



THE ACCIDENTAL CREATIVE

**STUDY
GUIDE**

**HOW TO BE BRILLIANT
AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE**
TODD HENRY

“You go to work each day tasked with (1) inventing brilliant solutions that (2) meet specific objectives by (3) defined dead- lines. If you do this successfully you get to keep your job. If you don’t, you get to work on your résumé. The moment you exchange your creative efforts for money, you enter a world where you will have to be brilliant at a moment’s notice. (no pressure, right?)”

This pretty much sums up what many of us feel each day as we go about our work. There is a constant pressure to keep up—to produce brilliance—in order to meet expectations.

Unfortunately, the creative process doesn't operate according to our client's or our manager's schedule. It's often difficult to know when creative breakthroughs will happen, and challenging to ensure that we have the right ideas at the right time.

There is a way, however, to ensure that you're always poised to experience creative insights when you need them. You must establish practices that support your creative process and give you the focus, energy and time you need when an opportunity arises. That's what this book is all about! It's a step-by-step guide to structuring your life so that you experience creative insights (creative accidents) more consistently and effectively.

In this guide you'll find a summary of many of the key topics in the book, organized by chapter. It also features questions and prompts to help you think through the principles and practices in the book and apply them. For maximum effect, work through this guide with co-workers or friends and discuss your responses. Remember: it's not what you *know* that matters, it's what you *do*.

I hope you'll join me in the effort to be prolific, brilliant and healthy in your life and work and I trust that you'll find *The Accidental Creative* helpful in that effort.

Sincerely,



TODD HENRY
ACCIDENTAL CREATIVE

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

- Read a chapter of the book and do the corresponding exercises in the guide.
- Come to your group meeting prepared to discuss your answers.
- Each section has a "next action" section. Don't neglect it—it will help you determine a course of action.

Remember: it's not what you *know*, it's what you *do* that matters.

1: THE DYNAMICS OF CREATIVE WORK

"YOU NEED TO CREATE SPACE FOR YOUR CREATIVE PROCESS TO THRIVE RATHER THAN EXPECTING IT TO OPERATE IN THE CRACKS OF YOUR FRENETIC SCHEDULE."

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Creative work (working with your mind) comes with a unique set of pressures, and without tools to deal with these pressures creatives are ultimately destined to drift toward mediocrity. Creatives should aim to be prolific, brilliant and healthy, which means producing great work consistently and in a sustainable way. In order to do this, creatives must establish Creative Rhythm by building practices in five areas: Focus, Relationships, Energy, Stimuli, and Hours (F-R-E-S-H).

Where (and how) do you most experience the create-on-demand dynamic?

Are you (circle one):

PROLIFIC + BRILLIANT—HEALTHY

BRILLIANT + HEALTHY—PROLIFIC

PROLIFIC + HEALTHY—BRILLIANT ?

Why do you think this is the case right now?

Did any part of the story of Amos resonate with you? Which part and why?

Of the five elements of Creative Rhythm, which do you immediately think you may need the most help with? Why?

NEXT ACTION FOR ME:

2: THE DYNAMICS OF TEAM WORK

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"EVERY ORGANIZATION BEGINS AS AN ADVANCE FORCE AND ENDS UP AS AN OCCUPYING FORCE."

Any time we attempt to organize the creative process, we must deal with the tension between possibilities and pragmatics. Organizational creatives are simultaneously charged with pursuing innovative and novel ideas while executing them within defined timeframes in a predictable manner. As a result, creatives are constantly wrestling with whether to continue exploring possibilities or to "reel the project in" so it can be delivered on time and on budget. This tension plays out in multiple ways and affects our ability to engage and do our best work.

Of the three tensions (Time-Versus-Value, Predictable-Versus-Rhythmic, Product-Versus-Process) which do you think you feel the most in your life and work? Why?

Have you ever experienced "snapshot productivity" in the workplace? What happened?

How do you think your organization doing at valuing process, not just product?

In your opinion, what could you or your organization do to better deal with the tension between possibilities and pragmatics? What's a next step?

NEXT ACTION FOR ME:

3: THE SIDE EFFECTS: DEALING WITH THE ASSASSINS OF CREATIVITY

"THE CREATIVE PROCESS IS A PERSONAL ASSAULT ON THE BEACHHEAD OF APATHY."

