

# A Young Person's Guide to Lichtenbergianism:

procrastination as a creative strategy

(or, How to make all the Things That Are Not)

by Dale Lyles

*The Lichtenbergian Press* 

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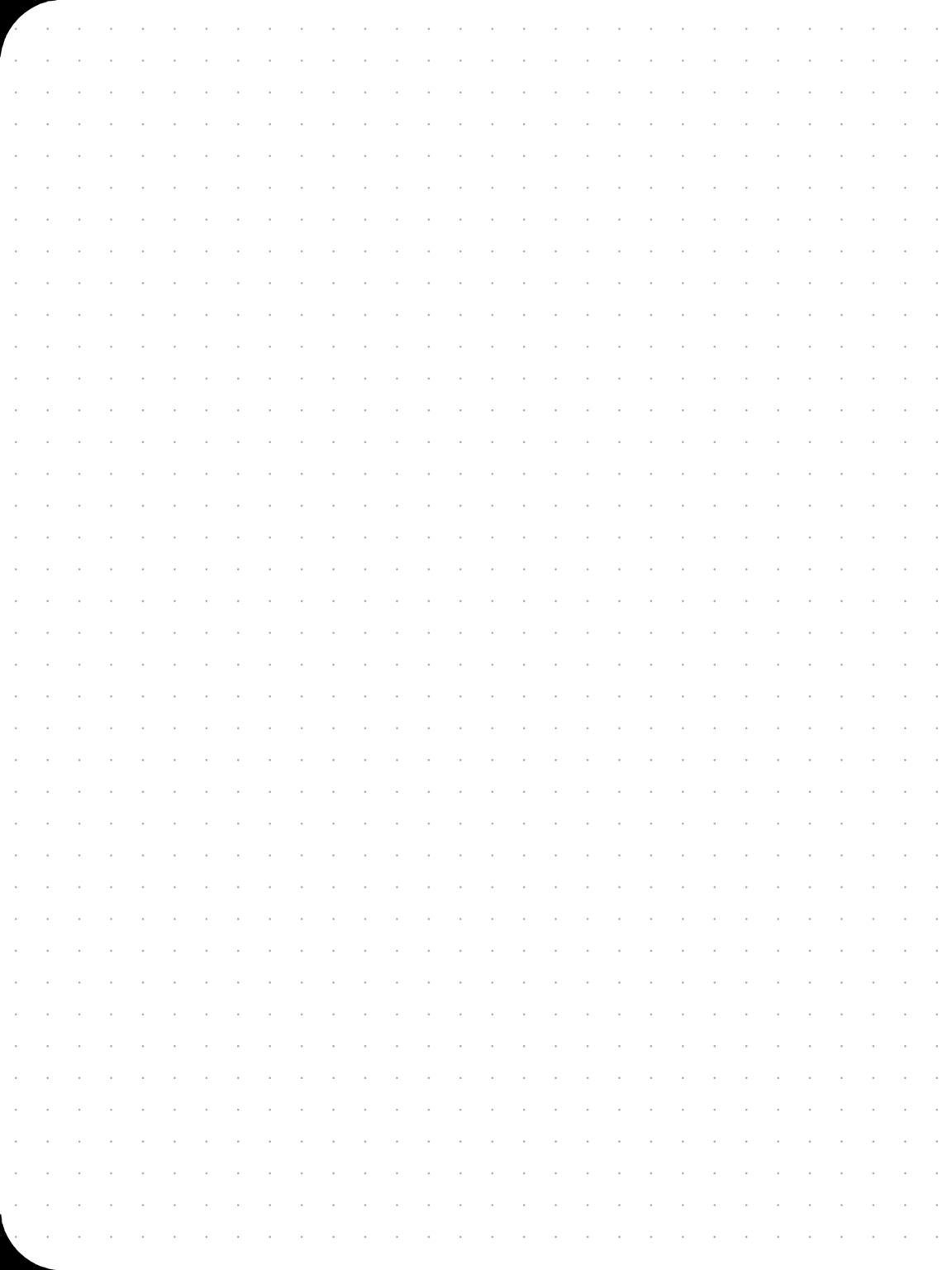
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to my scenius, the Lichtenbergians



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# FOREWORD

# Lichtenbergianism for Kids



# INTRODUCTION

Hi!

Are you the weird kid?

Are you the one who likes to write stories, or poetry, or blogs; or who paints and draws or makes comic books or zines; or who likes to act or sing or dance; or who likes playing music or even writing music; or who writes their own apps or programs — or maybe all of the above?

I think you are! That's why you picked this book up — or why someone gave it to you. You're the weird kid.

But...

You have doubts. You're not *sure* of what you're doing. Every time you start a project, it doesn't go right.

Or you just start a project and never get around to finishing it.

Or you just never start it at all.

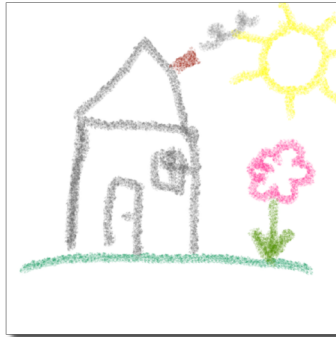
You start to wonder:

*Am I really creative?*

Take this quiz to find out.

Step 1: HOW TO TELL IF YOU ARE CREATIVE.  
TAKE THIS EASY QUIZ AND FIND OUT!

- |   | YES                      | NO                       |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| • WHEN YOU WERE A LITTLE KID (OR EVEN NOW) DID YOU EVER SING SONGS? DID YOU MAKE UP SONGS?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • DID YOU DANCE AROUND YOUR ROOM OR BACK YARD?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • DID YOU MAKE UP STORIES FOR YOUR TOYS TO ACT OUT?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • DID YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS PRETEND TO BE ACTION HEROES OR YOUR FAVORITE CARTOON CHARACTERS? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| • DID YOU EVER DRAW A PICTURE LIKE THIS?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



If you didn't answer YES to **any** of these questions, you should probably put this book down, because you may be a dog or a houseplant and you cannot read.

# Introduction

This is a footnote. It means I have something extra to tell you at the bottom of the page. Sometimes it's fun, sometimes it's more information.

Yes, you are creative because humans are creative. We are *addicted* to MAKING THE THING THAT IS NOT.<sup>1</sup> We cannot help ourselves.

So yes, you are creative. Unless you are a dog or a houseplant.

## What Is Lichtenbergianism?

Don't worry about that right now. We'll talk about it later.

Right now I want to talk about Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. You probably know his name; I hope you know his music.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Think about it: where there wasn't a poem, now there is. Where there wasn't a song, now there is. Where there wasn't a painting or a drawing... You get the idea.

2. If you don't, what a grand adventure you have before you! Start with his wind concertos: clarinet, bassoon (my favorite), flute (2), French horn (4). You won't regret it. Search YouTube for "Mozart bassoon concerto" and go from there.

## Young Person's Guide

Mozart was one of the few absolute geniuses that we humans have ever produced. This is just fact. You will not find anyone who will argue against this fact.

When he was five years old, he had his first public appearance performing in concert, on *both* the violin and the piano.

When he was eight, he wrote his first symphony.

When he was twelve, he wrote his first opera.

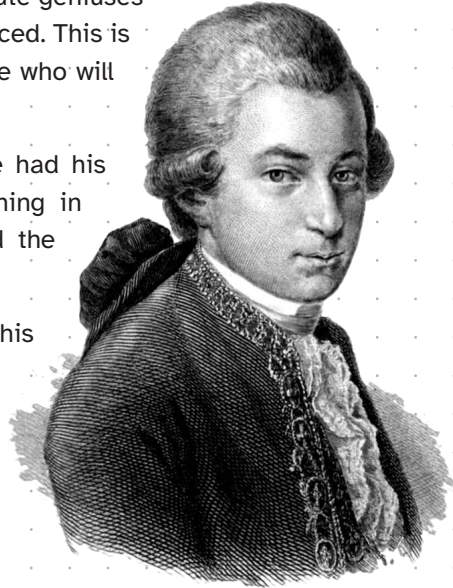
When he was 26, he got married against his father's wishes.

When he was 30, he wrote his most popular opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*.

When he was 36, he died.

Everything we know about him indicates that the music came straight out of his head and onto the paper in one pure and perfect stream. He never seemed to stop to think what came next. He never seemed to go back to correct anything.

Time for a little music nerd talk.



Wolfgang Amadeus  
Mozart, 1756–1791

# Introduction

## MUSIC NERD TALK:

When you write music for more than one instrument, you have to produce a score for the conductor to use which has all the instruments on one page, like this:

Mozart  
Symphony No. 40  
in G minor  
K. 550

Allegro molto.

1 flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets,  
2 horns, some violins, some  
violas, some cellos, a string  
bass or two.

...and then you have to copy out the parts for each instrument.<sup>3</sup>

3. Yes, in the old days, you literally had to hand-write every part. People made a living doing this. They were called *copyists*.

Advanced Reader Copy

# Young Person's Guide

Here's the score for a string quartet:

93

**Quartett in F**  
für zwei Violinen, Viola und Violoncello  
KV 590  
Datirt Wien, Juni 1790

Allegro moderato

The image shows a page of a musical score for a string quartet. At the top, it is titled 'Quartett in F' for two violins, viola, and cello, KV 590, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The tempo is 'Allegro moderato'. The score is arranged in four staves: Violino I, Violino II, Viola, and Violoncello. The first system shows measures 1 through 6. The second system starts at measure 7 and ends at measure 11. The third system starts at measure 12 and ends at measure 15. The fourth system starts at measure 16 and ends at measure 19. A handwritten arrow points from the text on the right to the first system of the score.

A string quartet has a first violin, a second violin, a viola, and a cello.

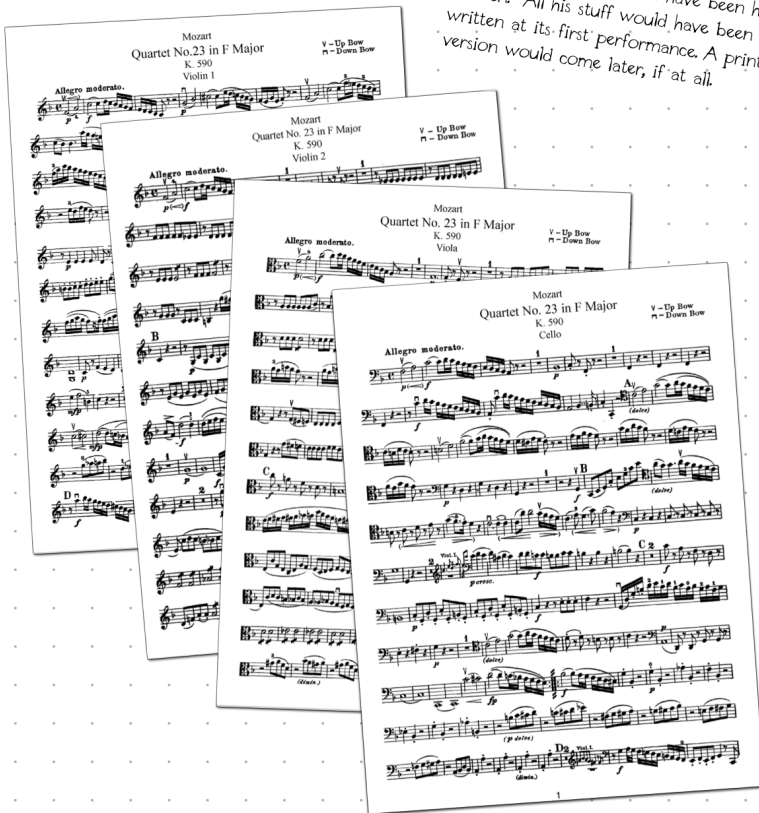
(Stay with me here — there's a point to this.)

## Introduction

We know for a fact that Mozart could write a string quartet in his head while riding in a coach, and then when he finally got to pen and paper he would write out the *parts* first, only later filling out the score. *Who does that kind of thing??*

A genius, that's who.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, Mozart's would have been hand-written. All his stuff would have been hand-written at its first performance. A printed version would come later, if at all.



4. Also, maybe a genius who liked showing off, like Mozart.

AND WE DON'T HAVE TO DO THAT. And by "that" I mean we don't have to produce perfect work straight out of our heads, ever. That's not the way this creativity thing works.

## For Real, What Is Lichtenbergianism?

Lichtenbergianism started as a joke. One day some friends and I were arguing online about music, and one of us posted a quote:

*"To do the opposite is also a form of imitation."*

The author of this quote was Georg Christoph Lichtenberg,<sup>5</sup> an 18<sup>th</sup>-century physics professor in Germany. In fact, he was the first full-time physics professor anywhere. He did many cool things — we have printers because of his discoveries — but he *failed* to do many other things because he was always procrastinating. He simply put off doing the work!

