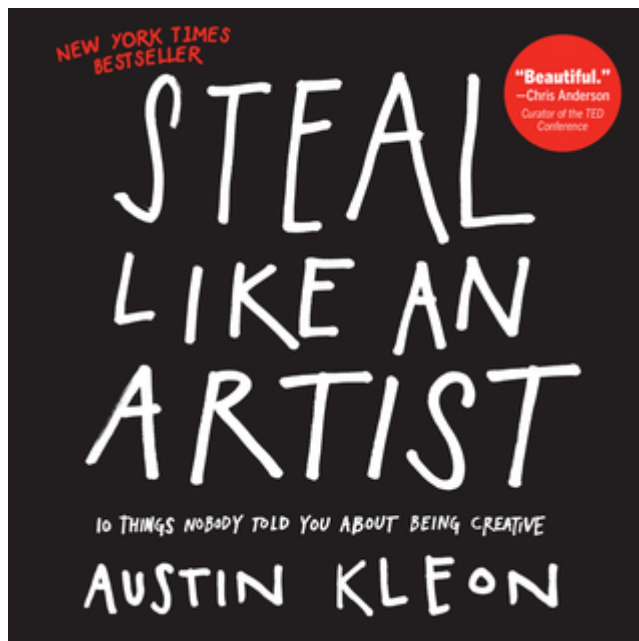


Steal Like an Artist

Full title	Steal Like an Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative
Authors	Austin Kleon
Publication Year	2012
Recommended By	



Pre-reading: What do I want to get out of this book?

My main creative endeavors are writing in my [PKM](#) and for my [Blog](#). When writing notes based on some source (YouTube video, article, etc.), there's a spectrum between blatantly copying the source and coming up with some original take on the same topic ([Write with your own words](#)). Some sources are so good that I find that any tweak I try to make it my own just ends up being less clear. Perhaps this book has some good takes on *how* to add my own take on a source while make it better.

Post-reading: Thoughts and takeaways

This book is really brief (160 pages with a bunch of images and large quotes, ~hour of reading) and has some pretty basic advice. I think the utility of this book is by compressing this basic advice and presenting it in a fun and short way that's easy to digest quickly. In a way, Kleon mentions this himself:

As the French writer André Gide put it, "Everything that needs to be said has already been said. But, since no one was listening, everything must be said again."

So, yes, this book is, expectedly, a mix of churned and been-there-done-that advice that I already heard, but that's not a bad thing. Being reminded of things you already know is not necessarily a waste of time. It spurred me to write notes on things that were in the back of my head for a while. It also connected some thoughts that I had, but hadn't connected (and [Creativity is about connecting ideas together](#)). Overall, I think there's some solid advice here for beginners and perhaps good reminders for those already deep in their creative endeavors. If this made the same points in three times the volume, like many business books that are inflated to sell better, I would think this was a waste of time.

Summary

1. Steal like an artist
2. Don't wait until you know who you are to get started
3. Write the book you want to read
4. Use your hands
5. Side projects and hobbies are important
6. Do good work and share it with people
7. Geography is no longer our master
8. Be nice (the world is a small town)
9. Be boring (it's the only way to get work done)
10. Creativity is subtraction

Dedication

” [Steal Like an Artist \(book\)](#) by [Austin Kleon](#)

It's one of my theories that when people give you advice, they're really just talking to themselves in the past. This book is me talking to a previous version of myself.

[Write notes with yourself as the audience](#) - [CGP Grey](#) also does this (discussed in [Cortex](#) I believe).

1: Steal Like an Artist

Kleon claims that "nothing is original" and that all ideas are combinations, mashups and remixes of ideas that came before them.

” [Steal Like an Artist \(book\)](#) by [Austin Kleon](#)

You are, in fact, a mashup of what you choose to let into your life. You are the sum of your influences. The German writer Goethe said, "We are shaped and fashioned by what we love."

Kleon suggests that the best way to steal is to note down things that inspire you. I agree - [Capturing thoughts is important](#).

” [Steal Like an Artist \(book\)](#) by [Austin Kleon](#)

Carry a notebook and a pen with you wherever you go. Get used to pulling it out and jotting down your thoughts and observations. Copy your favorite passages out of books. Record overheard conversations. Doodle when you're on the phone.

2: Don't Wait Until You Know Who You Are to Get Started

It's hard to find "your own voice", something that makes you unique in your creative scene. Kleon suggest that many people experience [Impostor Syndrome](#) where they think they aren't distinct enough to create something meaningful.

Kleon suggests to copy and imitate your heroes, a collection of people who's work you admire. You will find your own voice doing this, because:

1. You can't copy them perfectly. Whatever little mistakes or deviations you make will be "you".
2. You won't copy one specific person; you'll copy a collection of people who inspire *you*. That specific combination of personal heroes is unique to you. I personally copy [CGP Grey](#) quite a bit (e.g., with my [Evergreen Tool Report](#) style, using the "set the opposite goal" in [How to pick a starter project that'll make someone quit](#), etc.), but I *also* copy a bit from [Brandon Sanderson](#), [Adam Ragusea](#), and I probably carry a lot of other more subconscious influences. That specific combination of people who I admire is unique to me, or at rare enough for it to matter.