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There are three distinct side effects of organized creative work, and they can significantly limit our ability to create. *Dissonance* is when there is a gap between the "why" and the "what" of our work, and it prevents us from gaining creative traction quickly and effectively. *Fear* prevents us from exploring possibilities, whether because of fear of failure or fear of success. *Expectation Escalation* occurs when we are constantly comparing our present work with past work or with the work of our peers or heroes. Each of these three "assassins" cause us to perform at less than our creative best. To countermand them, we must implement the practices discussed in chapters four through ten.

Which assassin do you think is most prevalent in your life?

In your organization?

Have you ever seen unnecessary complexity in your workplace? Where?

Are there any systems (residual meetings, methods, etc.) that are ineffective for your current work, but that you're still using as a matter of habit?

Where might fear of failure be causing you to curtail your creative engagement?

Are you withholding yourself creatively because you can't sustain the pace of your success? Where?

Do you find yourself frequently putting your past work on a pedestal? How about your organization?

What might be a next step to deal with the assassins you're experiencing in your life and work?

NEXT ACTION FOR ME:

{PERMANENT SOLUTIONS TO}

TEMPORARY PROBLEMS

Organizational creating is difficult. We live in a create-on-demand world, and the expectation is that we will be able to produce consistently brilliant work, essentially on-demand, over long stretches of time and with little reprieve.

While this is certainly not a reasonable expectation, it's a natural result of attempting to systemize the creative process, which is inherently conceptual in nature, by establishing highly concrete expectations and processes. Many organizations treat creating just like assembly line work, or as if it's simply a matter of assembling the right pieces in the right order to turn out the final product. It's the only way the organization can deal with the inherent complexity of managing conceptual work.

Adding to this complexity is the organizational infatuation with rapid problem solving. It can be very uncomfortable for us when there are open loops, or problems inhibiting productivity. We grow so uncomfortable, in fact, that we often will do nearly anything to resolve the dissonance these problems introduce, which usually means inventing some new system or developing a process to deal with them. But not all problems are equal. Some problems are temporary in nature, and we're ultimately left with the permanent systems even after the problem is long gone.

But not all problems are equal. Some problems are temporary in nature. Unfortunately, we are often incapable of discerning a temporary problem from a permanent one in the moment, and the result is that we create a system or a process that ultimately inhibits our future creating.

The more structures we have to navigate in order to do our work, the more difficult it is to do our best work. When we are required to resolve the dissonance of complex systems, reporting relationships and accountability structures just in order to get our objectives and check off our direction we will begin to lose our drive to do brilliant work. Over time, this complexity only pulls entire organizations toward systematic mediocrity.

We also do this in our personal creating. Have you ever found something that worked for you once, so you started to incorporate it into all of your future work? Have you ever set up a recurring one-on-one meeting with someone to resolve a specific work issue, and then it stayed on your calendar long after that issue had been resolved? These examples follow the same “permanent solution to temporary problem” mindset that we must be careful to avoid.

Each time we add a system or process to our creating it increases the amount of energy required just to get to the actual work. These sub-problems that must be solved significantly zap our ability to engage effectively, especially in a create-on-demand role.

Do you see this playing out in your life and creating? Where is your organization developing permanent solutions to temporary problems?

WHERE ARE YOU DOING IT?

4: FOCUS: ZEROING IN ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT



"THE MORE QUICKLY YOU CAN FOCUS YOUR MIND ON WHAT YOU'RE REALLY TRYING TO DO, THE FASTER YOU GAIN CREATIVE TRACTION."

To be brilliant at a moment's notice requires an incredible degree of focus on what's truly important at any given time. But there are a million factors that can demand our attention and distract us from the very important creative work in front of us. The "Ping" is the sensation we get that something out there might be more important than whatever is in front of us (prompting us to check our e-mail, our Twitter feed, or other updates.) It prevents us from fully engaging in the moment and bringing our best to whatever work we're doing. To mitigate it, we must incorporate three practices: *defining* (by using Challenges), *refining* (by using the "Big 3") and *clustering* (by chunking similar tasks together to avoid the task switching penalty).