Lichtenberg became our hero, because my friends and I were the same way. We had a *lot* of great ideas for stories and songs and

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, 1743–1799



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5. Pronounced LISH-ten-berg. Just add -ian and -ism, and you're good to go.



## Introduction

plays, and sometimes we would start on them, but we almost never finished them.<sup>6</sup>

So we formed The Lichtenbergian Society to celebrate the idea that procrastination was key to the creative process. No, it doesn't make sense. How can you be creative if you never get anything done? Mostly The Lichtenbergian Society was just an excuse to get together and hang out.

But after five years of getting together to celebrate our procrastination, we noticed a weird thing. All of us were doing *more* than we had before! Jeff was writing books — I was composing music — Mike was writing and starring in plays. How was this possible?

Here is part of the answer.<sup>7</sup>

---

6. Does this sound like you and your friends? Good!

7. The rest of this book is the rest of the answer.

# ~~///~~ Young Person's Guide ~~///~~

Imagine some guy, some random guy. We'll call them THAT GUY.

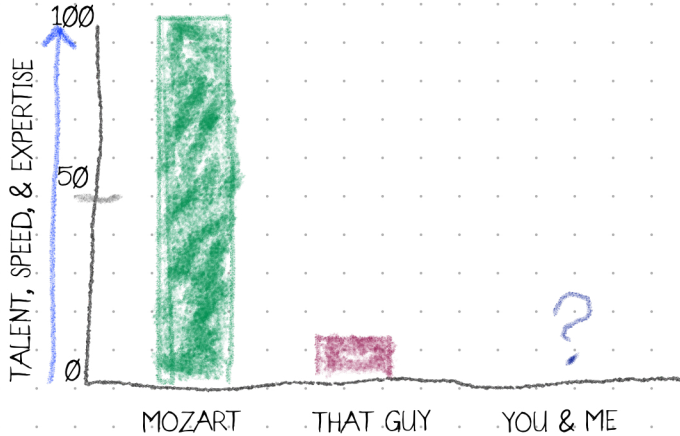
You choose: does THAT GUY want to write music or books?

If THAT GUY wants to write music, go to the next page.

If they want to write books, turn to p. 20.

## Introduction

Imagine THAT GUY decides they want to write music, and THAT GUY decides to compare themselves to Mozart.



Faced with Mozart's fearsome perfection, THAT GUY decides they shouldn't even bother trying to write music. After all, they will *never* be as good as Mozart.

And they're right. They never will.<sup>8</sup>

Neither will you or I, but you and I know that we don't have to be. We only have to be as good as we can be. That's what this book is about. Memorize this: **Failure is always an option.**

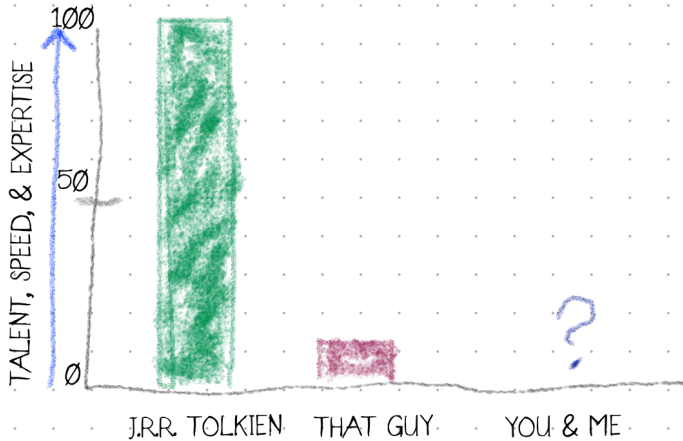
Plus, who on earth compares themselves to Mozart? Don't be THAT GUY.

---

8. Especially if they never try.

# Young Person's Guide

Imagine THAT GUY decides they want to write books, and THAT GUY decides to compare themselves to J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*.



Faced with Tolkien's incredible creation, THAT GUY decides they shouldn't even bother trying to write books. After all, they will *never* be as good as J.R.R. Tolkien.

And they're right. They never will.<sup>9</sup>

Neither will you or I, but you and I know that we don't have to be. We only have to be as good as we can be. That's what this book is about. Memorize this: **Failure is always an option.**

Plus, who on earth compares themselves to J.R.R. Tolkien? Don't be THAT GUY.

<sup>9</sup> Especially if they never try.

## ~~///~~ Introduction ~~///~~

So why do we think we're "supposed" to be perfect like Mozart or J.R.R. Tolkien? Why do so many people say they are not "creative"?

These days it's mostly because we are surrounded by magic. Every movie or TV show we see, every song we hear, every book we read — they're *perfect*, aren't they? Just like THAT GUY, we think we cannot possibly do anything that good, and so we do not try.

We think you have to go to school to be an artist or a musician or a writer.<sup>10</sup>

We think you have to be a genius to be an artist or a musician or a writer.<sup>11</sup>

We think you have to be famous to be an artist or a musician or a writer.<sup>12</sup>

What do people say when offered a chance to create art? "Oh, I can't even draw a straight line."<sup>13</sup> We just don't think we can do it. We are all afraid of failure.



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10. You don't.

11. You don't.

12. You don't. YOU'RE A KID, REMEMBER?

13. I have two answers to that: 1) No one's asking you to draw a straight line; and 2) If you need to draw a straight line, get a ruler.

## ~~///~~ Young Person's Guide ~~///~~

Try this. Copy this letter and mail it to your favorite author or singer or artist.<sup>14</sup> Go ahead. I'll wait.

Advanced Reader Copy

[Date]

Dear [Your idol],

I'm reading a book called Young Person's Guide to Lichtenbergianism and the author says that you fail sometimes when you're working on a new project.

Is this true?

Sincerely,

[Signature]

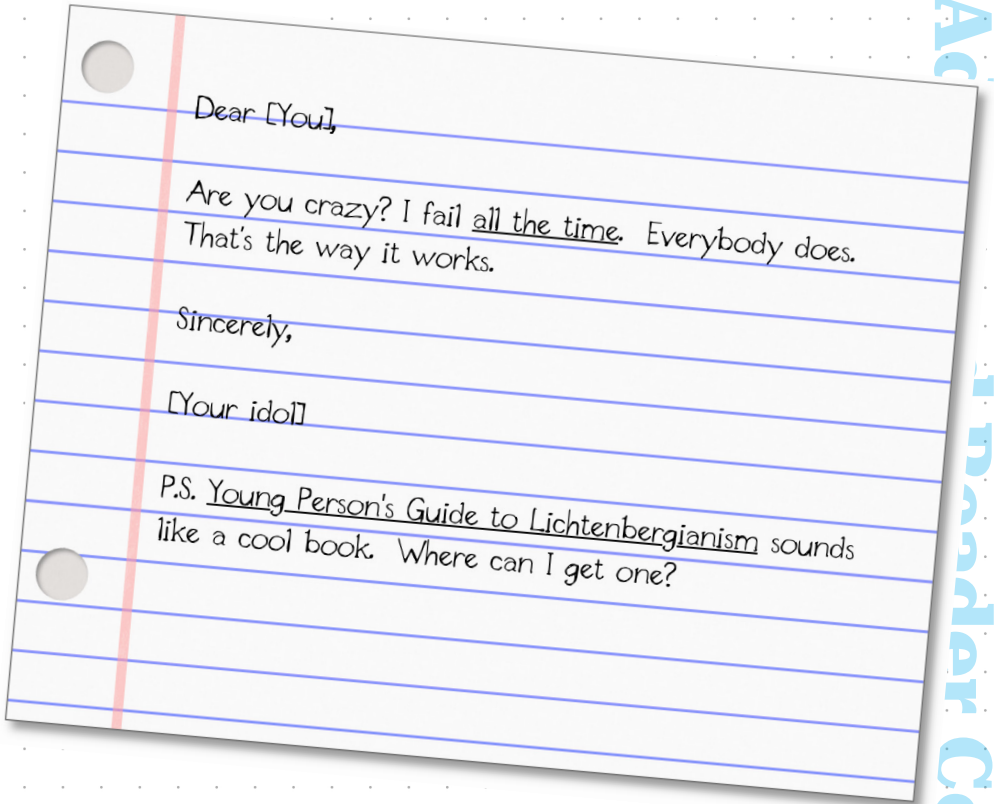
[Your address, so they can mail you back]

---

14. Or email or tweet. Whatever.

## ~~///~~ Introduction ~~///~~

What was their answer? It was something like this, wasn't it?



Don't confuse creativity with training.

Don't confuse creativity with "genius" (like Mozart/Tolkien).

Don't confuse creativity with fame.



## What Is A Precept?<sup>15</sup>

A precept is a general rule, a way to guide your behavior or your thinking.

We have nine Precepts. Each one is simple to understand and easy to put into practice.

1. TASK AVOIDANCE
2. WASTE BOOKS
3. ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS
4. GESTALT
5. SUCCESSIVE APPROXIMATION
6. RITUAL
7. STEAL FROM THE BEST
8. AUDIENCE
9. ABANDONMENT

That's just the list. Don't worry about getting them right now.

You don't do the Precepts "in order."

Precept #1 is not "more important" than #9.

They are all connected to each other, and each one has more than one meaning.

Taken together, they will give you *permission* to create without worrying about having to produce something "perfect."

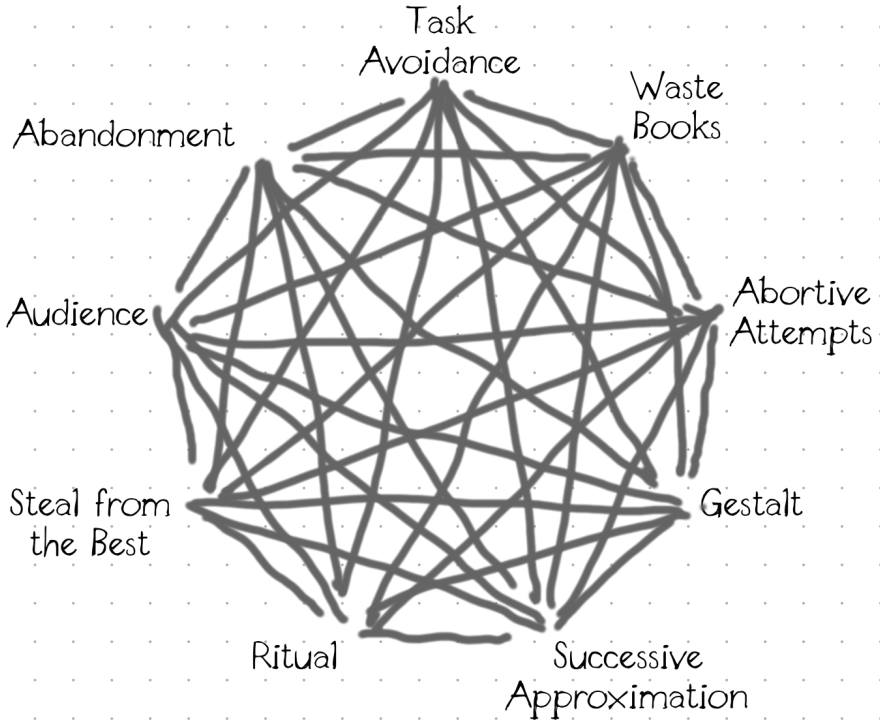
Only Mozart can do that — and he's dead.

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15. Pronounced: PREE-sept



# ~~///~~ Introduction ~~///~~



What I'll do in each chapter is explain the Precept and give some examples of how artists have used it in the past. I'll also give you some ways you can use it for your own creative work.

Ready?

But first...

## AIRPORT VERSION

In the “grown-up” version of this book, I started by giving the Airport Version<sup>16</sup>. That's simply a one-page description of each Precept in very basic terms. If you never read anything else, you'll have the basic structure of Lichtenbergianism.

You can skip it if you like. Come back to it later.<sup>17</sup>

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16. When people are flying and are waiting to board their plane, they may decide to go to the bookstore in the terminal to get something to read on the flight. Usually you don't have a lot of time to browse, so you look for a quick way to see if you're going to like the book once you're trapped at 30,000 feet.

17. You will have noticed that the pages are printed with a gray dot grid, like a *WASTE BOOK*. *You can write in this book, and I encourage you to do so.* Scribble in the margins. Design better illustrations. Argue with me. Take my ideas further.

