

## ByteNoise

# Seven Simple Steps to Success

## Preface

OK, so two glaring flaws with this guide are that I'm not particularly successful yet, and that everyone's got their own idea of what constitutes success in the first place. I'm going to discuss how to create popular things, with an emphasis on entertainment. I've mostly written this to keep clear in my mind the path ahead of me, for all my creative endeavours. I'm offering it here to you in the hope that you may benefit from this advice. Due to my lack of credentials, you should be [skeptical](#). Hopefully, using their own superior experiences, various people more successful than I can attest to, or dismiss, various pieces of advice that I offer here.

## Patience

First of all, you need to get into the right frame of mind. Most goals, even ambitious ones like writing a novel, aren't difficult to achieve. They're easy. They will, however, take a long time. You may get deterred. The hard part is sticking with the work. It will take a lot of time and effort, but you need to stick at it. There are countless steps to take on the path to success, but every single one is straightforward once you have a plan that shows you where you're going and how to get there. Be aware of your overall journey, but don't focus on it. Don't let it become daunting or paralyse you. Instead, focus on one task at a time,

and think about how easy that task is, and how the rest will all be just as easy.

## Predecessors

Read books by people who are successful in your chosen field, and who know *why* they are successful. Although practice is more important, practice only has a point if you're improving your skills. It won't work if you wander around aimlessly. You need to know where you're headed, which is exactly the advice that your predecessors can give you.

For example, if you're writing a novel, read James N. Frey's book [How to Write a Damn Good Novel](#). If you're writing pop songs, read Jason Blume's Six Steps to Songwriting Success. I'm not knowledgeable enough in other areas to recommend specific books, but always check the credentials of the author, and listen to what other people have to say about the book.

I'm not saying you should strictly follow all advice by professionals in the field. For one thing, they're likely to contradict each other as each person espouses their own personal techniques as if they're the one true way to do something. You can, however, save yourself a lot of time if you at least *know* the advice of professionals, so that when you go against it, you're doing so consciously for a reason -- you found some better advice, or it just plain doesn't work for you personally -- rather than because you don't know any better.

## Planning

Pretty much any big task can be broken down into lots of little ones. Write a quick outline of what you wish to achieve, and the

steps necessary to achieve it, then the smaller steps necessary to achieve each of those. Whenever you have writer's block or some other issue with actually making something, try to step back from your role as the creator for a second and become the manager for a little while. Make sure you know exactly what you should do next.

For example, a plan for writing a novel might look like this:

- Design an overall story arc
- Create the characters
- Work out the protagonist's emotional reaction, goal, and climax for each scene
- Write the first draft
- Rewrite it, merging tertiary characters together and making it more cohesive
- Rewrite it, polishing the writing style and more thoroughly engaging the senses
- Show it to friends and ask them for their critiques of it
- Rewrite it again, fixing any flaws pointed out by two or more people
- Submit it to an agent or publisher

Whereas a plan for writing a [pop song](#) might look like this:

- Write an emotionally engaging lyric
- Compose a catchy, hook-filled main melody to fit the lyric
- Compose the foundation and infectious rhythm
- Compose the chords, pads, and counter melody
- Arrange and rearrange the piece until it sounds as good as it can
- Show it to friends and ask them for their critiques of it
- Work on it some more, fixing any flaws pointed out by two or more people

- EQ and [compress](#) it
- Submit it to a record label or production library

Each of these steps can in turn be broken down into smaller ones, and so on, until you're left with a seemingly daunting amount of work ahead of you, yet each individual task will be simple and easy to do. Once you're at a level of detail such as "add descriptions of smells to each scene in my novel to engage the reader's senses more," you have a very specific and simple task to perform, so there's nothing left but to get on with it.

Such a rigid plan may not be how you want to be creative. If you want to make things up as you go along, then great, I certainly don't want to try to talk you out of that. Do whatever works for you. If you get stuck, however, *then* try drawing up a plan and seeing if it helps.

## Practice

In his book *This Is Your Brain On Music*, Daniel Levitin claims that anyone, no matter how innately talented this person may seem to be at something, needs to put in ten thousand hours of practice -- roughly ten years' worth at three hours per day, seven days per week -- to get really good at it. The key here is to sacrifice some of your downtime that you would spend watching TV or surfing the web aimlessly in order to practice more.