” [Steal Like an Artist \(book\)](#) by [Austin Kleon](#)

plagiarism is trying to pass someone else's work off as your own. Copying is about reverse - engineering. It's like a mechanic taking apart a car to see how it works.

3: Write The Book You Want to Read

” [Steal Like an Artist \(book\)](#) by [Austin Kleon](#)

All fiction, in fact, is fan fiction.

If you can't wait for another [CGP Grey](#) video, make a video in his style. If you just finished reading the [Cosmere Universe](#) series by [Brandon Sanderson](#) and find that you keep obsessing over it, try to write a short fantasy stories using his techniques.

4: Use Your Hands

[Creative work is done in phases of divergence and convergence](#). Divergence is where you open up to all the possibilities and explore. Convergence is where you're starting to settle on a direction and try to whittle something down to approach the final product.

” **Steal Like an Artist (book) by Austin Kleon**

That’s how I try to do all my work now. I have two desks in my office — one is “ analog ” and one is “ digital. ” The analog desk has nothing but markers, pens, pencils, paper, index cards, and newspaper. Nothing electronic is allowed on that desk. This is where most of my work is born, and all over the desk are physical traces, scraps, and residue from my process.(Unlike a hard drive, paper doesn’t crash.) The digital desk has my laptop, my monitor, my scanner, and my drawing tablet. This is where I edit and publish my work.

In other words, Kleon suggests to use analog tools for divergence and use digital tools for convergence.

” **Steal Like an Artist (book) by Austin Kleon**

The computer brings out the uptight perfectionist in us — we start editing ideas before we have them.

This is very similar to [Write notes with as low inhibition as possible](#).

5: Side Projects and Hobbies are Important

” **Steal Like an Artist (book) by Austin Kleon**

Tomlinson suggests that if you love different things, you just keep spending time with them.” Let them talk to each other. Something will begin to happen. ”

This seems to me like a continuation of [Don't Wait Until You Know Who You Are to Get Started](#). in that your own voice is the amalgamation of people who's work you copy. In this sense, it is also the amalgamation of the things that you love to do. [Adam Ragusea](#) was a professional journalist and later taught journalism. He was also an amateur musician and cook. Eventually, his cooking YouTube channel was a success, but his style is very much affected by his other hobbies. The Adam Ragusea style is exactly the combination of all of these hobbies (See his talk [How I write food videos \(Atlanta Writers' Club speech, May 2020\)](#) and [How Adam Ragusea’s journalism background helps him in his YouTube career](#)

Another point Kleon makes is that a cohesive brand is overrated:

” **Steal Like an Artist (book) by Austin Kleon**

Don’t throw any of yourself away. Don’t worry about a grand scheme or unified vision for your work. Don’t worry about unity — what unifies your work is the fact that you made it. One day, you’ll look back and it will all make sense.

This, too, is a point that [CGP Grey](#) makes a lot. His videos cover whatever interests him at the moment, whether it's election systems, hexagons, history, abandoned rocket testing facilities, disease, Indians, what have you. While these topics are very disparate, Grey's personality is what shines through them. And he incorporates his hobbies as well - his video on the best way to board an airplane has a bunch of Lord of the Rings references. His video on federal land makes heavy use of imagery from [Magic - The Gathering](#). Every little detail has some side of Grey in it, which is why he has a large community of people following him, even though no one can really predict what the next video topic would be about.