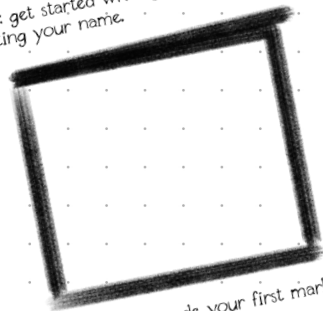
~~///~~ Airport Version ~~///~~

# Framework

All human beings are creative:  
all humans are born to MAKE THE  
THING THAT IS NOT.

That means you, too.

Here: get started writing in your book by  
writing your name.



There. You've made your first mark.  
This is the way.

Advanced Reader Copy

## 1. TASK AVOIDANCE

*Cras melior est:* Tomorrow is better.

You can be more productive through procrastination by avoiding one project while working on another.

## 2. WASTE BOOKS

Always have a way to write down everything. Come back to it later.

### 3. ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS

Don't wait until you can do something perfectly before you begin.

Write "ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS" at the top of your page to let the universe know that it cannot stop you from producing crap.

Produce crap.

Fix it later.

Have you been writing in this book?

## 4. GESTALT

*GESTALT* means “shape” in German.

Once you’ve started your **ABORTIVE ATTEMPT**, step back and see what shape it’s in. What’s missing?

## 5. Successive Approximation

Once you've assessed your project's GESTALT, tweak the project. Move it closer to being finished.



## 6. RITUAL

Have a way to get your brain/  
soul/ear/eye/hand into working  
mode.

Create your time and space to  
create, then protect it.

## 7. Steal from the Best

Use the past.

Reverse engineer the artists  
you admire.

## 8. AUDIENCE

You have two AUDIENCES:

Those people out there

Those people right here

(And 3. Yourself)

## 9. ABANDONMENT

Three kinds:

You can come back to it later.

It's ready for an AUDIENCE.

Failure is always an option.

# PRECEPT 1:

## TASK AVOIDANCE

When the original version of this book was published every single person I knew made the same two jokes:

I do all my best work at the last minute.

I'll buy your book... later, (or I'll read your book... later.)

Every. Single. Person.

::sigh::



“Procrastination” means “to put off until later.” It comes from two Latin words, *pro-* (for) and *cras* (tomorrow),<sup>18</sup> and usually people think of it as a bad habit.

It is true that if you have something important that you are supposed to do, it's not a very good idea to keep putting it off until you don't have enough time to do a good job on it. But that is not what we mean when we talk about

TASK AVOIDANCE.<sup>19</sup>

---

18. The motto of the Lichtenbergian Society is *Cras melior est* — Tomorrow is better.

19. I didn't even use the word “deadline” in the other book.

What the Lichtenbergians are actually doing is called “structured procrastination.” That means that we avoid working on one project by working on some other project. Instead of working on this book, for example, I could write a piece of music, or work on one of the other books I’m writing, or even go out into my back yard and mow the grass. Anything but work on *this* book.

The point is that no matter what I choose to avoid working on, I’m still working on *something*, and I’ll still end up with this book, or a piece of music, or a freshly mowed lawn. Probably not today, of course.<sup>20</sup> But tomorrow. Maybe.

Believe it or not, this works.



One of the jokes the Lichtenbergian Society always makes about procrastination is that the world would be a better place if some artists had procrastinated longer before writing their bad poetry or releasing their bad rap video on YouTube. We joke that they should have spent more time *not* working on the project.

Here’s the real talk about that joke — there’s a step in the creative process called the *gestation period*.<sup>21</sup> In biology, the time between the

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20. WARNING: surfing the web or dawdling on Facebook/Instagram does *not* count as TASK AVOIDANCE.

21. Pronounced: jess-STAY-shun. (I’m giving you these pronunciations because whenever you hear someone mispronounce a word, it’s because they learned it from reading and have never heard it. Now you can talk about all this without fear.)

## ~~Task~~ Task Avoidance ~~Task~~

fertilization of an egg and the new animal's birth — say, a bird<sup>22</sup> — is called the gestation period. From the outside, it doesn't look as if anything is happening, but on the inside the egg yolk is turning into a bird.<sup>23</sup>

The same thing happens to creative projects. After you start your project<sup>24</sup>, you may get stuck. That's when you practice TASK AVOIDANCE. Work on something else for a while. Go for a walk. Bake some cookies. Clean your room.<sup>25</sup>

All that time — while you're brushing your teeth or riding your bike or daydreaming in class — your mind is still working on solutions to your problem, until one day you shout out "Aha!" in the middle of class and now everyone thinks you're a weird kid.<sup>26</sup>

That's gestation. Don't be afraid to leave your project alone for a while and then come back to it. Don't put your bad poetry out there before it's ready to be born.

---

22. Or velociraptor. Your call.

23. Or velociraptor. Technically, the yolk is feeding the developing bird, but you know what I mean.

24. see WASTED EFFORTS, p. 56

25. Your parents asked me to put that in there.

26. Unless they already thought you were a weird kid. You do you, babe.



Let's talk about how to manage your TASK AVOIDANCE, because let's face it: if you just keep putting off all your work, tomorrow will *not* be better.

You want a system that's easy to use and simple to understand. It should keep you aware of what you have to do, but let *you* decide what to work on and what to avoid<sup>27</sup>.

My favorite method is called *kanban*<sup>28</sup>, and it's super simple. To do kanban you will need something like a whiteboard or a bulletin board — something that you can put where you can see it while you work, or at least where you can see it without having to dig it out.

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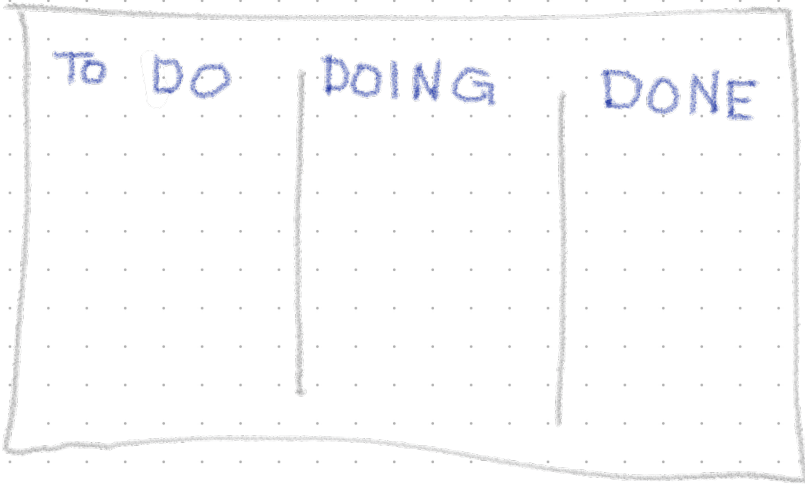
27. Beware the pretty notebook systems that tempt you to decorate more than you make notes.

28. KAHN-BAHN — it's Japanese. (But most people I know say CAN-BAN anyway.)



## ~~Task~~ Task Avoidance ~~Task~~

You're going to divide the board into three parts and write these headings at the top:

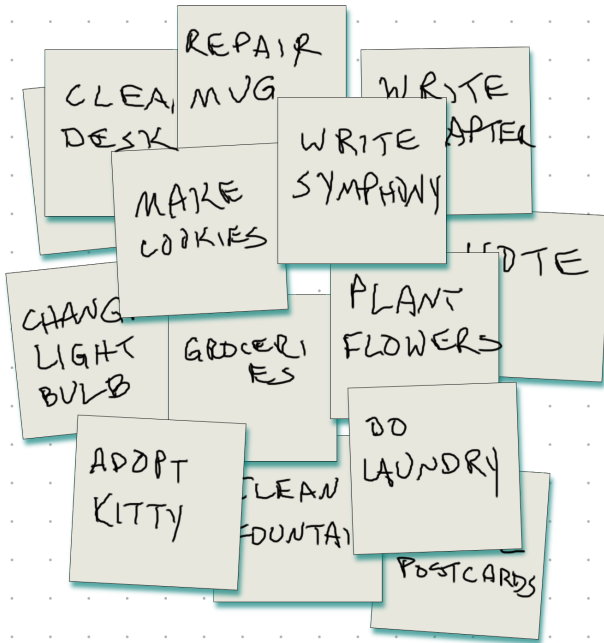


# Young Person's Guide

Now you need a stack of sticky notes.

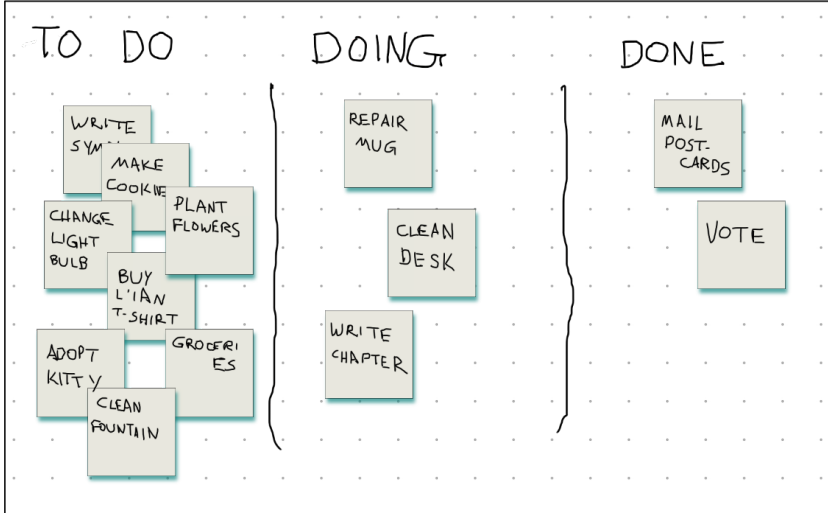
This is the hardest part of the entire process: doing the kanban dump. Think of *all the things* you have to do or want to do. Write each and every one on a sticky note. Put all those sticky notes on your whiteboard in the TO DO column. Every. Single. One.

The first time you do that, it's scary — so many things! But remember, you're going to procrastinate on most of them.



# Task Avoidance

Here's how it works. You choose *no more than five* sticky notes to move over to the DOING column, and that's what you work on. (I'd start with only three at first and see how it goes.)



No more than five. If something in the TO DO column becomes so urgent that you have to work on it, then you have to move one of the DOING notes back into the TO DO column. No more than five.

When a project is finished, of course, move it to the DONE column. Personally, I just move them to the trash, but you may find it helpful to see what you've accomplished.

When you do this for a while, you will start to notice what you *want* to work on and what you keep putting off — that's very helpful and will actually keep you moving towards a goal — or ABANDONMENT<sup>29</sup>.

## **AND SO...**

- Practice “structured procrastination” by alternating your projects — avoid working on one project by tinkering with another.
- Kanban your projects — know what you're putting off and why.
- Don't be afraid to let projects simmer.
- Learn the difference between TASK AVOIDANCE and ABANDONMENT.

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29. see ABANDONMENT, p. 103

## PRECEPT 2: WASTE BOOKS

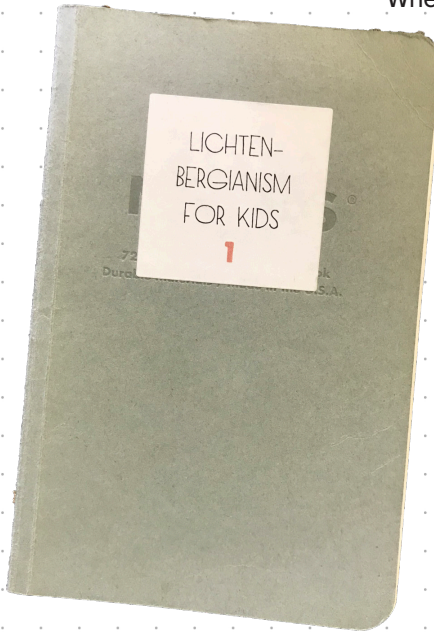
When I first decided to write this book, I pulled out a small notebook — a WASTE BOOK — slapped a label on it, and started scribbling.

You need a WASTE BOOK. Here's why.

When Georg Christoph Lichtenberg was a college student, he noticed that merchants would scribble down the day's sales in crappy little notebooks — often scrap paper stitched together — and then would neatly transfer their scribbles to their actual account books later. He called these crappy little notebooks “WASTE BOOKS,” and he started doing the same thing, only with ideas.

He always had a WASTE BOOK with him, and he scribbled *everything* in it: ideas for experiments, witty sayings, letters he needed to write, shopping lists — *everything*.

He said that dumping all his ideas into a WASTE BOOK was like throwing a bunch of seeds onto the ground. Some would sprout and bloom. Others never would. But, he said,



This is my WASTE BOOK for Lichtenbergianism for Kids.

