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It was the fall of my junior year and I was starving for what would be my first and only course dedicated to the topic of creativity. More specifically, dedicated to understanding creativity and practicing it. What was promised to me, and what I left with, were the skills necessary to enhance my creative journey.

Artist Dates and Morning Pages were two exercises from the course I use to this day and merit as the reasons for the success of my pursuits since graduation. What kind of pursuits? As of this writing, I've been a professional copywriter for five years. About two of those years were spent freelancing for clients and agencies, the remainder was spent as a full-time copywriter for Mullen Boston and as creator of the webcomicky art project upside down grin, where I've posted a single-panel illustration/caption every Monday through Friday without fail since the site launched on October 3, 2011.

Artist Dates take the concept of quality time and ask that I spend that quality time only with myself—usually while I engage in something new. Friends can't come along because this exercise is meant to form a deeper connection with myself. Instead of impressing someone or being influenced by their bias, I learn how it is I truly think and feel as I experience things. Artist Dates have been my cure for the common creative rut.

Morning Pages have a similar intent but with a twist: instead of experiencing, I'm releasing. The exercise of Morning Pages requires that I grab a pen and paper every morning and write anything that comes to mind for thirty minutes straight without stopping. The pen cannot pause even once. If that sounds hard, it is. It's also not as meaningless as it sounds. More than voiding the mind, Morning Pages have helped me build an incredibly useful skill for my job as a professional creative: the ability to shut off my inner critic at will.

In the world of advertising, you're given a creative brief and demanded to create something—actually, make that three things—and oh yeah, they all have to be strong options—and oh, make sure each one is different from the last. Thanks. We'll review everything tomorrow afternoon.

Now is not the time to be critical. Now is the time to flow. Just like with Morning Pages, I shut off my inner critic. I don't worry about spelling or impressing people. I create and create and create, and I know I'm doing it right when it feels like play.

This only sounds like complete chaos.

As with any game, there are rules and boundaries you create beforehand—that's essentially what the creative brief represents: rules and boundaries. You play within those and then you can be critical after the fact.

Everyone loves to be the devil's advocate, but brainstorming, concepting, ideation—these are re-

served for the angel's advocate. You can play the devil when, and only when, the angel's work is done. This also works with others disciplined in the same manner. The real magic I've noticed in those collaborative situations is how freeing myself to say anything allows someone to build from what I said. Something that I may initially have perceived as too dumb to say (but said anyway) was the exact spark someone else needed to inspire a new train of thought—one that would lead to the big ideas we need at tomorrow's internal review.

The creative thinking course left me with the belief that creativity—a seemingly mysterious gift—is something you can teach, and moreover, is something you can practice and improve upon.

In the same way a person who runs every day will be a better runner than those who've spent a lifetime at the gravitational mercy of their couches, a person who flexes the mind creatively on a daily basis will be better than another who's resigned himself to the misconception that he's simply uncreative.

Yes, creativity might come more easily to some than to others, but that's true of any pursuit. No matter how hard I train at running, there's a limit. I can't beat someone who trains equally hard with a body genetically gifted for running, but who cares about beating someone else? The value is that it's possible to improve myself, and I haven't hit my limit yet.



## *Key Insights*

1. Being is a matter of doing – Writers write. Painters paint. Create something this instant. Do it again tomorrow. Don't worry about how good it is. Focus on making. If for every hundred things you make, only five make you proud, that's five more than had you never tried at all. That's five closer to being who you want to be.
2. Follow through – “I have so many great ideas, I don't know where to begin.” Anyone can have a good idea for a novel or dream up a fantastic television series. Only few will follow through to write the novel or shoot the pilot. You don't know where to begin? Just pick one and go. Follow-through is the difference between someone who's all talk and someone who's actually creative. Dirty the same fingers that picked your brain, and always finish what you start!
3. Inspiration shows up when you do – Stop waiting for it. Put the pen to paper. Put the brush to canvas. Put the fingers to guitar strings. The creative process is just that: a process. If you wait to “feel inspired,” you'll barely make a single thing. Just go easy on yourself if inspiration doesn't show. Everyone has off days, the point is that you did your part by showing up.