Have you ever identified a false or unhealthy assumption you were living with? What was it?

Can you identify any questionable assumptions you may be making right now?

How do you most experience the "Ping" in your life?

What are a few ways you could counteract the effects of the "Ping"? List specific actions.

Choose one project from your work life and write a challenge for it:

What do you think would be your "Big 3" right now?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3

When do you most experience the "task switching" penalty in your workflow? What can you do to counteract it?

NEXT ACTION FOR ME:

5: RELATIONSHIPS: BEING BRILLIANT TOGETHER

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"IF WE WANT TO THRIVE OVER THE LONG-TERM WE MUST RECLAIM THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS IN OUR LIFE AND ESTABLISH PRACTICES THAT HELP US LEVERAGE THE GIFTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY THAT ONLY THRIVING RELATIONSHIPS CAN PROVIDE."

Many creatives treat relationships haphazardly, but they can be a significant source of inspiration and accountability in our effort to do brilliant work. In order to leverage the full power of relationships in our life, we need to be purposeful about building into others and allowing others to build into us.

There are three kinds of relationships we need to develop: those that help us stay inspired, those that challenge us and build into us, and those that help us stay on the right course. By building these three kinds of relationships into our life we are much more likely to experience frequent moments of creative insight.

Do you feel generally more introverted or extraverted? How has this affected your life and work?

List five people you'd like to connect with as part of a circle:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

List a few people who might be good candidates for head-to-heads:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

List some people who might be candidates for your core team:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

What can your organization/team do to better foster relational connection and growth?

NEXT ACTION FOR ME:

{ELIMINATING 90% OF TENSION}

ON CREATIVE TEAMS

How can I get them to understand me?

The *them* in the question is either “my manager” or “my creative team,” depending on who is asking the question. There is a lot of time spent lobbing shots across the organizational bow, from both sides, but there is often a significant dearth of real communication.

Eliminating tension begins by understanding the values and concerns of the other party. While this is a bit of an over-simplification, please understand that there’s no formula for this. We’re simply trying to improve communication, which will in turn improve our collective work.

What all managers want to know: Will you do what I ask?

Most managers simply want to know that—in the end—creatives will do what they ask. This doesn’t necessarily mean that they want their way all the time, it simply means that they want to know that, when push comes to shove, it’s understood who’s ultimately in charge. But often there is such heated debate (over even the most inconsequential topics!) that the manager starts to feel like the organization is in misalignment. This feels like a threat to the manager, which leads to escalation of the conflict or passive-aggressive behavior.

Rather than starting a conversation about work by attempting to assert your opinion, you can countermand this issue by starting any feedback session with “So...I want you to know that I’ll go whichever direction you decide, and I’m cool with that. I’d like to show you why I think this direction is best.” [Insert brilliant work.] By beginning a conversation with a statement that re-affirms the manager’s authority, you are eliminating any concerns that there will need to be a power struggle. (You’re also making your manager much more considerate of your view, because they realize how much is riding on their making the correct decision.)

What all creatives want to know: Will you listen to me?

OK, managers. Creatives spend 99% of what they do in process mode, meaning that they are iterating, developing and refining their work. Unfortunately, much of this work is critiqued solely according to the final 1%, or the finished product. As a result, a creative who has spent hours, days or weeks working on something will often hear “can you make X a little bigger?” or “can you de-emphasize Y?” While these may be perfectly appropriate questions, it can also make the creative feel incredibly de-valued and like a cog in a creative-cranking machine.

At the heart of it, creatives want to know that their process is valued as much as their product. Rather than simply lobbing observations about the finished product, try asking some questions about process. If you want X to be a little bigger, why not ask “I see what you’re doing here. Explain to me why you chose to make X as small as you did?” Then you can proceed to have a valuable conversation about the thought process of the work rather than just about the end results of that process.

Do these methods take time? Yes. Are they less convenient? YES! But do they begin to facilitate healthier conversations about the work? ABSOLUTELY!

If you are truly interested in seeing your team thrive, I’d challenge you to begin each interaction with the question “what is the other person most concerned about right now?”

It will make a world of difference in your collaboration.