## ~~W~~ Young Person's Guide ~~W~~

you had to throw that handful of seed or you'd never get anything to grow.

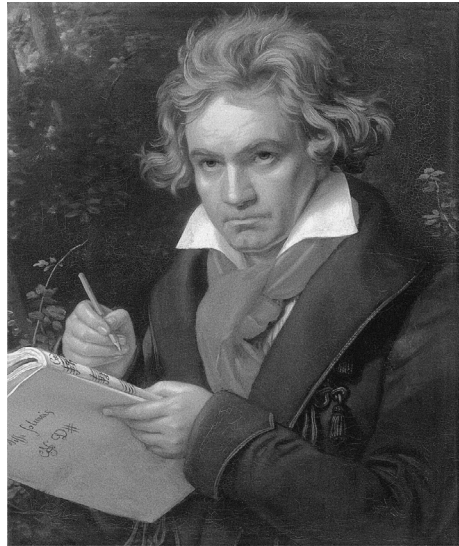
It's a great idea. Every creative person — that's you — should have a WASTE BOOK and always have it with you. *Write it all down* and come back to it later. It doesn't matter if you're a writer, an artist, a composer, or a computer programmer: write it all down and come back to it later.

Remember Mozart and how perfect he was? Let's look at Beethoven, who was *not* perfect like that.

Ludwig van Beethoven always carried a notebook with him, mostly because he was deaf the last half of his life and other people had to write their side of the conversation so he could read it. But as he took his walk every day, he would also scribble ideas for music in his notebooks. Not all of them turned out to be usable, of course, just like Lichtenberg's "seeds."

But if a melody kept bugging him, he would take it and write it in a *second* WASTE BOOK. There he would play with the idea. He would work on different harmonies or variations. He would figure out if it was a symphony or a sonata or something else. It always

Ludwig van Beethoven,  
1770–1757



## Waste Books

took him a long time to work on his music.<sup>30</sup> (It was *ten years* after he scribbled down a theme that it finally premiered as his Ninth Symphony, one of his most famous works.)

Finally, if the piece was working, he'd transfer it to a *third* notebook, where he would actually write the piece. (He still made tons of mistakes. He was not Mozart.<sup>31</sup>)



Beethoven's sketches for the Cello Sonata, Op. 69 — mostly mistakes!



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30. Unlike Mozart!

31. And if Beethoven wasn't Mozart, why should we think we need to be?

What are your options for a WASTE BOOK?

The most important thing to think about is that you have to be able to carry it around with you, which is why I like pocket-sized WASTE BOOKS. I know people who are never without their *book*-sized WASTE BOOK, but it means they always have to carry it or have a backpack or purse to put it in.

Other things to think about:

- Do you want to be able to tear pages out, or do you want something that will be a 'book' forever? (Both Lichtenberg and Beethoven kept all their notebooks their entire lives.)
- How many pages do you want? Do you want to have a single WASTE BOOK for the whole year? Each month? Each week? Each project?<sup>32</sup>
- Hard cover? Soft cover? Extra cover to protect it from wear and tear in your pocket?
- How expensive is your preferred method? There are some *really* nice notebooks out there, and that can get to be expensive. (Remember, though, that the notebooks that cost a little more may last longer than the cheap ones.)



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32. I have a pocket WASTE BOOK for daily use, plus one for each major project I'm working on. Just like Beethoven.

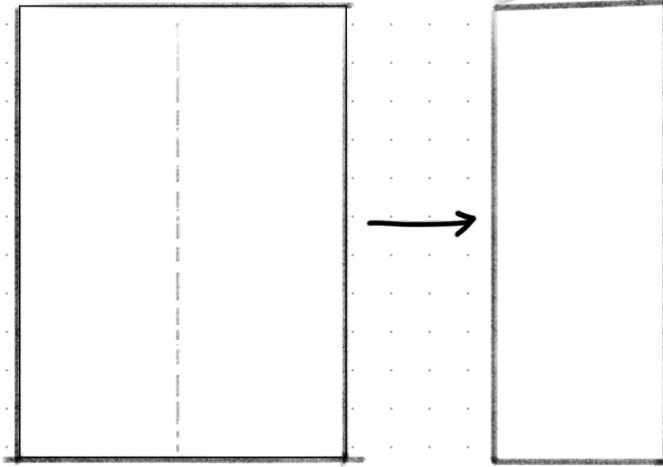


## ~~Waste~~ Waste Books ~~Waste~~

Here's a neat trick that is fast, easy, and about as cheap as you can get for a WASTE BOOK. You'll end up with a small, disposable system that will let you—like Lichtenberg's merchants—scribble stuff down without worrying about perfection and then get it transferred to your permanent records.

Take a single sheet of paper, either letter or legal size.

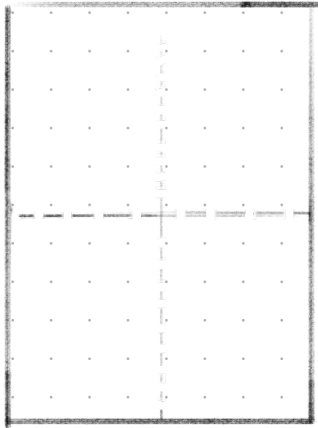
①



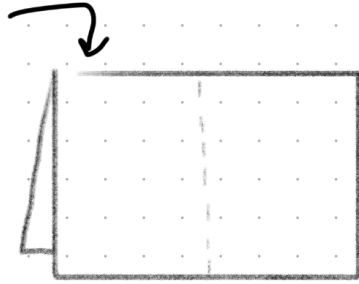
Fold in half vertically  
("hot dog style").

Unfold.

②

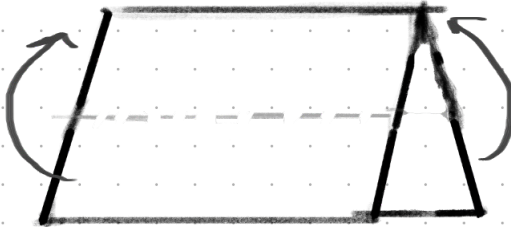


Fold in half horizontally ("taco style").

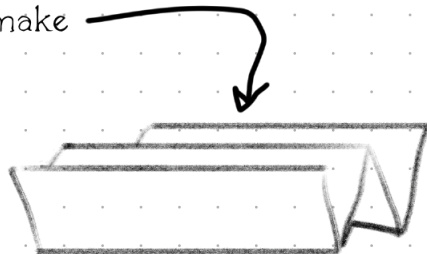


Leave it folded.

③



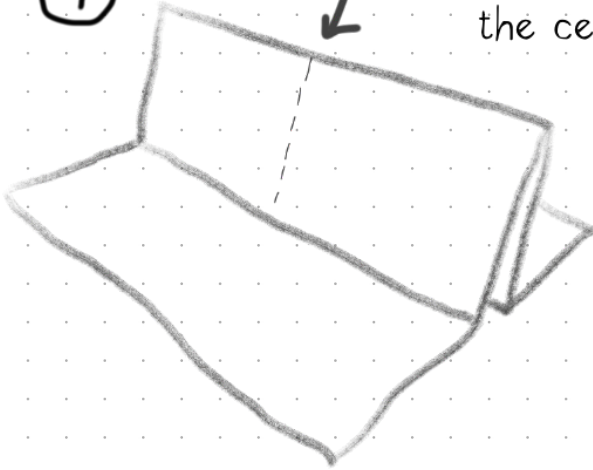
Fold both the front and back up to make a "W" shape.



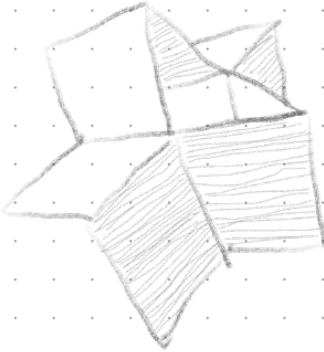
~~Waste~~ Waste Books ~~Waste~~

④

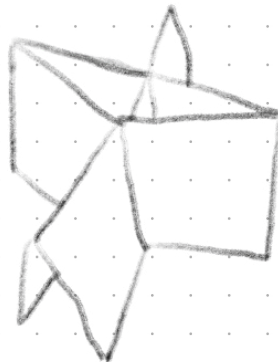
Cut the two folded middle pieces down the center line.



Open up the cut, then...

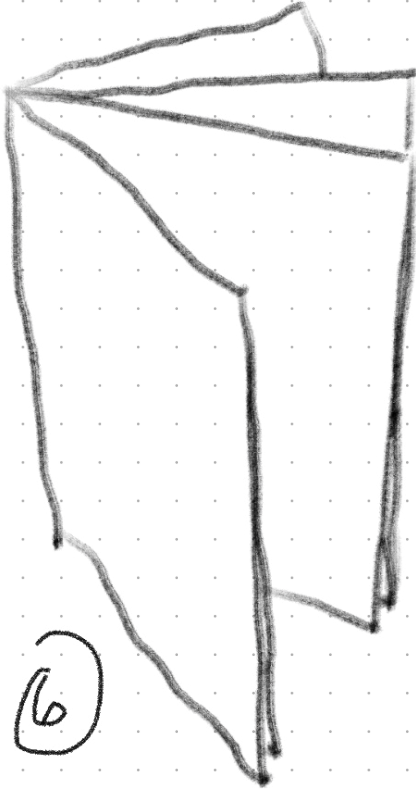


⑤



...collapse it all into a little cross.

Fold it all up into your  
very own 8-page emergency  
Waste Book!



Very handy – you can use the clean side of any  
printed page as a recycling thing, and if you use  
a new, clean piece of paper, you can turn it in-  
side out for another eight pages!

## ~~Waste~~ Waste Books ~~Waste~~



Let me say something about electronic WASTE Books, i.e., apps for your phone/tablet. Because you live in the space future, you may prefer using something like Evernote or Notion or Bear to jot down all your ideas.

There are a lot of reasons why this can be a good idea: you don't have to carry around a paper and pencil; your ideas are readily transferable to your projects on your computer/tablet; your notes are always available to you rather than disappearing onto a shelf somewhere when your paper WASTE BOOK is full; it's easier to tag/label your notes and easier to sort and retrieve them.

If using an app works for you, then go for it. I have used a few in the past, but I have always come back to good old paper and pencil, and I'll tell you a couple of reasons why.

First, it is usually faster to use paper; by the time you've gotten out your phone, unlocked it, found and opened the app, created a new note, typed it in with your thumbs, and then saved it—I've already whipped out my WASTE BOOK, scribbled a note, and put it back in my pocket.

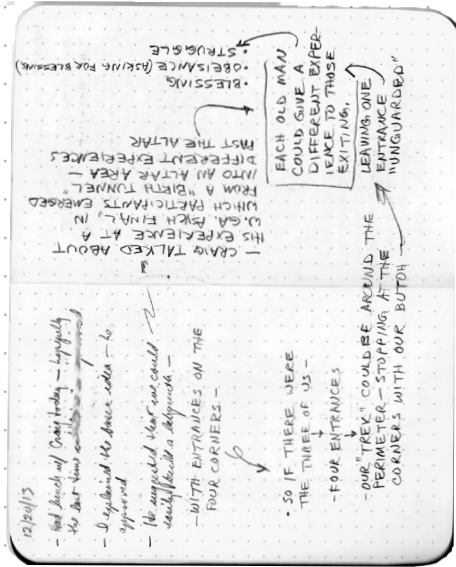
The second reason is that no matter how good the app is, you are always doing your work the way the *app* works, not necessarily the way *you* work. So as soon as you find yourself wishing

## Young Person's Guide

you could do... whatever it is that the app won't do... then get yourself a good old-fashioned paper WASTE BOOK and see if your thinking changes along with the way you write it down.

### AND SO...

- Have a way you can record ideas and plans every day, immediately as they occur to you.
- Have a way to move these ideas into a framework of production.



Can your app do this?  
If yes, then great!  
If no, then try paper.

# PRECEPT 3:

## ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS

What is an ABORTIVE ATTEMPT?

“Abortive” means “unsuccessful, failed, futile, useless.”

Hold that thought.

The White Rabbit as herald,  
ill. by John Tenniel.



Near the end of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice is on trial for some silly thing, and when the White Rabbit is unsure how to proceed with the evidence the King of Hearts tells him,

**“Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”**

You may — most people do — think that successful/talented writers, painters, and musicians produce their works exactly like that: they start with the first (and perfect) sentence or line or chord, and then work smoothly from start to finish, whereupon they write THE END and everyone lives happily ever after.

No.

No, no, a thousand times no.

## ~~///~~ Young Person's Guide ~~///~~

Oh, it's possible — if you're Mozart. He could do it, but he was a freak.

