

In this lesson, you'll learn how to create really strong systems that can help you manage creative work, even if the creative work you do is difficult to control.

Building strong systems, as you've learned, is surprisingly easy when you have a process that works the same every time. When variables don't change and you don't have to think too hard about each step of the system, the pieces come together without too much effort.

But one place where structure and discipline often elude us is the creative process. If you've tried and failed before, it can feel like structure and discipline are just incompatible with creative work.

Creativity seems to require three things that make it really hard to build reliable systems around.

First, the pathway from idea to finished product often feels different each time. You want to be free to let your imagination and intuition take you wherever it may because that's what produces the most creative and unique results.

How do you build a system around a path that could go a different direction each time?

Second, the final result of creative work can't always be perfectly predicted from the beginning. Something that's creative is also unique. We're not building widgets here. We don't *want* to create the same thing over and over. We want to create something new and different each time.

If you're a painter or a graphic designer, or some other type of visual artist, you can't produce the same piece of art each time you sit down to create. That would be boring and not very valuable either.

The same could be said for a composer or a writer or any other creative who's always looking to put a new spin on their craft.

Finally, creativity is really closely linked with inspiration, and inspiration often feels impossible to corral or control. The most common way to deal with inspiration is to just wait for it to show up spontaneously, and then try to milk everything you can out of it because you know it won't be there forever, and you might be waiting awhile for it to come back.

These are three problems we have to work with if we want any hope of bringing more structure to our creative work.

And the good news is that there are some very effective ways to approach these problems that will not only make you more productive, but they won't ruin the magic that comes from that feeling of spontaneous creativity.

To get better control over your creativity, you'll want to focus more on the process of your creative work and build control around how you approach each step of that process instead of trying to engineer specific creative outcomes.

That way, you're more free to explore and pursue creative ideas that lead to truly unique results while also better defining the broad steps you'll take to get there so that the process becomes more repeatable.

The creative process is something that's actually been pretty well studied. And, in fact, you probably follow it—or some form of it—pretty closely already if you do a lot of creative work.

There are five basic “steps” to the creative process: Preparation, incubation, illumination, evaluation, and implementation.

In the preparation step, that's when you realize there's a problem or, in some cases, a problem is assigned to you. It's the time when you start to get curious about how to solve a problem and you do the brainstorming and the research that will set you on a path towards actually building a solution.

Then there's the incubation step. This is a boring step from the outside, but a very exciting and active one on the inside. During the incubation step, you spend time mulling over the many options you have to solve your creative problem. All these different possibilities compete for attention, and you start to see how some are better than others as you weigh them against each other.

Even though you don't produce anything during the incubation step, it's a critical part of the process.

Next comes the illumination step. Before this point, you've identified a number of good ideas, but a clear and workable way to stitch them all together into a coherent solution to your problem doesn't exist yet. You have some good ideas, but you can't really communicate the big picture.

The illumination step is when you experience that “aha” moment where the solution becomes more clear and you can see how all the ideas in your head actually fit together. Maybe it's not perfectly clear, but you start to see the connections.

This is probably the most frustrating step of the creative process because it often comes suddenly and unexpectedly. For instance, it could be your job to plan a party and, while you're soaping up your hair in the shower one morning, you finally figure out the theme you can use to tie all your fun party ideas together and make the big picture more concrete.

Then, in the evaluation stage, you start to refine everything. This is when you really dig into the details to figure out how your solution is actually going to work, and how you're going to build it. Depending on the task and how you prefer to work, you might start building a plan or an outline. Or, you might ask for feedback from other people involved to see if what's in your head makes sense to them.

Finally, the implementation step comes. This is when all the steps before it come together to create the final result that the rest of the world will see. If you're a painter, it's when you start actually putting the paint on the canvas. If you're a musician, it's when you start recording some instruments. If you're a marketer, it's when you start implementing your campaign. Or if you're a writer, it's when the draft starts flowing.

And the implementation step might happen multiple times. As you build whatever it is you're building, you may realize that it needs adjustments, so you backtrack, adjust, or even start over and try again until you get to a point where you're satisfied with the result.

Now, when you understand the creative process and how it progresses, you can start to build a system around it so that you can operate it faster and find more creative solutions to big problems in more reliable ways.

In fact, many creative businesses like ad agencies and design companies do exactly this. They study the way they work and how they navigate the creative process and then build systems to support that process and help them do their creative work faster and better.

Here are a few ideas that might help you do that, too.

First, have your creative tools ready to go.

Whatever it is you use to design or build the creative things you do, try to engineer your workflow so that there's as little friction as possible between the inspiration to create and the act of actually creating.

This can look different for many different types of creative work, but one thing anyone doing creative work can benefit from is always carrying a pen and a pad of

paper. Often, getting ideas out of your head and onto paper is the hardest part of the creative process.

The first step of filling in that blank slate is brutal. Once you have something to work with, the process flows a lot more smoothly because you don't have to create from nothing anymore.

