvements incorporated. When reviewing The Document you shouldn't have to browse through all the pages to get a good sense of the current state. It should be on top of the pile. The other pages are just there to refer back to, so you can get a good sense of the progress made and the different paths taken.

IDEAS WITHIN IDEAS

So we're making some real progress now. Really working on our idea. But if you're still getting new ideas each day, they may distract you. And what I said still holds true, you shouldn't ignore those ideas. Instead you can try to find the relevance to the current project you're working on.

Ask yourself what qualities of this new idea you can incorporate into your current project. I'm not saying you should make a big mix of all the ideas you get, but you might be able to reshape some ideas into something useful. Something that can be part of the current project.

The key element here is to find a way to link the new ideas to your current project. All these extra ideas will empower your project and let you focus on it even more. Every new idea will remind you of the project you're working on. And since you probably get a lot of ideas, this is a great way to stay focussed.



THE NEXT ACTION

You should now have a pretty clear picture of what your idea is about. We started with just a thought, clearly the open mode, but now you have a real concept you can actually work on, we gradually moved to the closed mode. We're almost there. The following step really depends on your specific idea, so I will provide some global guidelines instead of telling you exactly what to do as I did before.

The next step is to look at your idea and think of the very first action you have to take to further the project.³⁰ Let's say you're writing a book, the first thing you probably want to do is to write down a working title. So your next action would be to "brainstorm for words for a working title". Again, the "next action" really depends on your idea, but make sure it's the very first thing you need to do and make it as small as possible. Notice I didn't give the example "think of a working title". First you have to brainstorm, then you combine the words into a nice title, these are separate actions. I can't stress enough how important this difference is. "Coming up with a working title" takes more mental capacity than just "brainstorming for words". Your mind knows the difference. It will postpone bigger tasks, while it doesn't have any problems with the small ones.

Also, you have to make sure your next action is actionable, meaning two things:³⁰

- You know what the outcome looks like and what you're committing to.
- What the next required action is.

In most cases your action will start with a verb. For example "buy paper" instead of "need some paper". The first one tells you what to do, while the latter just offers a problem. We don't need problems, we need solutions. We need actions.

When your next action is clear, write it down. Write it down somewhere you'll surely see it again often. If you're an avid user of a calendar that might be the right place. Or perhaps just write it down on a post-it note and stick it at your computer screen. The important thing is you will be reminded of the action, preferable in place where you can immediately act on it. Then as soon as you can, you do. Make it top priority. If it takes less than two minutes don't bother writing it down, just do it right then.³⁰

If the action is indeed well thought-through and is written down as concise as possible (you can take your time here, it pays off in the long run) you shouldn't have any problem actually acting on it. And when you have completed it, think of the next action and write that down. Just repeat the cycle of thinking about the next action, writing it down and doing it.

You can keep adding all documents that extend on your idea to The Document. This way it always provides an overview of the current state of the idea.

As long as you keep the action items as small as possible and write them down in such a way you know exactly what to do when you read them this method will work perfectly. The real problem of procrastination is being overwhelmed by all the work you have to do. You just cannot wrap your mind around that, you do not know where to start so you don't start at all. The solution is to know where to start. Then actually starting is not hard at all.

CONCLUSION

WELCOME TO THE CLOSED MODE

You're now working on your idea, one action at a time. You're in the closed mode.

Congratulations!

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH PROGRESS

One last tip, we talked about this earlier. By surrounding yourself with your progress you motivate yourself. It also shows all the time you have invested, which makes you want to finish the project.

The Document is one of things we already implemented to keep ourselves up-to-date with our own progress. So make sure you read it frequently. Flip through all the previous pages to see how far you've come already. You'll see how small your initial idea was and how it has grown over time. Besides The Document we can implement other methods as well. For example:

If you're using post-it notes for your "next actions" instead of throwing them away after you accomplished the action, stick it on the wall. After a while the wall will be filled with post-it notes. All actions you have accomplished. This may look a bit messy, but it's a very visual way to show off your progress to yourself, and potentially others.

Another trick is the calendar chain, something Jerry Seinfeld uses. Brad Isaac talks about a conversation with him:

"He told me to get a big wall calendar that has a whole year on one page and hang it on a prominent wall. The next step was to get a big red magic marker.

He said for each day that I do my task of writing, I get to put a big red X over that day. 'After a few days you'll have a chain. Just keep at it and the chain will grow longer every day. You'll like seeing that chain, especially when you get a few weeks under your belt. Your only job next is to not break the chain.'" ³¹

Isaac goes on explaining it *"works because it isn't the one-shot pushes that get us where we want to go, it is the consistent daily action that builds extraordinary outcomes."* And this consistent daily action will turn into a habit. *"If you don't break the chain, you'll start to spot opportunities you otherwise wouldn't. Small improvements accumulate into large improvements rapidly because daily action provides 'compounding interest.' Skipping one day makes it easier to skip the next."*

GOODBYE

So, that's it. I really hope you followed the guidelines instead of just reading them. Otherwise it would just be another escape from working. If you did only read them, I suggest thinking of an idea you would like to work on right now and start to read part two again. It's so much more valuable if you really do the exercises instead of just reading them. If you did the exercises, keep up the good work!

There's one last thing I'd like you to do: create one page with all the key elements of this guide. Make it a step-by-step plan. This way you don't have to keep coming back to this article, which is filled with examples and theories you will probably become sick of if you needed to read them everytime when working on an idea. So create your own guide, based on your your own process and with your own tips and tricks. Like ideas, it's a good practice do write down your process, this will open up your eyes and clarify what needs improvement and what works as-is.

Writing this article certainly helped me. I hope it helped you as well. Good luck!

Marc Köhlbrugge

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COLOPHON

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TYPEFACES

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