We call this the KING OF HEARTS FALLACY,<sup>33</sup> and it's a trap. No one likes to make mistakes, and so because we can't see how we're going to do it without screwing it up, we never start our book or our drawing or our song.

Now, however, since you're a Lichtenbergian, you don't have to fall into the Trap. Let me show you how to get started on any project.

It's easy: before you begin any project, especially one you're scared of messing up, write "ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS" at the top of your page. Go ahead and label it as an "unsuccessful, failed, or useless" attempt.<sup>34</sup>

What you're doing is telling the universe that you're going to screw this up and you're going to screw it up *bad*, and there's nothing the universe can do to force you to try to make it good. You're going to create trash. Lots and lots and *lots* of trash.

Wait, this is supposed to be a good thing? Yes, because you give yourself permission to fail, and if you have permission to fail it doesn't matter how you start. You just start.



Or worse: you plop it out and think it *is* finished, perfect, without waiting to see if it is. (It is almost never perfect.)

---

33. A fallacy is a mistaken belief. (Pronounced: FAL (rhymes with Al)-uh-see)

34. You may also call it WASTED EFFORTS, which is the term that poet Nancy Willard used for her work. Or create your own term. Just give yourself permission to fail.



## Abortive Attempts

The other part of the KING OF HEARTS FALLACY that keeps many people from starting is the idea that they have to start at the beginning and work their way to the end.

You do not have to start at the beginning and work your way to the end.

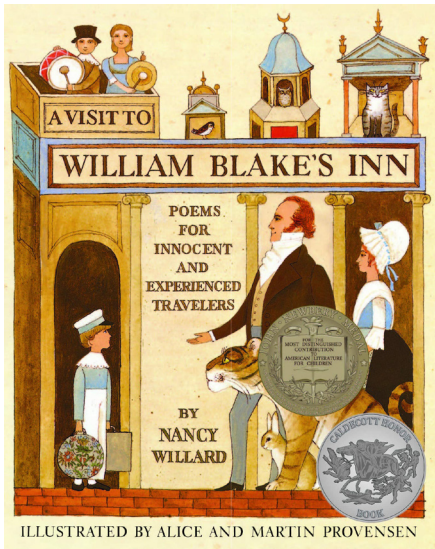
The biggest piece of music I have ever written is *William Blake's Inn*, based on Nancy Willard's book *A Visit to William Blake's Inn*, sixteen poems set to music for full orchestra and chorus<sup>35</sup>. I did not start with the first poem at all. I started with "When We Come Home, Blake Calls for Fire," more than halfway through the book.

Then I worked on the other poems in no special order until I ended up with "Blake Leads a Walk on the Milky Way," which is the poem just before "Fire."

Not only that, but I didn't always finish a song before starting to work on another one. I might have

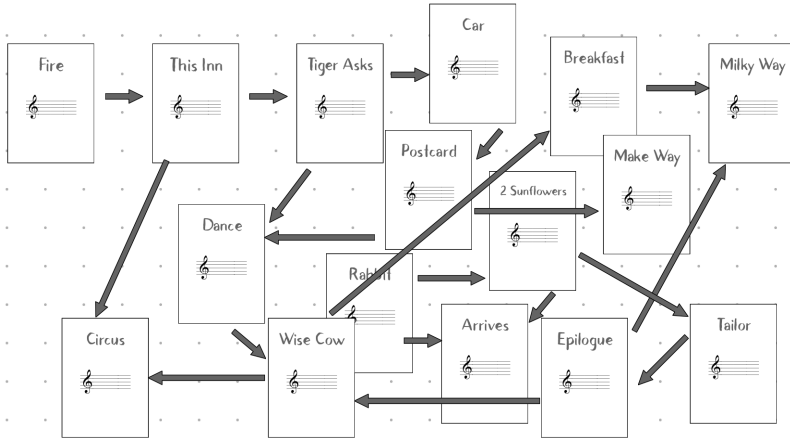
three or four unfinished songs going at the same time.

A Visit to William Blake's Inn, by Nancy Willard, won the Newbery Award in 1982.



35. It is important to know that I had to get Ms. Willard's permission to use her copyrighted work to create my own "derivative work." This is not a case of STEAL FROM THE BEST.

You can do this too. It's not cheating, it's not lazy, it's just the way the creative process works.<sup>36</sup>



How I worked on William Blake's Inn. (artist's conception)

If you have an idea for a book, start anywhere. Start with the happy ending. Start with the big fight scene. You can even start with the opening.

Same thing with a piece of music, or a drawing. Start *anywhere*, and don't worry about making it good.

Do it wrong, and then fix it later. Don't wait until you can get it right before you start. Trust me on this one.

36. Don't believe me? Ask Lin-Manuel Miranda, the author/composer of the musical *Hamilton*. He actually wrote a letter to a friend asking if he needed to try to write the show in order, because he found himself jumping all over. His friend replied that he should just work on what interested him; the rest would come together as he needed it.

## ~~///~~ Abortive Attempts ~~///~~

### **AND SO...**

- Give yourself permission to fail by labeling each page with **ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS**.
- Deliberately set out to create crap — lots of crap.
- Plan if you must, but be aware that art has ideas of its own.
- You don't have to begin at the beginning.
- You can always go back and fix it. [SUCCESSIVE APPROXIMATION]

---

Or ask Johann Sebastian Bach why he wrote “J.J.” at the top of every new piece of music. It stood for “Jesu Juva,” Latin for “Jesus, help me.” He had no idea what the piece of music would end up like and just prayed that it would be OK. (Given that this is J.S. Bach we're talking about, of course it was OK.)

# PRECEPT 4:

## GESTALT

So you've tricked your brain into creating a big pile of ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS, and all you've got for your work is a big pile of ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS. Now what?

It's time for GESTALT.



GESTALT is the German word for "shape." (It's pronounced geh-SHTAHLT.) In English, GESTALT means "the shape of the whole," and for our purposes we could call it **What's Wrong With This Picture?**

GESTALT is where you step back from your ABORTIVE ATTEMPT and try to imagine what it would look like if it were finished. It's like you have an image of your work, completed and perfect<sup>37</sup> — compare what you've got to that image. Can you tell what's different? **What's Wrong With This Picture?**

What would make it better? What do you need to change? Why is it *not* finished now?

---

37. It's not going to be perfect.

## ~~W~~ Gestalt ~~W~~

The difference(s) between your ABORTIVE ATTEMPT and the “perfect” version will usually be one of these three things:

- NOT ENOUGH
- TOO MUCH
- OUT OF PLACE

### **NOT ENOUGH**

- needs more cowbell
- more blue in that corner
- needs a cymbal crash at measure 83
- needs another verse before first entrance of the chorus
- repeat that section
- need more background for that one character before heading off into the woods
- got to find a rhyme for ‘hat’ that isn’t lame

### **TOO MUCH**

- too many syllables in that line of the poem
- too much red over the entire painting
- drop the violins, let the clarinets carry the melody
- that chapter doesn’t move the story along
- does the dragon really need 18 arms?

### OUT OF PLACE

- need to fix the shape of the eyes
- wrong font for the poster
- move that piece of the newspaper collage
- use that chapter to open the book, then flash back
- that song doesn't belong in the show/on the album, so cut it
- her arm in the painting should be up, not down.



The last two illustrations are real. Broadway composers always write songs that eventually are cut from the show for making the show too long or slowing the show down or just not working. Recording artists are the same way. Every one of your favorite artists has left out more than they've shown you. As Georg Christoph Lichtenberg says,

*"With many a work of a celebrated man I would rather read what he has crossed out than what he has let stand."*

## ~~///~~ Gestalt ~~///~~



Portrait of Mme. Montessier, Jean-August-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867)

For example, the painter Jean-August-Dominique Ingres did multiple sketches of Mme. Montessier before finally painting her portrait. Look at the sketch of her right arm (on your left). It's all over the place, and it looks as if Ingres had settled on having it relaxed down onto her skirt. But then when he painted it...



Fun fact (and you can look it up on Wikipedia): Ingres started this painting in 1844 and didn't finish it until 1856. Wonder what he was procrastinating on?



In other words, **What's Wrong With This Picture?** That's GESTALT.

The really hard part about this is that there is not just one "right" choice on how to move forward with your piece.

No wait, that's the easy part: there's not just one right way. Once you step back and ask yourself what's missing, the discoveries will come very quickly. The hard part is deciding *which* of the right ways you've discovered to choose. But that's the creative process — you choose one path, and keep moving.

Moving? Where?

[SEE: the next Precept.]



Here's a very good way to figure out what's missing from your ABORTIVE ATTEMPT: write it down.

Write a letter to someone famous to ask for their advice. Describe the problem so that even though they don't know who you are or what you're working on, they can understand the problems you're having. Ask them very specific questions about the problems. (You can even mail it if you like.)

Set a timer for two minutes and then in your WASTE BOOK just write down everything that



## ~~///~~ Gestalt ~~///~~

comes into your head about your work. Ask questions. Be specific about what's bugging you, or the brick wall you keep running into, or the impossible choices you need to make.

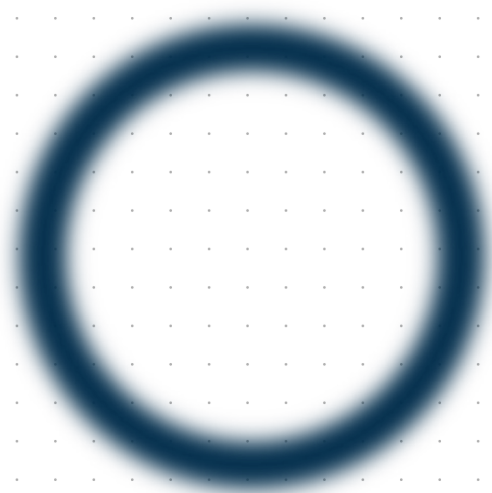
Go for a walk. Enjoy the outside. Your body will thank you, and your brain will keep working on the problem. [SEE: Gestation, p. 38]

### **AND SO...**

- Keep looking at the project to see what's not there — or what is there that doesn't need to be.
- The “shape” of the project will change — and that's OK.

# PRECEPT 5: SUCCESSIVE APPROXIMATION

So GESTALT works like this:

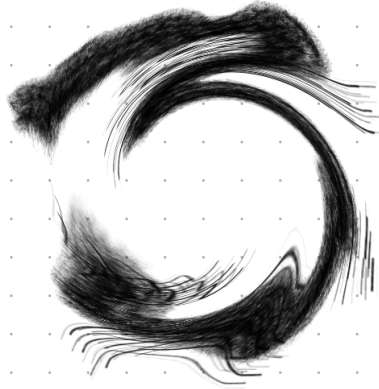


Vague Idea of  
Perfect.

We have a thing we want to make that looks  
sort of like this maybe?

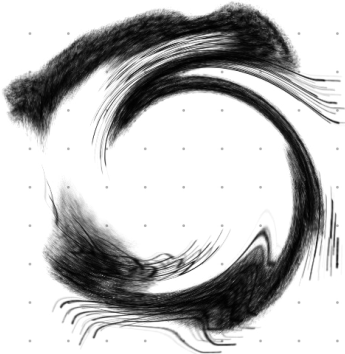
# ~~///~~ Successive Approximation ~~///~~

So we make our first **ABORTIVE ATTEMPT**.



Abortive Attempt

We compare it to our perfect image.



Abortive Attempt

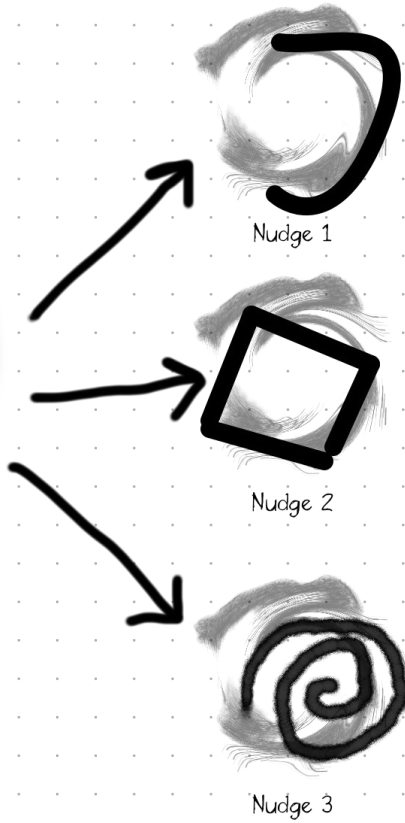


Vague Idea of  
Perfect

And that gives us some ideas...



Vague Idea of  
Perfect



# Successive Approximation

We choose one and go nudge it.