6: ENERGY: YOUR INVISIBLE ALLY

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"BECAUSE THE ENERGY WE EXPEND SHAPING IDEAS IS INVISIBLE, WE FAIL TO REALIZE THAT THERE IS A VERY REAL COST ASSOCIATED WITH EVERY PROJECT WE TAKE ON AND EVERY MENTAL COMMITMENT WE MAKE."

Many creatives are great at managing time but in the process they neglect their most important resource: energy. They stack their calendar full of back-to-back meetings and cram activity into every crevice of their life, but in doing so they fail to account for how it affects their ability to operate at their best across every area of their life.

To do brilliant work consistently we must get better at managing our energy. We do this by applying two practices: whole-life planning, and pruning.

How is your energy level right now? How has it been trending?

Do you feel over-committed, under-committed or about on-target right now? Why do you think this is the case?

Have you ever experienced a season in which you made too many commitments at once? Describe it, and how you dealt with it. How could you avoid making that mistake again?

Are there any projects that you need to prune from your life right now? What are they?

What are some examples of your "red-zone" activities?

NEXT ACTION FOR ME:

7: STIMULI: WHAT GOES IN MUST COME OUT

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"JUST LIKE GOOD FOOD INCREASES YOUR CAPACITY TO BE ACTIVE AND HEALTHY, THE HIGHER THE QUALITY OF YOUR STIMULI, THE BETTER YOU ARE SETTING YOURSELF UP FOR HIGH-LEVEL BREAKTHROUGHS."

We are inundated with thousands of messages every day, from print to e-mail to TV and the web. However, we often don't consider how the kinds of information we allow into our head affects our ability to generate creative ideas. *Stimuli* are anything that stimulates creative thought, and by being more purposeful about the kinds of stimuli we build into our life we can better set ourselves up for breakthroughs.

To effectively leverage the power of good stimuli we must be selective about stimuli, we must learn to record our observations effectively, and we must intentionally challenge ourselves with new experiences.

What's inspiring you right now? What are you seeing/reading/noticing that's fueling your creative process?

List five areas of curiosity that you'd like to pursue, and some potential resources that might help.

Curiosity	Resource(s)
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

Where are you lacking information that you will need over the next three months? List specific projects or objectives.

List five experiences you'll build into your life to stretch your comfort zone:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

NEXT ACTION FOR ME:

KEEPING AN IDEA QUEUE

One of the frustrating aspects of creating for a living is that we are often responsible for executing our own ideas. Over time, this can cause us to self-limit because, subconsciously, we don't want to generate an idea that we'll have to find the time and energy to execute.

This happens a lot within organizations. We know that we're going to have to go to bat for any idea we generate, and there is always a cost/benefit ratio associated with our idea. This cost/benefit ratio often has little to do with the merit of the idea, and more to do with the degree of pain we'll experience in trying to get buy-in from our managers. The ratio is something like this:

$$E = PB + (NXA) / D$$

E = Enthusiasm for idea

PB = Potential Benefit

N = Novelty

A = Appropriateness

D = Degree of Hell I'll have to go through in order to implement the idea

What to do when we have more ideas than we can execute? Social media guru Chris Brogan suggests keeping an idea locker. I've been using a similar method for a long time, called the Idea Queue. I keep a list of ideas I think have great potential, with referenced notes and situations where they could be useful. This is far better than letting great ideas die on the vine because they can't be executed at the moment. It also releases the pressure of having to execute right now, and gives me permission to generate great ideas without feeling like I have to execute all of them right now or else I'm a failure. Execution is critical, of course, but we only have so much bandwidth for it. We can self-limit ideas just because we have limited time and energy for executing.

Ideas are like stray cats. If you put out food and water, they'll keep coming around. If you ignore them, they'll go find another place to hang out. Keeping track of ideas—even when they're not useful at the moment—is a great way to ensure that you'll always have them when you need them.

8: HOURS: THEY'RE THE CURRENCY OF PRODUCTIVITY

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"THERE IS MUCH ADVICE ON HOW TO ORGANIZE YOUR TIME TO CONQUER YOUR TASKS, BUT IT IS MOSTLY PREDICATED ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT YOUR GOAL IS SIMPLY TO GET THROUGH THE WORK, WITH LITTLE REGARD TO THE QUALITY OF THAT WORK. AS A CREATIVE, YOU ARE HELD TO ACCOUNT FOR THE QUALITY OF YOUR WORK, NOT JUST THE QUANTITY."

