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Self-Regulation of Creative Behaviors

Idiosyncratic rituals of creative people

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“Don’t expect to find one right way to make yourself creative.”

A Chinese Fortune Cookie

Sustaining creative efforts on a regular basis is a great challenge for even the most creative people. From time to time, we all get stuck and feel empty for want of ideas. The work of behavioral psychologists suggests that designing work strategies may help sustain [productivity](#). For example, designating a place and committing to a schedule of work can help regulate your creative efforts by decreasing your reliance on mood and [motivation](#).

Consider the way two well known behavioral psychologists regulated their creative behaviors. C. B. Ferster and B. F. Skinner wrote their book *Schedules of Reinforcement* in one room dedicated to the sole purpose of writing. No other work was done in that room—no visitors, no phone calls, no warm-up or inactive periods, and no private conversations. They wrote between 9 AM and lunchtime and did not continue in the afternoon even when the temptation was strong (Ferster, 1970).

Creative individuals tend to be idiosyncratic when using [self-regulation](#) strategies. Henry David Thoreau and Georgia O’Keeffe preferred “the tranquility of nature”; Marcel Proust preferred “absolute silence”; Sartre preferred a public place like a café; and, Toulouse-Lautrec preferred a nightclub’s environment (Weiner, 2000, p. 206).

Enders (2008) observed considerable variation in strategies used by professional writers: “Hemingway wrote standing up”; “Ben Franklin wrote in the bathtub”; and, Balzac ate a big meal at 5 PM, slept until midnight, then wrote continuously at a small desk in his room for 16 hours, often drinking coffee. Toni Morrison wrote in a motel when her children were very young, and A. L. Kennedy chose “‘a monster black chair’ in a room ‘the color of blood’” (p.27). Poet Catherine Barnett prefers a booth at a local diner where she feels “protected” and taken care of by others (Enders, 2008). Anne Landsman, a novelist prefers the “Writers Room,” a shared work environment in New York City because being around others who are engaged in creative writing works well for her (Enders, 2008). Richard Russo, Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction, prefers to write in public places because when the telephone rings, it is not for him. He uses a special notebook, one fountain pen for writing drafts and another for editing. He finds these strategies help him get to that “psychic place” where he can do his “best work” ([Interview with Barnes and Nobles Meet the Writers](#)).

According to Auriemma and Langley (2014), the ex-Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer did not have a desk; he worked from an “upholstered armchair facing a giant whiteboard” and “had a chaise against a window” for reading and thinking with a tablet (p. B1). They further note Ballmer’s “workspace also included a miniature putting setup for practicing golf shots and a chin-up bar to hang from, the latter a remedy for his bad back” and that “Several other tech chieftains have stepped away from their desks permanently saying that helps them focus and engage with colleagues. Some have gone even further, rejecting offices and personal workspaces” (p. B1).

Alter (2014) noted that Russell Blake, a mystery writer, wrote a new novel every 5 weeks, releasing 25 books in 30 months, and one of his best sellers in 16 days. This is truly remarkable, but how does he do it? Per Alter, Blake writes 7000-10000 words a day and often works from 8 AM until midnight, spending many of those hours walking on a treadmill desk. “He is at his keyboard every morning by 8 a.m., after eating a breakfast bar and drinking some decaf coffee (‘imagine me on [caffeine](#),’ he says). When his legs start to go numb, he switches to his treadmill desk and walks for an hour or so while typing” (p. A 12); he has two editors and a proofreader to check his manuscripts. Certainly, this is one hardworking man. It is worth noting that his first self-published novel did not sell well, but he continued to write as if a great demand existed, “That’s the helpful part of being [delusional](#)” (as quoted by Alter, p. A 12).

The stand-up Comedian Stewart Huff writes his skits in his Honda CR-V whenever and wherever he can. In his CR-V, he keeps “notebooks, voice recorders, two kinds of pens, audio books, [and] a spot for [his] suitcase. On the dash [he] keep[s] a brass crucifix, a real hairy bear toe [he] found in a parking lot, and a banner that [his] girlfriend made that says ‘I love you’” (Baime, 2014, p. D4). What a way to keep oneself motivated!

Some geniuses were known to have engaged in odd superstitious behaviors to sustain their inspiration. According to Levey (1940, p. 286):

Schiller kept rotten apples in the desk; Shelly [sic] and Rousseau remained bareheaded in the sunshine; Boussuet worked in a cold room with his head wrapped in furs; Gretry and Schiller immersed their feet in ice-cold water; . . . Guido Reni could paint, and de Musset could write poetry, only when dressed in magnificent style; . . . The aesthete, Baumgarten, advised poets seeking inspiration to ride on horseback, to drink wine in moderation, and provided they were chaste, to look at beautiful women.

Hmm Baumgarten, what was your advice to women? And, [Freud](#), as you might expect, curtailed [sex](#) with his wife when he felt his creativity was declining (Dacey, 1989).

Hamerman and Johar (2013) observed that superstitions help create an “illusion of control” over uncertain outcomes (p. 429) and may have [placebo](#) effects on improving performance. They warned, however, that

although one may feel greater control from using [superstition](#), the time may be “better spent in pursuing more rational strategies for success” (p. 442). I am not inclined to agree with Hamerman and Johar because people should use whatever strategies seem helpful to them, while not ignoring their good advice of spending time to plan viable rational strategies for success.

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