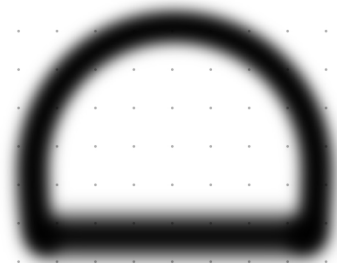


Nudge 1

Let's compare it to our perfect image...WAIT!



Nudge 1



Vague Idea of  
Perfect

The perfect image changed! You can't do that, can you?

[sound cue: evil laughter]

Oh yes — did I forget to mention that your vision of what your piece is “supposed” to look like will change?<sup>38</sup>

That’s because every time you stand back to look at the piece and see changes you can make — those changes will give you more ideas for what your project may become.

This is SUCCESSIVE APPROXIMATION, which means that every successive change, you are not necessarily *finishing* the piece, only getting closer to the end. You are approximating each and every time.

Computer programmers do exactly this when they code, only they call it “iterative processes” — they run their code, then see where it fails or could be made better, and then they make the changes and run it again. At each iteration (repetition) the code gets better.

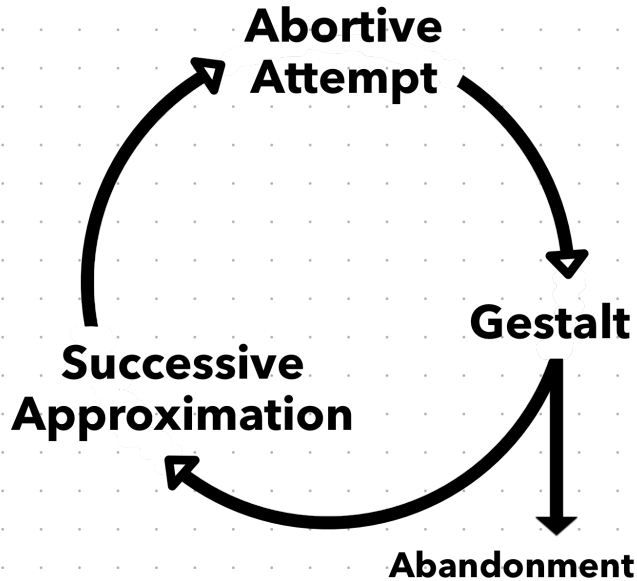
In other words, each SUCCESSIVE APPROXIMATION then becomes a new ABORTIVE ATTEMPT, which then needs a new GESTALT, which prompts another SUCCESSIVE APPROXIMATION, which becomes...

---

38. I did not forget to mention that. Go look at the last sentence of the last chapter.

# ~~Successive Approximation~~

Here, have a picture:



Don't worry — you're not stuck in that loop forever.<sup>39</sup> We MAKE THE THING THAT IS NOT by blundering our way through the cycle of “I'm gonna make some crap” — “Oh crap, it's crap.” — “I'm gonna fix that crap” — until finally we get to the off-ramp and ABANDON our work to its AUDIENCE.



39. see ABANDONMENT, p. 103

There is a very good book you should read some day if you are at all interested about becoming a better creator: *Art & Fear*, by David Bayles and Ted Orland. In it, the authors tell a story about a pottery teacher who split up his class, telling one half that their final grade would depend only on the *quantity* of their work, i.e., 50 pounds of pots would get them an A; and the other half that their grade would depend on the *quality* of one single pot they produced.

At the end of the semester, of course, it was the students who made *more* pots who ended up with the better work. Every mistake they made along the way was useful, either as a correction or as a new path.

It is like famous inventor Thomas Edison's statement that he hadn't failed 1000 times in inventing the light bulb, he had learned 999 ways not to do it. Each time you attempt a project and fail, you learn something new about the project.<sup>40</sup>

---

40. If you're paying attention.  
Pay attention.



# Successive Approximation



Now that you're convinced that you don't have to produce a perfect work straight out of your head, have some Pro Tips for SUCCESSIVE APPROXIMATION:

When I'm writing and I'm going great in a sentence and then all of a sudden I can't think of the correct word or concept or person's name — I will just type or write XXX and keep going. The XXX makes it easy when I'm looking back over my writing to see where I gave up and left a blank.

Or when I have beginning and an ending, but not a middle, I'll put in an XXX for the missing section. (This book had a *lot* of XXX's in its evolution!)

If you can't figure out what comes next, *summarize* what comes next. "I need to connect section A to section B." "I need to explain the concept of the magic mailbox more clearly." "I need a better bridge between the chorus and the third verse."

Write yourself questions that you don't have answers to. "What emotion should this section attempt to express most clearly?" "What next step will leave me with different ways to move forward?" "Is there a way to embed Theme B in the music at this point?" "Should this section go in the chapter on GESTALT?"

## AND SO...

- The first version is not the finished product.
- Do it over, repeat with variations and improvements. Make it right-er. [GESTALT]
- Make it possible to update/upgrade the project.
- Don't wait until you can do it perfectly — dive in. [ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS]

Have you figured out that all the Precepts are connected to each other? You should write notes about that.

# PRECEPT 6: RITUAL

This is the hardest chapter.

The Precept of RITUAL is complicated and abstract, that is, mostly ideas and talk and not a lot of “how-to.” I will try to give you enough “how-to” so you can make sense of it.

But first, some ideas and talk.



There’s a thing called **THE HERO’S JOURNEY**. It’s a pattern that a man named Joseph Campbell noticed in stories of all kinds — myths, legends, fairy tales, even movies and novels.

Here’s how it works. When the story starts, our hero is stuck in a yucky situation. Call it **Situation A**.

A

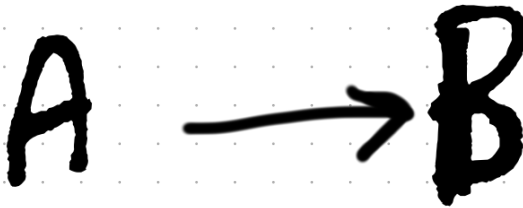
**Situation A** is not good. Your wicked stepmother has it in for you. The princess never smiles. You want to go to the Academy but Uncle Owen won’t let you even though Biggs left last year. **Situation A** is yucky.

yucky

To complete the yuckiness of **Situation A**, you — the Hero — are not quite a knight in shining armor. You're the youngest — you're an orphan — you're not very smart — that kind of thing.

But then something happens. You find a lamp. You give a glass of water to an old woman. The new droid runs off to find Ben Kenobi. Soon you find yourself going into the woods, or down the rabbit hole, or out to the Tusken wastelands.

You're leaving **Situation A** and heading into a completely different place: **Situation B**. This is the **Call to Adventure**.



yucky

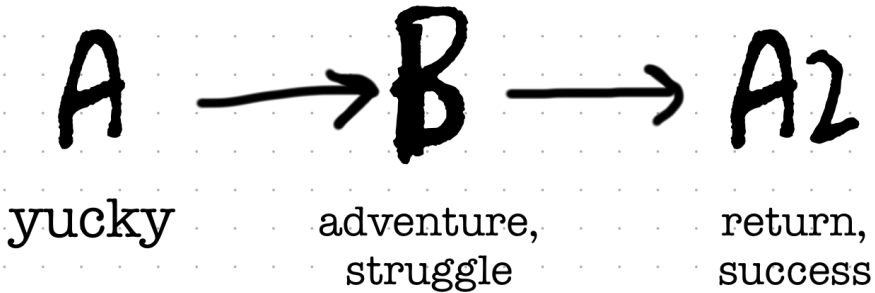
adventure,  
struggle

**Situation B** is very different. It's scary, it's probably dark, and there are a lot of things you don't know and have never seen before. The **Call to Adventure** has dragged you into a **Quest**: slay the dragon, find a treasure, rescue the princess.

## ~~Ritual~~ Ritual ~~Ritual~~

Sometimes you get help from unexpected places — a dwarf, a wizard, Old Ben — but eventually you have to face the Monster at the End of the World. There you use whatever tools and gifts you've picked up along the way to defeat the Monster and achieve the goal of the **Quest**.

But you're not done yet. Now you have to leave **Situation B** and return to **Situation A**, only now you have the treasure/the sword/the princess. Before, you were a nobody. Now you're a hero, and you're home. **Situation A** is no longer yucky, so let's call it **Situation A2**.



As you read this you may find yourself thinking, "Hey, this is just like Jack and the Beanstalk or *The Hunger Games*." You are right. It is.



# ~~///~~ Young Person's Guide ~~///~~

Now, finally, we're ready to talk about RITUAL.

RITUAL is a series of actions that are repeated in a certain order. RITUAL is designed to create a change in you or your AUDIENCE.

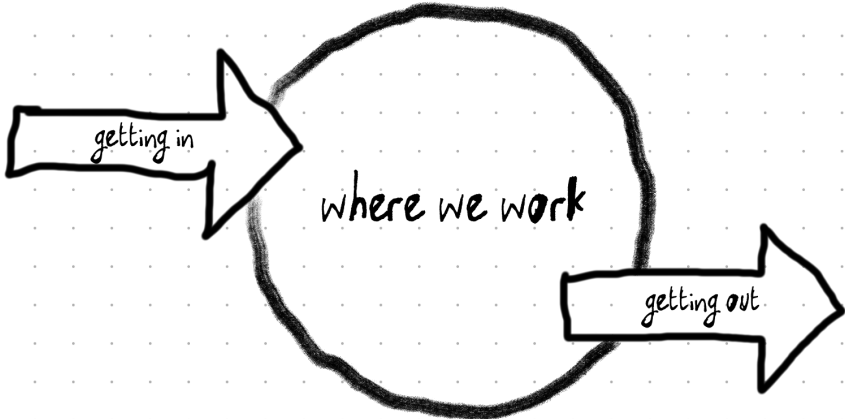
A church or temple service is a RITUAL.

Going to see a play or a movie is a RITUAL.

Reading a book is a RITUAL.

What do all of these have in common? They all create a space for our minds and our souls to work. And they all use the same shape to get us into that space and then out of that space.

where we don't work



where we don't work

# Ritual

What do we mean by that? Here's a handy chart:

	Getting in	The Space	Getting out
Church/Temple	Call to worship	Sermon Music Worship	Benediction
Movie	Buying a ticket Finding a seat Previews	Entering the world of the movie	Credits Leaving theater Talking about it
Book	Being in a reading place, opening to bookmark	Being surrounded by the world of the characters	End of a chapter? Bed time?

You probably already recognize that the shape of RITUAL is the same as the **HERO'S JOURNEY**. Hold that thought.



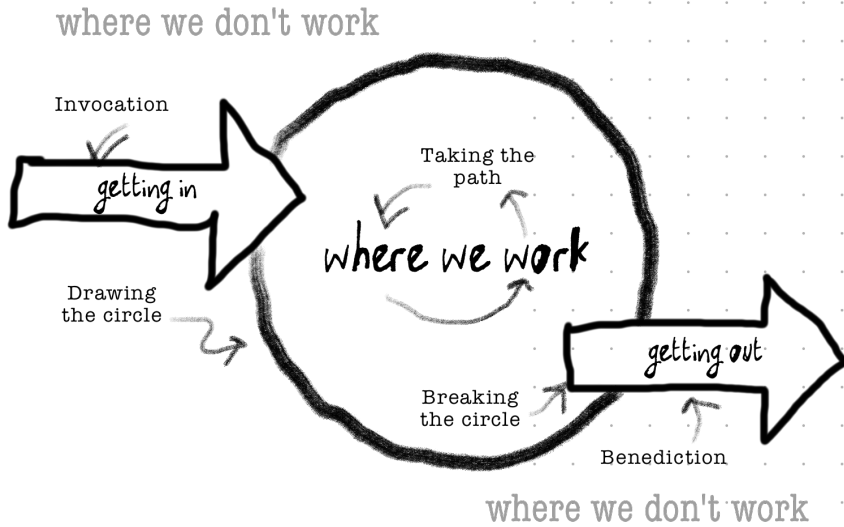
MAKING THE THING THAT IS NOT is like the **HERO'S JOURNEY**. We start with an idea or some materials, and everything's crappy. We have to accept the **Call to Adventure** and head out into the unknown. We have to figure out how to beat our own Monster (our art) and then — if we're lucky — we get to come back with our new treasure.

# Young Person's Guide

We use RITUAL to help us MAKE THE THING THAT IS NOT. Here are the terms I use to describe the separate steps of RITUAL:

- **Invocation**
- **Drawing the Circle**
- **Taking the Path<sup>41</sup>**
- **Breaking the circle**
- **Benediction**

Here's where they fit into our diagram:



41. There's another step called *Numen/Connection*, but I've left it out to keep our discussion simple. If you're interested, you can read about it at <http://bit.ly/LichtenbergianNumen>



## ~~Ritual~~ Ritual ~~Ritual~~

### Invocation

To “invoke” something means to call upon it,<sup>42</sup> so an invocation is literally calling on... what?