Everyone feels the persistent ticking of the clock. It seems like there's never enough time to finish our work, yet each day we find more and more of it waiting for us. The only way to thrive in the age of ever-increasing expectations is to approach your time with an *effectiveness* mindset rather than an *efficiency* one. You need to build practices into your life that enable you to gain more ground in an hour than you would in ten hours of obsessively cranking away.

To think effectiveness rather than efficiency, you need to set aside time to generate ideas for your key projects, and you need to hone your skills and creative growth through unnecessary creating. Each of these practices will focus on possibilities even when pragmatics are screaming for your attention.

When do you feel time pressure the most? Why do you think that's the case?

What are the key projects or challenges in your life that could benefit from Idea Time right now?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

When will you set aside time for Idea Time this week?

Day: _____ Time: _____

List all of the "unnecessary" projects you'd like to do someday. Be as extravagant as you want. You're not putting yourself on the hook for doing them, you're just identifying some things you'd like to explore in the future:

NEXT ACTION FOR ME:

9: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: THE CHECKPOINTS

"YOU PROBABLY DON'T CARE ABOUT THE PIPES RUNNING THROUGH YOUR WALLS (UNLESS YOU'RE A PLUMBER); YOU JUST WANT THE WATER THEY DELIVER. SIMILARLY, YOU NEED TO BE MINDFUL ENOUGH OF YOUR PRACTICES ONLY TO ENSURE THAT THEY ARE PRESENT AND FUNCTIONING PROPERLY, BUT REMEMBER THAT THEY ARE THERE TO SERVE YOU, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND."

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Building Checkpoints into your life allows you to regularly review your practices and rhythm to ensure that they're still working effectively. They are like road signs that continue to ensure you that you're on the right path; you don't need them every fifty feet, but you need them frequently enough that you don't stray off course.

To effectively implement the practices, creatives need to establish practices at three horizons: weekly, monthly and quarterly. Doing so will allow for flexibility in how the practices are implemented from season to season, but also ensure that there is a consistent infrastructure providing stability in their creative process.

Here's a list of all the practices discussed in the book:

Focus: Challenges, the Big 3, Clustering

Relationships: Circles, Head-to-Heads, Core Team

Energy: Whole-Life Planning, Pruning

Stimuli: Study Plan, Notation, Purposeful Experience

Hours: Idea Time, Unnecessary Creating

Of each of these practices, which is the easiest for you to implement? Why?

Which is the most difficult? Why?

Per the section on page 198, list some things that would "blow your mind" if they happened:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.

NEXT ACTION FOR ME:

10: COVER BANDS DON'T CHANGE THE WORLD

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"I HOPE THAT YOU WILL JOIN ME IN THE EFFORT TO EMPTY YOURSELF EACH DAY, AND TO STRIVE TO FIND YOUR UNIQUE VOICE. DON'T GO TO THE GRAVE WITH YOUR BEST WORK STILL INSIDE OF YOU. DIE EMPTY."

The end goal of building practices is not just to have a nice new system to follow, it's to get to a place where you have the capacity to do your best work consistently and are doing more of what really matters to you. To do so, you must identify the core areas where you are most effective and are able to have an impact on the world, then operate in them consistently.

The ultimate goal of establishing Creative Rhythm is to help you be prolific, brilliant and healthy, which means having tremendous and unique impact on the world for a very long period of time. And ultimately, it means ensuring that your best work is being "shipped" consistently because you have the capacity to engage with your full creative potential.

Is there any area of your life where you think you may have grown a little too comfortable?

Have you ever experienced unexpected "resonance" (p. 211) in the midst of an activity? What was that like for you? What do you think was the cause of the resonance?

Write a 7 word bio:

How do you define greatness?

NEXT ACTION FOR ME:

“

I HOPE YOU WILL JOIN ME
IN THE EFFORT TO EMPTY
YOURSELF EACH DAY, AND
TO STRIVE TO FIND YOUR
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”