So, whatever you can do to remove friction between an idea and recording that idea, the less frustrating the creative process will be.

To continue with the writing example from earlier, that might also mean keeping a shortcut on the desktop of your computer to whatever writing app you use. You might even keep a version of the app on your phone so that if an idea comes while you're on the go, you can capture it.

I like to create drawings and diagrams for my writing as well, so I keep a small set of drawing tools in my computer bag everywhere I go. That makes it really easy to just get started drawing whenever I want to. I don't have to waste any energy doing pre-work or spend time gathering tools.

Whatever tools you use to do the work you do, make it as frictionless as possible to access them whenever the moment strikes.

Another thing you can try to better systemize your creative process is to use a "time per task" approach. That means that, for each step of your creative process, you assign a maximum amount of time to spend on it. You time-box each creative task. We've talked about that before.

When the time is up, you move on.

This approach will work for some and not for others. Creative work doesn't always fit neatly into a strict schedule.

But I recommend trying it anyway—even if you have to continually adjust your time boxes—because committing yourself to a set amount of time can help inspiration come faster and encourage you to work at your best pace without wasting time.

The simple act of giving yourself an hour to get something done will help you set aside frustration or confusion that might be holding you back so that you can make meaningful progress.

It sort of creates a fear response that you might not finish on time if you don't get started right away.

And if what you want to complete ends up taking more than an hour, you know, that's okay. You can keep working if you're making progress and then allocate more time up front the next time around.

Another self-imposed limitation you can try is the "attempts per task" approach. Instead of managing your creative process by setting time limits, you limit the number of tries you get for each step.

This approach works really well for creative work that is made up of many small steps. Limiting the number of attempts you get for any given piece of your creative system keeps you from getting stuck on one small part of a bigger project.

It kind of forces you to zoom out and look at the big picture more often. And that helps to keep you moving forward.

For instance, music is a hobby of mine, and I used to do a lot of home recording. Sometimes, it would take me weeks to record a single song. Even though each song was a compilation of many tracks, I would often get bogged down by obsessing over my performance on one small part.

It's good to get things right and do your best, but I wasn't doing myself any favors by spending hours trying to perfect a tiny piece of the song that would barely be noticed.

When I realized what I was doing, I decided to limit myself to 10 takes. So, if I was recording a part for a song, I only got 10 tries to get it right. After that, I had to pick one and move on. This helped speed up my workflow tremendously.

And it also improved other parts of the process by allowing me to work on different pieces of a song in a better mood because I never allowed myself to get too frustrated by getting stuck.

So, where you can, try limiting the number of attempts you allow yourself.

Finally, you can do a lot to help yourself find that elusive inspiration to actually do your creative work in two ways.

First, engineer your creative environment for productivity. You'll remember from our earlier lesson about engineering your environment that there are a lot of things you can do to make sure that, when you sit down to get work done, you actually make progress quickly.

That applies to creativity, too. If you have a space where the only work you do is your creative work, your brain will become accustomed to doing that kind of work when you're in that space. Like one of Pavlov's dogs drooling at the sound of a bell.

The other approach is, similar to time-boxing we talked about earlier, to do your creative work on a strict schedule. When you force yourself to sit down and approach your creative work every day at the same time, it can be maddening at first. Your instinct often tells you that the inspiration just isn't there.

But if you ignore that impulse and set to work anyway, eventually, you become accustomed to producing creative work on that schedule.

It's like the famous author William Faulkner used to joke. He would say, "I only write when inspiration strikes. Fortunately it strikes at nine every morning."

None of these approaches are mutually exclusive, either. Creative work comes in all shapes and sizes, so what works for you may be a combination of tactics.

Part of your process may benefit from being time-limited. Another part may be best suited for a limit on attempts. Or maybe both.

And your whole process may improve by making your tools easy to access and engineering your environment and your day to produce creative work on a tighter schedule.

Perhaps what's most important to take away from this is that you shouldn't pretend that there isn't a system or underlying routine to your creative work.

It can be more difficult to wrap your head around than other, more straightforward processes, but it's there, nonetheless, waiting for you to optimize it.

So, here's a recap of what we went over in this lesson:

First, we learned that creativity often feels messy and difficult to organize, but there *is* an underlying process that you can tap into if you're willing to do the work to identify it and study it.

Then, we went over the five stages of the typical creative process: preparation, incubation, illumination, evaluation, and implementation.

After that, we learned about a few ways to optimize and speed up that process. We talked about making your creative tools easy to access, time-boxing your work, limiting the number of attempts for any given step of your creative process, and

engineering your environment and schedule to produce creative work more consistently.

Go ahead and spend some time today working what you just learned into your own creative process.

Pick a creative task you often need to complete, and map out the process you tend to follow and the tools you use to get it done. Once you have that, you can optimize it a bit by implementing some of the optimization tactics you just learned.

Good luck, and I'll see you in the next lesson.