If you have a partner or children, don't neglect them, of course, but try to find some things you can cut back on during your daily habits. Try developing a routine or schedule that allows for a set amount of practice every day, even when you're not in the mood. If you can somehow get paid to practice, so much the

better -- as Malcolm Gladwell points out in *Outliers*, that worked for The Quarrymen.

Avoid procrastination at all costs. Don't be ashamed of it. Admit that you do it, and make a conscious effort to avoid doing it. Procrastination is often a sign you need to become the manager again for a while because, as the creator, you're temporarily stuck. Whenever you catch yourself procrastinating, think about *why* you're doing it. Perhaps you're not sure what to do next, in which case, it's time to become the manager again and either break a complex task down into several simple tasks, or work around a seemingly insurmountable issue.

## **Performance, Feedback, Revision**

As Baba Brinkman summarised so eloquently in his album *The Rap Guide to Evolution*, the key to improving anything is simple: *performance, feedback, revision*. This is where the real Midas-like magic happens, albeit very slowly. Don't expect miracles. The improvements will be too slow and incremental to notice, but they all build on top of each other. The cumulative effect, the end result, will seem nothing short of miraculous.

Let's face facts: pretty much anything you create will be flawed in its first version. I know all of my creations are. That's OK though, because it's not set in stone. You can improve it, rewrite it, bit by bit. Each improvement may be minor, as trivial as changing a character's name or a few notes in a bassline. That's OK too, because these little improvements all add up. This is how evolution works, and it works for memes as well as genes.

The worst thing you can do is imagine your work is flawless to

begin with. It isn't. If you have this false assumption that it's already as good as it can be and doesn't need improving, you won't improve it. So even if it is good to begin with, you won't make it *great*. It will get rejected, and you'll never work out why, and become bitter about the whole industry. That's no way to go about it.

The best thing you can do is not worry about how good your work is right now, but always try to make it better than it currently is. Learn what's wrong with your work. No matter how good it is, there will always be *something* you can improve. As you work out how to improve it, so too will you improve your skills themselves.

Listen to criticism. Learn to be thick skinned. Show your work to other people, and ask them to be as harsh as possible. It's always nice to find out what they thought was good, but don't let them shy away from telling you what was really bad too. Don't disagree with them and defend your work either, just make a note of their advice, and repeat the process until you have several opinions.

If several people like the same thing about your work, that's great. Take a moment to think about how well you're doing already and remember to continue doing things like that next time, unless you feel it's time for a change.

If several people say your work has the same problem, they're probably right. First of all, don't feel downhearted by this. It's to be expected that almost everything created has at least one good aspect and at least one bad one. There's a big difference between saying that the work is bad in general, and saying that one particular aspect of it is letting it down, and getting in the way of letting its better aspects shine.

For example, you could have written a wonderful novel with a lousy ending, and if several people assure you this is the case, it's no reason to feel downhearted -- you merely have to change a relatively small part of your work until it's as good as the rest of it. Or maybe you need to tidy up your prose, but your characters, the plot and the sense of intrigue are all there, in which case just rewrite the prose, and think about how great it is that you don't need to reimagine the story, only retell it.

Even if everything about your work stinks, it's no reason to get upset. Remember to emotionally separate yourself from your work. You may be a great person, even a great artist, but your creations will still be bad *at first*. This doesn't reflect badly upon you; it's merely how the creative process works, and it's the same for everyone. If someone says your latest work is bad, they don't mean *you're* bad. They're not calling you talentless. They just mean you need to go back and make your work even better. They're saying it's not yet as good as it can be, and you should spend even longer improving it.

Successful corporations do this. For example, let's look at a hypothetical chain store. The corporation's head office will separate their stores into two groups. One of these groups will do their normal thing with their customers, and the other one will change one little thing, such as changing their greeting or the colour of their uniforms. Both groups will count how many products they sell. If the stores that changed what they do sell more products than usual, the other stores will make that same change. If not, they'll change back to the old way of doing things. The process is then repeated with another little thing to change.

