

## Multitasking and Other Creativity-Killing Myths



### The Myth of Multitasking

Whataya doin? Obviously, you're reading this paragraph, but what else are you doing? Eating something? Drinking something? Listening to music or half-listening to someone talk? How many windows do you have open on your computer right now? Please tell me you're not reading this and driving at the same time!

The omnipresence of multitasking is an indication of how fragmented our attention has gotten in the past decade. Not only is multitasking while trying to create a huge mistake, I suspect that the more you multitask throughout the day, the less creative you can be.

Creativity requires sustained focus. Distractions and interruptions destroy the opportunity to let our creative cortex follow a train of thought long enough to recognize new possibilities. As we split our attention by multitasking and frequently and repeatedly shifting our attention from one context to another (the way we do when we're reviewing email, searching on the internet, interrupting a face-to-face conversation to answer our cell or send or receive a text, etc.), we train our brains to jump from focus to focus.

Because the brain changes in response to what it experiences, we could very well be rewiring our brains in way that reduces our ability to sustain focused attention on anything for more than a few minutes.

**The myth is that multitasking will save time that you can then use for your writing/art/music/creativity. The truth is that multitasking actually takes MORE time and is quite possibly the biggest creativity killer stalking the industrialized world.**

You can multitask if what you're doing doesn't require conscious attention. You can walk, talk and chew gum at the same time. But study after study the research shows that attempting to simultaneously perform tasks that require conscious attention actually takes more time than doing each task serially. The human cortex is not capable of multitasking; it is only capable of "focus-shifting."

When you think you're multitasking during your morning commute by driving, putting on your makeup or shaving, changing the radio station, eating breakfast and talking on your cell, your cortex is really shifting your attention from task to task. When you reach for your bagel and remind yourself not to spill cream cheese on yourself, you momentarily lose track of the phone conversation, which means you have to ask the person on the other end of the call to repeat what he or she just said and hope you don't get busted for not paying attention. Meanwhile, your limbic system is about to kick you into panic mode to bring your attention back to the fact that the idiot in front of you has just slammed on the brakes and you just missed your exit.'

Every time your cortex shifts attention from one task to another, which it does every couple of seconds, you lose processing speed, accuracy and grace. **That's right, trying to multitask takes as much as 50% more time than it takes to focus on and complete one task before starting another.** Factor in the fact that you're up to 50% more likely to make an error and that some multitasking-induced errors can be serious, even life-threatening, and you start to understand the true cost of multitasking.

It is physiologically impossible to give a creative task the focused attention it requires while also attempting to check your email, tweet, update your Facebook page and revise a spreadsheet while talking on the phone and keeping one eye on dinner cooking in the next room and what the kids/puppy/cats are up to. I suggest you stop trying to do that.

## The Time Myth

Wrapped up with the Multitasking Myth is the myth that we need big chunks of time to be creative. We think we need hours and hours to really get into our writing/painting/ music/creativity and the only way we can imagine getting that kind of time is to multitask like crazy the rest of the day.

But multitasking actually eats time rather than saving it. The only way to have more time for your creativity is to stop doing other things. The unpleasant truth is that to have time for what's most important to you, you have to refrain from spending time on things that are less important. You really can't have it all; you have to choose.

**Fortunately, the truth is that you don't really need hours and hours to be creative.**

You will get more done consistently showing up for 15 minutes a day, five days a week, than you will waiting for the rare day when you'll have hours and hours to yourself. You'll even get more accomplished and feel far more satisfied devoting 15 minutes a day

for five days a week (which adds up to 75 minutes) than you will in one 75-minute session. Daily practice builds momentum and keeps your unconscious working even while your conscious mind is doing other things. Conversely, waiting for big chunks of time means you have to reintroduce yourself to the material, remember where you left off, reacquaint yourself with the characters, ideas, research, etc.

In fact, the rare days when it looks like I'll have more than 4 hours for writing are the days when I have to be most vigilant about the temptation to "take just a few minutes" to clear up my email, catch up on office administrivia, make phone calls, have lunch with someone, let clients reschedule appointments into the middle of the day, etc. If I'm not careful, I can find myself at 3:30 in the afternoon wondering what the heck happened to this whole day I supposedly had to write.

When you know you only have 15 minutes, you feel less anxious and are more likely to show up. When you have 15 minutes, you're also more willing to say "no" to distractions and to refrain from attempts to multitask. This in turn makes you better prepared to engage the kind of focused attention you need.



## The Limitation Myth

Another common myth is that structure and limitations are antithetical to creativity. And while it is true that external demands and constraints like deadlines, rewards and punishment can inhibit creativity, creative people can minimize the effect by focusing on the internal motivation and intrinsic value of creating.

Pierce J. Howard, PhD writes in *The Owner's Manual for the Brain*, "The one exception to the negative effect of external motivation is a situation in which the guidelines for success are carefully spelled out."

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*Entering the Flow gave me a way to get my novel under control and structured yet creative from the beginning. Rosanne's classes are some of the best structured and at the same time the most open and generative classes I've had anywhere. – L. Nygaard*



In other words, **defining the boundaries of the playing field frees creativity, not reduces it.**

One of Derek Hough and Nicole

Scherzinger's performances on *Dancing With the Stars* demonstrated how apparently insurmountable constraints can actually inspire more powerful and amazing creativity (for details, please go to <http://baneofyourresistance.wordpress.com/2010/05/13/do-the-im-paso-ble/>).