In the RITUAL of a religious service, an invocation begins by calling on [God] to join the congregation.

In ancient poetry like the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, the poet would invoke the Muse to help him tell the story.

For Lichtenbergians, the **Invocation** means calling on our own creative impulses to MAKE THE THING THAT IS NOT. Art doesn't just happen; we have to *decide* to make it.

Sometimes artists make the decision to work at specific times every day, or on specific days. That's an **Invocation**.

When I whip out a new WASTE BOOK and slap a label on it for a project, that's an **Invocation**.

When you have an idea and can't wait to get to your art supplies or notebook or musical instrument, that's an **Invocation**.

The point is: You have to DECIDE to MAKE THE THING THAT IS NOT.

Then it's time to **Draw the Circle**.

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42. The word comes from Latin, *in + vocare*, “to call in.” What Bach wrote at the top of his new works was literally an invocation.

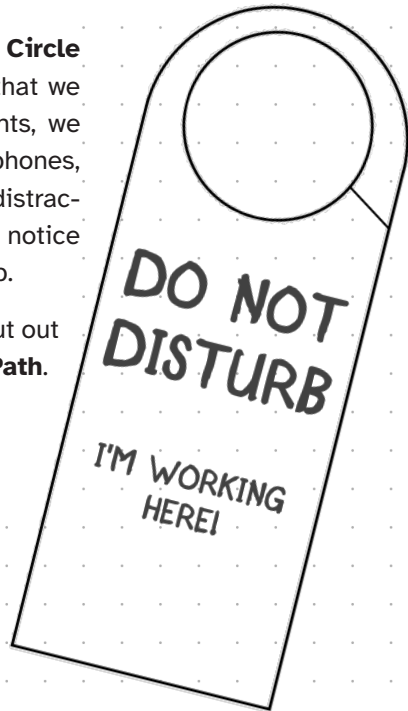
## Drawing the Circle

In many ceremonies the leader will literally draw a circle around the RITUAL group. Sometimes it's a line scratched in the dirt, or chalk on the floor. Sometimes the leader will walk around the RITUAL space with a rattle or a drum or incense.

They are separating the ceremonial space from "reality." They are telling everyone there that they have crossed a boundary and left their normal space to enter a place where things will be—for a time—more special. (Remember the HERO'S JOURNEY?)

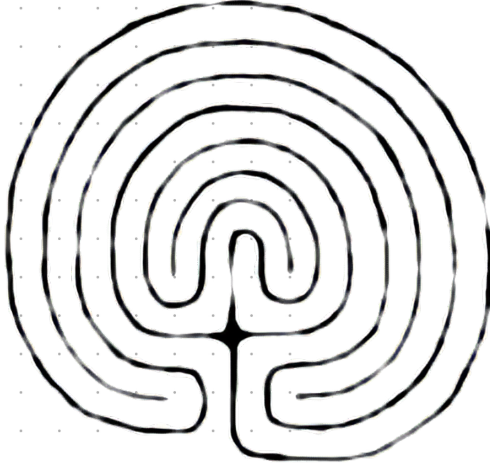
For us Lichtenbergians, **Drawing the Circle** means arranging our time/space so that we can get to work. We lay out our paints, we sharpen our pencils. We turn off our phones, block Twitter/Facebook/whatever the distraction might be. We put the Universe on notice that we're working here. Do not disturb.

Once you've **Drawn the Circle** and shut out the "real world," it's time to **Take the Path**.

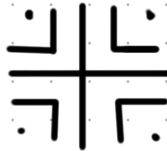


## Taking the Path

In my back yard I have built a labyrinth.



This is the pattern known as a 7-circuit labyrinth, because the path winds around the center seven times. A little research on the interwebs will give you instructions on how to draw one. Look for this little “seed” pattern:



Many people think a labyrinth is the same as a maze,<sup>43</sup> but we labyrinth fans say there is a difference: a maze is a puzzle that you have to solve, choices you have to make, choices that you can get wrong. Dead ends and failure are built into a maze.

A labyrinth, on the other hand, has only one path: once you start at the beginning, you cannot get lost—

you just follow the path and you’ll reach the center.

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43. Mostly because of the movie *Labyrinth*.

Here's my labyrinth:



Yes, it's as amazing as it  
looks.

## Ritual

People use labyrinths for quiet meditation or thinking—remember that you don't have to think about where you're going—and so my buddies in the Lichtenbergian Society have a saying:

Take the Path  
to explore  
uncover  
confront.  
Return to the Fire  
to confirm  
affirm  
retreat.<sup>44</sup>

So **Taking the Path** means doing the actual, scary work of exploring/uncovering/confronting all those **ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS** and **GESTALTS** and **SUCCESSIVE APPROXIMATIONS**.<sup>45</sup>

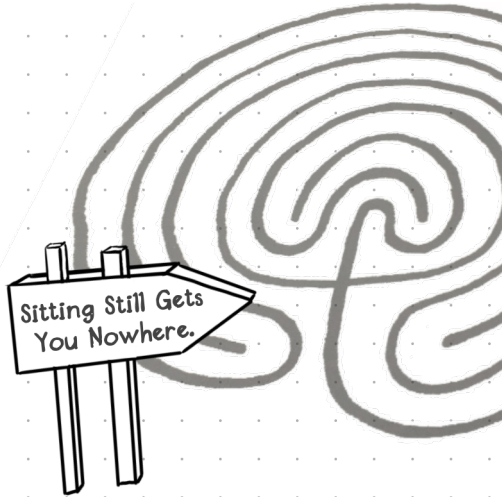
Just like the Hero, you have to get up and take that Path—you have to go into the woods—because that's the only way you're going to slay the dragon/win the princess/create art.

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44. Does that sound like the HERO'S JOURNEY to you? Good, you're catching on.

45. You might think, now that you know about **ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS**—>**GESTALT**—>**SUCCESSIVE APPROXIMATIONS**, that the creative process is more like a maze than a labyrinth, with choices, dead ends, and failure written all over it. I will not disagree.

Just remember:



## Breaking the Circle

Eventually of course you have to Break the Circle. It's time to walk the dog, or do your homework, or maybe your brain just stops working.<sup>46</sup> It's time to quit.

But don't just quit. Take the time to say to yourself and to the Universe, "I'm done here. I'm going to be doing the ABANDONMENT thing for a while. Be right back."

Here's one weird trick that many famous writers use: Stop when the work is going great! Stop when you know *exactly* what comes next. That way, the next time you **Take the Path**, you're not staring at a blank wall. Not

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46. It could happen.

## ~~///~~ Ritual ~~///~~

only will you have the ideas you stopped with, your brain has been working on it between sessions. You'll be glad to get back to work.

So clean your brushes. Save your work. Tidy your desk.<sup>47</sup> Organize All The Things.

Take a step back.

Take a deep breath. Stretch.

Now go do your homework.

## Benediction

Just as Invocation is as simple as turning the light switch on, Benediction is simply acknowledging that you're done.

In addition to turning the lights off, you should probably throw in a little gratitude there, as well as a promise to return. The Universe likes that kind of thing. Might make it easier next time.<sup>48</sup>



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47. It could happen.

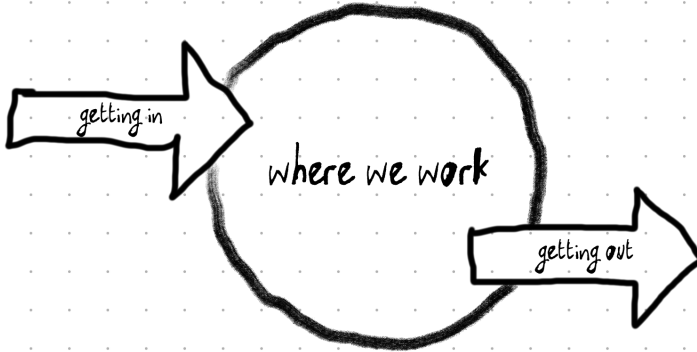
48. Spoiler alert: It will not make it easier.

# ~~///~~ Young Person's Guide ~~///~~

So, this RITUAL thing. You're probably saying, THAT'S TOO MUCH WORK or IT'S WEIRD.

It's not really. Remember:

where we don't work



where we don't work

We use RITUAL to move from Where We Don't Work into the circle Where We Work. That's it.

Almost every creative person has RITUALS they use to get into that circle. Ernest Hemingway wrote standing up; Mark Twain wrote lying down. German poet Friedrich Schiller kept rotten apples in his desk. (He claimed that the smell helped trigger his creativity.) Some people write in the morning, others at night. Whatever.



## ~~///~~ Ritual ~~///~~

All you and I need is time, space, materials, and commitment, and RITUAL can help us get all those things together. By recognizing that you're willing to get to work—**Invocation**, — you trigger your body/brain/soul to enter that space where the words or notes or ideas come from.

RITUAL doesn't guarantee success, of course. Sometimes you eat the Minotaur, sometimes the Minotaur eats you. But unless you enter the labyrinth—**Take the Path**—you will have a very hard time MAKING THE THING THAT IS NOT, and it's hard enough as it is.

Make it easier: draw that circle, take that path.

### **AND SO...**

- Find the time and space that suits your working habits and needs, then protect them.
- Find a pattern that leads into (and out of) your creative space.

## PRECEPT 7:

### STEAL FROM THE BEST

There's a saying among creative types:

"Good artists borrow; great artists steal."

What does that mean?

It means that we as artists hardly ever create something totally new. It means we get our ideas from everything and everyone around us. It means we learn from other artists.

It means we take from those who have come before and use their gift to us to create our own **THING THAT IS NOT**. It means we look at how nature makes things and we copy it. It means we understand the patterns and forms used by others and use them ourselves.

Just as **ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS** lets you off the hook for having to create something perfect, **STEAL FROM THE BEST** lets you off the hook for having to come up with something completely original. Because here's the truth: nothing is original.

Yes, of course every work of art is new and shows us something new about ourselves and our world, but nothing comes from nothing. Every artist gets ideas from other artists.

How does that work?

## ~~Steal~~ Steal from the Best ~~Steal~~



First of all, we can steal from the past. In the old days, that's what you were expected to do — there were forms you used, rules to follow, and you followed them.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though, artists and writers decided it was time to break the rules. (This is where we started getting the idea that everything had to be *new* and *original*.)

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were very few rules that artists *had* to follow, which may sound great — but absolute freedom can be really really alarming. Sometimes it's actually freeing to write a sonnet, or compose a sonata, or paint a traditional still life; those forms give you a path to follow, even if you end up leaving the path behind.<sup>49</sup>

So it's worth going back looking at these traditional forms, and using them for your work. You'll learn a lot about your art, and by learning the "rules" you'll know what you're doing when you break them.

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49. **Take the Path** can turn into **Make the Path!**

## If you're a poet...

- Learn the basic meters—iambic, trochaic, dactylic, anapestic—and practice writing in them.<sup>50</sup>
- Explore the old forms and rhyme schemes: quatrain, terza rima, sonnet, blank verse, etc.
- Write new lyrics for a popular song, or for a piece of music that has no lyrics.

## If you're a composer...

- Explore traditional harmony; learn those chords and their inversions!
- What's a rondo? Sonata allegro form? ABA song structure? Find out.
- Write a song that mimics a song you admire: slow intro, big chord, rocking chorus, etc.

## If you're a painter...

- Learn to paint a color wheel. Learn how to take a color from pure color to white and from pure color to black.
- Know how to draw the basic geometric solids—cube, sphere, cone, pyramid—and how to shade them.
- Study human anatomy and how all our pieces work together.

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50. Pro tip: Work towards natural-sounding language. Don't reverse words in a sentence, and don't use "filler" words like *did* ("and so he did turn," that kind of thing).

# ~~///~~ Steal from the Best ~~///~~

If you're a \_\_\_\_\_

- \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_



The second way to STEAL FROM THE BEST is to steal from artists you admire: Learn to play their music. Read their books. Study their paintings.

Reverse engineer their work. That means to look at their final, “perfect” product and figure out how they got there. Figure out what strategies they used, and then use those strategies to create your own work. As Austin Kleon says, “The great thing about dead or remote masters is that they can’t refuse you as an apprentice... They left their lesson plans in their work.”<sup>51</sup>

After all, I call myself a composer — I’ve written a lot of music — but I’ve never taken a class in composition. How did I learn all of it? I stole it: I stole it from textbooks and encyclopedias and album covers. I stole it from choral directors. I stole it from Mozart and Beethoven and Philip Glass.