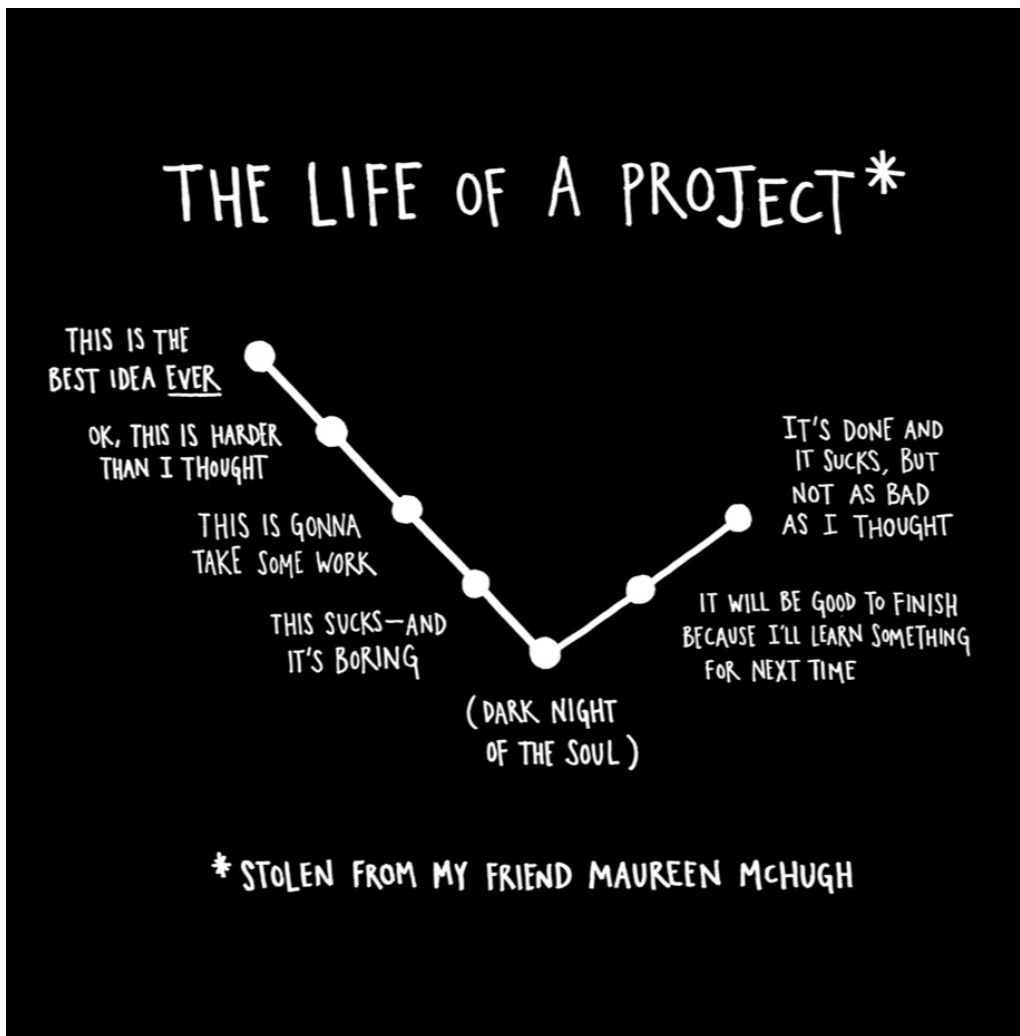
6: The Secret: Do Good Work and Share It with People

There are a few points here:

- Obscurity is useful because you can experiment and no one will judge you
- Don't wait until you have a masterpiece. Share your progress, how you do things, things you *haven't* figured out yet. People are drawn to openness and they might even help you figure it out. If you haven't fully fleshed out that blog post and you're stuck, share your struggle on Reddit or in a forum. I think I should do more of that (and started to do that sometimes in the [Obsidian](#) forum).
- Put stuff out there frequently.

” [Steal Like an Artist \(book\)](#) by [Austin Kleon](#)

Whenever I've become lost over the years, I just look at my website and ask myself, "What can I fill this with?"



7. Geography is no longer our master

Because of the internet, you see?

8: Be Nice (The World is a Small Town)

Several points here:

- If you say something bad about someone on the internet, they'll find out, so don't.
- Find someone close that's more talented than you and get them to be your mentor. Find ways to help them so they'll keep you around.
- Don't rely on validation from other people, but if you do get some praise, save it so you could get a kick of feeling good when you need it.

” [Steal Like an Artist \(book\)](#) by [Austin Kleon](#)

If you ever find that you're the most talented person in the room, you need to find another room.

9: Be Boring (It's The Only Way to Get Work Done.)

This tip is about finding your own [Executable Strategy](#) for your creative endeavors.

” [Steal Like an Artist \(book\)](#) by [Austin Kleon](#)

Amassing a body of work or building a career is a lot about the slow accumulation of little bits of effort over time. Writing a page each day doesn't seem like much, but do it for 365 days and you have enough to fill a novel.

[Brandon Sanderson](#) is the best famous example I can think of in this area. And I think that copying someone's [Executable Strategy](#) is also helpful in finding your own way of doing things. Though, you should probably be wary that you can admire something for *what* they do and not necessarily *how* they do it, and vice versa.

Kleon also suggests keeps a logbook:

” [Steal Like an Artist \(book\)](#) by [Austin Kleon](#)

A logbook isn't necessarily a diary or a journal, it's just a little book in which you list the things you do every day. What project you worked on, where you went to lunch, what movie you saw. It's much easier than keeping a detailed diary, and you'd be amazed at how helpful having a daily record like this can be, especially over several years. The small details will help you remember the big details.

I find this to be good advice overall. For me, [Journaling](#) is done using a daily note in [Obsidian](#).

10: Creativity is Subtraction

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The way to get over creative block is to simply place some constraints on yourself.

Limitations make it easier, not harder, to create. I think that's the point of [Note Writing Prompts](#). Being unconstrained leads to paralysis, but answering a specific question is much easier. "What do you think about this book?" is hard to answer, but the more limited "What other books does this book remind you of?" is much easier.