Web designer and writer Glen Stansberry says, "Even a blank canvas has four corners... Limitations shape how the project or idea will be developed... Structure gives you the opportunity to think outside the box, because without structure *there is no box!* ... The *real* creativity comes when you're able to work around the structure and limitations place." (July 2010, <http://lifedev.net/2008/07/creativity-myths/>)

One of my coaching clients told me he works more creatively to a deadline, but when he described what he meant by that – that a deadline motivates him to get started, that he never waits until the last minute to start working, but always finishes early – it seemed clear to me that it was the structure a deadline offered that supports his creativity. This is more a reflection of the truth behind the Limitation Myth than an example of the Deadline Myth.

## The Deadline Myth

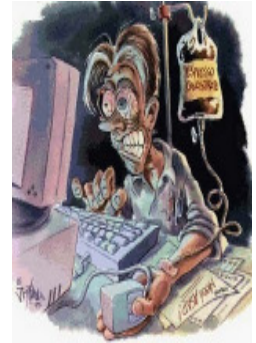
The real Deadline Myth is that deadlines make people more creative. Many people, college students especially, believe that the adrenaline rush they get from a looming deadline motivates them and that they work best under pressure.

**In truth, deadlines trigger the limbic system's fear response, and when the limbic system is turned on, the creative cortex is switched off.**

It is possible to write a report or produce

something without having your cortex fully engaged, but what you produce will not be your best work and it certainly won't be creative. It will be derivative, the product of automatic processing, not the sophisticated analysis and synthesis that only the cortex can perform.

A looming deadline doesn't make people more creative, but it does give them an adrenaline rush. Adrenaline is enough to break you out of the paralysis part of the fear response, but you're still functioning from the limbic system as you attempt to act out the fight-or-flight response by either running away (following distractions, checking emails, popping out of your chair to look for answers in the fridge or see what's on TV) or fighting (criticizing yourself and/or others, denigrating your work, sabotaging yourself).



In a study of nearly 12,000 daily journal entries from 238 people working on creative projects in seven companies, Harvard Professor Teresa Amabile and her team found that "people often thought they were most creative when they were working under severe deadline pressure. But the 12,000 aggregate days that we studied showed just the opposite: People were the least creative when they were fighting the clock. In fact, we found a kind of time-pressure hangover — when people were working under great pressure, their creativity went down not only on that day but the next two days as well." (July 2010, <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/89/creativity.html>)

Amabile's research also discovered a positive correlation between creativity and happiness, joy and love – people who are happy are more likely to be creative – and a negative correlation between creativity and fear, anxiety and anger – people who are angry or fearful are less likely to be creative. It's comforting to have the research support what I've always intuitively known.

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*I really got a lot out of this class (Writing Habit) and am so glad I took it. I realized that forming habits is key in living a self-actualized life, at least for me. I learned to not listen to the Saboteur. I'm so grateful for my 'a-ha' moment – it's like a weight has been lifted. – Amanda Storm*

## Creativity Truths

Love and joy free creativity.

Adrenaline, stress, anxiety NEVER enhance creativity.

Some structure, but not so much it overwhelms our own intrinsic motivation, helps us create.

You will have time to create if you focus on what is most important to you in small amounts of time regularly repeated.

Creativity requires focus.

Let these truths set you free. The creative flow experience is so marvelous, why would you want to dilute it by distracting yourself with a bunch of trivia anyway? Go follow what you love. Make time for creative joy. Give your whole self to your creativity and give your creativity to the world.

## Develop the Habits and Practice the Skills to Free Yourself From Creativity-Killing Myths

**Instant Fiction: Just Add Water** at Madeline Island School of the Arts (Half-days, Aug 16-20). You don't have to outline or plot the whole story before you start writing; you can discover what happens as you write. If you started a story and don't know where to go with it next, or have characters in mind but don't know what happens to them, or just want to see what stories are bouncing around in your subconscious, this four-day intensive will give you plenty of inspiration, exercises, and time to get the characters and story out of your head and on to the page. For more information, go to <http://www.madelineartschool.com> or call 715-747-2054.

**The Writing Habit** at The Open Book (Tuesdays 5 to 7 pm Sep 14 thru Oct 19) and Eagan Wescott Library (Wednesdays, 10:30 am to 12:30 pm, Oct 27 thru Dec 8). You'll be encouraged and supported as you develop sustainable writing habits, become accountable to yourself and take action to achieve your writing goals. Our weekly check-ins give you a place to celebrate and reward your success. You'll develop an Action Map, put your plans into daily action, learn the six stages of the creative process and identify allies.

**Entering the Flow** at the Open Book (Tuesdays 5 to 7 pm Oct 26 thru Dec 7) This class will show you how to intentionally shift your consciousness to find your own way into the flow and show you how to develop structure while embracing imaginative discovery. You'll spend the majority of class time 'dreamstorming' and writing in a relaxed, meditative state. Each class will give you an opportunity to assess what's working well in your writing and discuss topics like rituals and routines, ego surrender, and writing place and time.

For more information or to register for Loft classes,  
go to [www.Loft.org](http://www.Loft.org) or call 612-379-8999.



Please contact me to talk about how coaching and classes can give you the encouragement, information and tools you need to achieve your creative dreams.

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