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51. *Steal Like an Artist*, p. 17

You can, too.



Other places you can STEAL FROM THE BEST:

**Steal from your culture:**

Look at local folk art. Listen to family stories. Do you belong to a group or culture that has a definite “insider” feel? What does it take to be on the “inside”? What would mark you as an “outsider”?

**Steal from the world at large:**

The world has a gazillion different cultures around the world, and you can learn from any of them. For example, one of Pablo Picasso's first megahit paintings was *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and one of the reasons it created a sensation was Picasso's “theft” of the geometric patterns of African tribal masks.

A word of caution here: there is today some concern about “cultural appropriation,” which means that some people think it shows disrespect for one culture to “steal” another culture's imagery, music, costume, etc. Certainly if you are snagging something that has a religious significance in someone else's culture just to put on a t-shirt, that's not just wrong, it's cheesy. But it is my belief that we — human beings — are all in this together, and that if China wants to learn to play the violin and play Mozart, why should we jealously guard that?

## Steal from the Best

### Steal from nature:

In 1941, an engineer in Switzerland named George de Mestral went for a walk with his dog. He noticed that burdock seeds would stick to his coat and his dog's fur; he was curious about how they did that, and when he examined the seeds saw they were covered with tiny little hooks. Hm, he said, that could be useful, and he invented Velcro®.

Beethoven loved to go for long walks in the country, and his Sixth Symphony, "Pastorale," uses sounds and feelings from those walks — birdsong, peasant music, thunderstorms — as the building blocks for the entire work. (Many other composers have used birdsong as inspiration: Antonio Vivaldi, Olivier Messaien, and Ottorino Respighi among them.)

Beatrix Potter wanted to be a scientific illustrator. She was particularly adept at drawing types of fungus, but the scientific community rejected her because she was a woman. (Ironically, mycologists still use her illustrations of fungi.) She used her powers of observation and her gifts as an artist to write and illustrate children's books: *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* for starters.

You, too, can and should pay attention to the natural world around you.

**AND SO...**

- Don't be afraid to emulate your heroes.
- Stuck? Look for how others have solved it — and try it yourself.
- Learn and use the great forms of the past.



## PRECEPT 8: AUDIENCE

As an artist, you want other people to see the THING you've MADE — you want them to see it, to like it, to appreciate it, maybe even give you money for it. As a friend of mine says, his paintings aren't really finished until someone buys them and takes them home.<sup>52</sup>

It's probably true that we'd all love to be best-selling authors/artists/songwriters, but think of this: Are there popular movies you don't care about seeing? Books you wouldn't read? Music you won't listen to? That's OK — all that means is that you are not the AUDIENCE for those artists.

The reverse of this is true, too: not everyone out there is *your* AUDIENCE.

So who is *YOUR* AUDIENCE?



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52. Or, he always adds, until he's dead.

## ~~///~~ Young Person's Guide ~~///~~

First of all, let me be clear about who your AUDIENCE is *not*: the Museum of Modern Art [MOMA] is not your AUDIENCE. The New York Times bestseller list is not your AUDIENCE. The Tony Awards Committee is not your AUDIENCE. You are not MAKING THE THING THAT IS NOT for those guys.

In fact, even if you *are* on the NYT bestseller list, you are not MAKING THE THING THAT IS NOT for those guys. You are MAKING THE THING THAT IS NOT for *your* AUDIENCE.

Austin Kleon, author of *Steal Like an Artist*, said in a tweet one day something like: Imagine yourself appearing before an adoring crowd of hundreds, even thousands of fans. Do you imagine that every single one of them really, truly cares about your work? No, of course not. Maybe a handful do. Those people are your AUDIENCE.

I would add: The rest of them are The Crowd.

Don't create for The Crowd. Create for your AUDIENCE.



Create for your **audience**.

Create for **your** audience.

Create **for** your audience.

**Create** for your audience.

## ~~W~~ Audience ~~W~~

You actually have at least two AUDIENCES:

1. Those people out there.
2. Those people right here.

That first AUDIENCE is that great invisible crowd of people to whom you will eventually Abandon your work. They are the ones who will read your book, listen to your music, stroll your garden, review your research. If there are enough of them, they may very well propel you to that bestseller list or that Tony Award, but even so they are not infinite in number. You are not MAKING THE THING THAT IS NOT for everyone.

Let me say that again: your work is not for everyone. It is for *your* AUDIENCE. Even our top earners know this. George R. R. Martin<sup>53</sup> is writing his books for readers who like huge, sprawling fantasies with hundreds of characters and a lot of violence. If you don't like that kind of thing, he's not writing for you. And trust me, he's OK with that.



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54. Author of *The Game of Thrones*, which you probably already knew

Then there's your second AUDIENCE, "those people right here."

If you look at history, you'll find that all the cool kids seemed to know each other. The artists, writers, scientists, composers of any great period partied together, shared studios, wrote letters, stole from each other, supported each other, argued with each other.

There's a word for that: *scenius*.<sup>54</sup> Musician Brian Eno made that word up by combining "scene" and "genius" — a group intelligence that results from all the cool kids hanging out together.

Who is your scenius? MAKING THE THING THAT IS NOT is just easier when you have people who are interested in seeing you succeed.

Do you have a writers' group? A band? A drama club? Here's a scary idea: if you don't have one, make one. Form a club at school. Start a band.

Start with one or two friends. Meet often. Share lots. Embrace difference!

Show interest in each other's work. Give feedback; criticize but don't silence. Express praise. Offer encouragement. Promote each other's work.

Form your own Lichtenbergian Society.



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54. Pronounced: SEEN-yus

## ~~///~~ Audience ~~///~~

You have a third AUDIENCE: yourself.

Think about it: as you work through the cycle of ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS, GESTALT, and SUCCESSIVE APPROXIMATION, you are trying to please your eye, your ear, your sense of wholeness and completion. Only you can decide when it's time to ABANDON the work.

Once again, MOMA is not your AUDIENCE. None of the artists whom you admire, not even the ones who are filthy rich, create their work for some abstract notion of fame. It is certainly true that Those People Out There will give you money for your work — I will have no objections if this book sells a million copies — but the surest way to short-circuit your process is to stop listening to you inner AUDIENCE and try to hear instead the fickle and nonexistent voice of The Crowd.

Stick to your inner AUDIENCE; if it also pleases MOMA or the bestseller list, that's great (remember to invite me to your private Caribbean island for a stay) but never pursue an AUDIENCE that does not exist.

Most artists are in fact their own toughest AUDIENCE. Even today when I hear some of my music, I can hear all the compromises, the band-aids, and the outright failures to achieve what I thought I wanted from the piece — but almost no one else can.

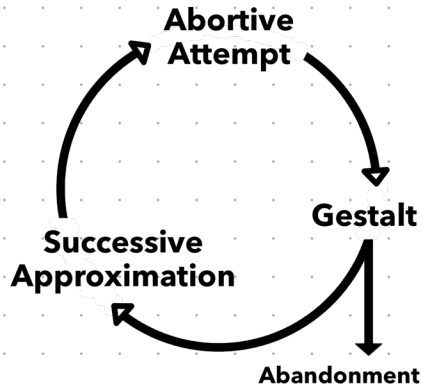
The trick is to be your own AUDIENCE, not your own Critic. There is a difference.

**AND SO...**

- MOMA is not your AUDIENCE.
- Find or create your scenius.
- Be your own AUDIENCE: journal your efforts in some way.

# PRECEPT 9: ABANDONMENT

Remember the ABORTIVE ATTEMPT cycle?



ABANDONMENT is the exit ramp off that loop.

Just like AUDIENCE, there are three different kinds of ABANDONMENT.



Let's look at the hard version of ABANDONMENT first and get it out of the way: **ABANDONMENT = Failure.**

Lichtenbergians have two mottos: "Cras meli-  
or est" and "Failure is always an option."

That sounds terrible, but let me explain why  
it's not.

"Failure is always an option" is a great way to  
think about your work. Like the whole struc-  
ture of Lichtenbergianism — of this book —  
the idea of embracing failure is a joking way  
to give you the tools to fail, to fail often, and  
to fail upwards.

The thing is, failure is part of the process. You  
may think that "failure" means that you did  
something bad, that if you were a *real* artist  
you would have ridden that wave all the way  
to the shore and then shaken the water out  
of your hair in slow motion like some golden  
surfer dude.

This is nonsense. You have not "failed," you  
have ABANDONED work that is no longer your  
work. *Real* artists know this. Remember, not  
all baby sea turtles make it. Not all art gets  
finished.

No, it's not fun. Yes, it's painful. But ABANDON-  
ING your work doesn't make you less of an art-  
ist, it makes you more of one.





## ~~///~~ Abandonment ~~///~~

There are two other versions of ABANDONMENT. The first is our old friend TASK AVOIDANCE: you just set a project aside and don't work on it for a while.<sup>55</sup> Come back to it later when you have a better grip on how to finish it.

In fact, even if you think a project is a failure, don't throw it out. When bestselling author Stephen King was young, married, and poor, he was trying to make money by selling short stories to magazines. One day he wrote an ABORTIVE ATTEMPT of a story, and it was so terrible that he threw it in the trash. When his wife got home from work, she found it in the trash and read it. She convinced him it wasn't terrible. She said it was good enough to keep working on, so he did. But it soon became too long to be a short story, so he kept writing until it turned into his first novel, *Carrie*.

So keep all your "failures." You never know when they might be ready to come back to life.



The third kind of ABANDONMENT is actually far scarier than failure, and it's when your project is finished and you have to hand it over to an AUDIENCE. As the French poet Paul Valery said, "A poem is never finished, merely abandoned."

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55. see Gestation, p. 38 [in TASK AVOIDANCE]

What did he mean by that? Sending your art to an AUDIENCE is like when you finish a project for school and turn it in for the teacher to grade. Will your teacher notice all the errors or will they think it's a pretty good job?<sup>56</sup> Likewise, will your AUDIENCE love what you've done, or will they hate it? Or worst of all, will they ignore it?

You can't be afraid of any of that.<sup>57</sup> ABANDONMENT is where you get off the ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS circle. The artist Pierre Bonnard was obsessed with perfecting the colors in his paintings, and the story is told that he convinced his friend Édouard Vuillard to distract the guards in a museum so he could touch up one of his paintings *hanging in that museum*. Don't be that guy.

### AND SO...

- Give yourself permission to stop — it's OK to stop gnawing at it.
- Let it go — walk away from it and come back later to look at it. [GESTALT]
- Failure is a perfectly acceptable option.
- Be interested in your failures. Make them interesting.
- It's also perfectly acceptable to succeed.

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56. Of course, it's your teacher's job to notice the errors. School is nothing more than the whole ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS cycle, and your teacher is there to help you with the GESTALT of learning.

57. You can even be afraid of people thinking you're a genius, because what if the *next* thing you make SUCKS??

# WRAPPING UP

And that's it: Lichtenbergianism, procrastination as a creative strategy. Now that you've seen the Precepts, you may be thinking, "This is the worst book on creativity ever — it didn't even tell me how to make my art perfect!"

No, it did not. It did something better.

If you are like me — and like most of the people I've worked with — the only thing stopping you from accomplishing your work is the fear that it's not going to be perfect. Lichtenbergianism shows you that it's not going to be perfect, and that's okay.

As I said in Chapter One, what I get out of Lichtenbergianism is the sense that I have permission to create, and to create crap. Because of the way the creative process works, I have gotten better at all the things I've created by creating more things, from writing to designing to composition to computer programming; that's the way it works.

Start where you are.

Use what you have.

Do what you can.

**MAKE THE THING THAT IS NOT.**

And then do it again.

Better.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

So who am I anyway?

I was a school media specialist for many years, both at the high school and the elementary levels. I worked hard to make the book collection in my libraries be the kind of library I wanted as a kid, and I've tried to make this book a book that I would have liked when I was a kid.

I was also the artistic director of our community theatre, and I worked with the Georgia Governor's Honors Program (a summer program for gifted and talented high school students) for nearly 30 years.

I've done a lot of creative stuff in my life. I have acted, directed, composed music, painted and drawn and sculpted, written poetry, blogged, written books, and programmed computers. I made a labyrinth in my backyard. I have taught other people how to do these things.

I've done all these things mostly because nobody ever told me not to. I hope you will do the same.

My website is  
[lichtenbergianism.com](http://lichtenbergianism.com)

You can follow me on  
Twitter @Lichtenbergian

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Beethoven's score, p. 47, is  
from Beethoven-Haus Bonn

~~///~~ Wrapping Up ~~///~~

# NOTES & THOUGHTS

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