This is called A/B testing. If you want to know why franchises are so successful, this is one of the main reasons. If something

they're doing doesn't quite work as well as it could, they'll replace it with something that works better. They don't even need to know *why* it works better, they just need to know what they need to do differently in order to sell more products, which is a corporation's measurement of success.

Once you've worked out a way of measuring success, you could use trial and error to achieve it if you had enough people, time and graph paper. Asking for the opinions of friends is a fine substitute.

Don't be afraid to get rid of an idea -- such as a character in a story -- that may even seem good but doesn't quite fit in with the work as a whole. If you don't want to destroy it, save it somewhere so you can add it into something else later if you really want to.

Personally, I have a real psychological problem with letting go of rough drafts. I have hundreds of them, documenting every trivial change I make to anything I write. This isn't a problem for me because I keep these rough drafts to myself and only show my friends later versions I need shot down in order to improve them further, and only show the general public the very end result. This is what everyone does, and gives the illusion that everything they write is great the first time, but it's just that -- an illusion.

## **Popularity**

If you want to be successful, try to appeal to the masses. Music for musicians to sit down, appreciate and talk about will never be as popular as music for people to dance to, or to hum while grocery shopping. Literary novels will never be as popular as

pulp fiction. Intricate magic tricks will never be as popular as simpler magic dressed up with a little theatrics and showmanship. In short, make things for people *outside* of your chosen industry to appreciate -- there's a lot more of them.

You should never choose the path of least resistance, making what's easiest to make. Always look at your work from the point of view of the person consuming it, and work out how to improve that [experience](#), to make it even more emotionally moving, or magical, or just plain easier and simpler.

It's always a worthwhile tradeoff to put more effort into making something in order for other people to put less effort into enjoying or using it. That's precisely what they're paying you for. This is why films are more popular than novels, and albums are more popular than songbooks. If something takes longer to make, but less time to use, that's a net benefit to society in terms of time saved. Society becomes that little bit more efficient, and everyone benefits.

Every industry should make things for the benefit of the general population, not merely for its own closed group to appreciate. Artistic flourishes and subtle references to predecessor works are fine, but they can't be the sole reason to appreciate a given work. Novels should have good plots and character development, not just poetic prose. Films should also have good plots and character development, not just novel cinematography. Music should have catchy hooks, not just the showing off of musicianship. Start by making a solid product for the masses, that anyone can appreciate. If you then want to add in-jokes or references, or show off in any way, that's fine as long as it doesn't detract from the main function of the work.

Try to appeal to people. Don't expect them to like your work as it

is. You need to change *your* work into what *they'd* like, not the other way around. Entertainment, such as stories and music, should be emotional. It should appeal to people's subconscious and their imagination as much as their intelligence. A magic act should appeal to the audience's sense of awe and wonder, with the stage magician adopting an appropriate stance of reverence and respect for the fictitious forces at work. Whatever your craft, take it seriously, and treat it as something the consumer should also take seriously.

If you've shown your work to someone and they didn't like it at all or see the point, that's their problem. If you consistently get that same reaction from everyone you show it to, that's not the path to success. Try changing what you're doing slightly to be more accommodating of other people's desires, tastes and expectations.

Avoid the lofty ambition of inventing a whole new genre. People generally only like things if they can work their way steadily up to them. It's usually best to write something that's mostly in an existing genre, with one or two novel elements from a different one or that you've completely invented. Later, with subsequent works, you can drift further from the established genre, towards your own ideal.

Delve into the histories of existing genres, be they of stories, music, or anything else. [Genres generally evolve from other genres](#), a bit at a time, the same as with any other evolutionary process. Someone will work in an existing genre, but tweak a little aspect of it, and if it's better than what came before, other people will do the same thing. Before you know it, a significant number of people have drifted away from the established genre, having created something innovative and new, much to the annoyance of clerks in stores who have to classify their works.

## Persistence

Have audacity. Send your work off, but only once you've got harsh feedback and improved it. It's an excruciatingly slow process, but it *will* work, it *will* get you there. Have faith in yourself. Carry on. Never give up. Thank you.

## References

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