

5 Ways to Unlock Your Creative Genius



Terri Trespicio



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by Terri Trespicio

I've never given much credit to mealy mouthed advice. And I certainly try to never, ever give it.

The worst kind of advice, in my opinion, is the kind that attempts to feign “big meaning” by saying a whole lot of nothing.

One of my *least* favorite has been the idea that all you need to do to have a rich and meaningful life is to—wait for it—“follow your passion.”

That's the advice you've been told: Just follow that passion around, and it'll be sure to lead you to fans and freedom, riches and redemption.

Now, for those of us who only ever wanted to play piano, and are making a fine living doing it, well, congrats, you've found your passion and are living the dream.

But for the 99% of us who are still wondering what we'll be when we grow up, the advice to follow your passion just doesn't cut it.

Two of the biggest reasons I loathe this threadbare bit of advice are also the two most important reasons to loathe *any* advice:

It's not helpful, and ends up making you feel worse than before.

No good advice does this.

I go into this in a bit more depth in my TEDx talk, [“Stop searching for your passion.”](#)



In short, the problem is that the “find your passion” dogma insists that you must know going in precisely what you should be doing, what you’re “called” to do. Right.

What happens is most of us sit there by the phone, wondering if life lost our number.

I don’t believe our ultimate achievement is finding a singular passion or picking one like a college major. What we want is a life of meaning, value, and connection. We want to know that our work, our lives, matter.

To that end, I’d much rather hand you tools and insights and prompts to get you busy creating something that only you can.

That’s why I put together this short guide, *5 Ways to Unlock Your Creative Genius*. It’s actually not a book of advice. There are plenty of those. The goal of this little guide is to help you find flow and freedom in your own work, to shift your mindset—away from worrisome wild-goose chases, and toward crafting work that matters most to you.

And that means your greatest contribution to this world will be something you make. Something you say, plan, create—whatever verb you like. But it must be yours.

Not like *get it trademarked, call the IP lawyer yours*, though of course that’s your call. You must simply create the kind of work you can stand behind, the kind you give all you got.

A word about “creativity”...

Remember the words of Brene Brown: “*There’s no such thing as creative people and non-creative people. There are just people who use their creativity, and people who don’t.*”

We’re not going to get precious about it, either. Because your creativity is as real and necessary as a femur, a kidney, a thumb.

And just as I wouldn’t use flowery words to discuss your bladder or retina, I will not be using them to talk about your creative genius, either.

Creativity is part of what makes us innovative, resilient, robust. We will not cultivate it like some secret garden, but rather like a hardy plant that can be plopped down in any old dirt and thrive.



You have my word as we go forth: **No mealy mouthed advice, no snowflakes, no precious nonsense here. We have too much work to do.**

How to use this guide

There's no right way or wrong way, of course. You might decide to read through it first and then go back, or do the exercises as you come upon them. But as with any guide, the key isn't just to read what it says, but apply what you read to what you do.

The best kinds of books do one of two things: Keep me so engaged I can't put them down, or trigger so many ideas that I absolutely must put the book down so I can go do or write something of my own. So if you must toss this aside and start writing, that's a win!

Another option is not to read it, and instead:

⇒ [Listen to the audio guide.](#)

There are exercises here in this guide that are not in the audio version, but you can always listen and then do the exercises after.

I'd also love to hear from you on what's been most helpful to you!
Drop me a line: terri@territrespicio.com



1 | See the blank page in a new way

When you start *doing* your work differently, you start *seeing* it differently.

And by “work,” I don’t mean your job. I mean the form your art takes, whatever that may be, and it may be several forms—writing or painting, teaching and talking, crafting or launching.

And when you start *seeing* your work in a fresh way, you approach it in a fresh way, too.

I went on a rock climbing trip once. It was scary and exhilarating and all the things you’d think it might be, having never gone rock climbing before.

But it did something else: It changed the way I see rocks.

When you start climbing, the rock wall just looks flat and intimidating. But you learn to spot even the tiniest fissure or ledge on a wall, tiny little edges that become so critical, because they’re the only way up. These teeny little footholds give you a place for both rest and leverage so you can continue the journey.

I have never looked at rocks the same way again.

Even years later: I’m walking through Central Park, and there are these little outcroppings of rock here and there, and I itch to climb them, and sometimes do. I see all those tiny ledges that I wouldn’t have seen previously—all the opportunities to grab hold.

But another thing that surprised me about the actual act of rock climbing (the ONE time I did it) was that while the whole endeavor was scary, I wasn’t paralyzed with fear. And what helped stave off fear was the fact that I had *agency*.

OK, I was bound by a secure knot tied by a professional, but then I’ve also had a full fledged panic attack while securely belted into an airplane, so. The agency came from the sense of my own effort and strength as I found my way up the wall. It served as an antidote for fear.

There’s nothing so scary as feeling you have no control. And that’s why it matters that you feel yourself—your strength, focus, and ability—rising to a challenge.



The blank page can strike fear into the hearts of many people, too—even for people who write for a living!

But when you can see the page differently, as a door, rather than a wall, **things in your work, and your life, can change.**

Fact is, we've all been at the business end of a red pen, and it's been enough to silence us, to keep us small and safe.

A critical word can send a cold, chastening wind over our juiciest creative urges, and freeze them right up. Even those of us who genuinely enjoy writing sometimes question whether what we want to say is worth the paper it's written on. (Especially given the cost of a good notebook these days.)

But anything you want to do, make, craft, launch, share, or sell, must pass first through the page. Before it lands on a shelf, or in someone's hands, or on someone's mind, it must be born through the written word.

You don't have to aspire to be a writer, per se, to make good and consistent and fulfilling use of the act of writing as a tool.

It doesn't have to be your profession. Your writing doesn't have to be up to publishing or journalistic standards to play a really powerful role in your own work.

Writing is a sacred act of self expression, which people have been doing since long before anyone majored in anything.

And when you give yourself this tool to use often, even if no one sees what you wrote, it gives you a powerful place to explore your own ideas as they happen, on the page right in front of you—where your most brilliant ideas are waiting to be born.

I'll add this: There are plenty of "professional writers" (copywriters, journalists, editors, anyone who traffics in words) who may know how to lay down a sentence, but don't go an inch below the surface. So lest you think a professional wouldn't have use of this work—think again.



You can traffic in words for a living and come nowhere near the kind of moving, soulful work that moves people.

The key is to use the *act of writing* itself to stir your creative genius.

It's a pretty amazing thing. You start writing, and it stirs the water, it baits your creativity—and ideas and images and stories come flying to the surface like fish during a feeding frenzy. Maybe not right away, but they do come.

Ready? Let's try it. I'm going to give you a prompt, and you'll set a timer and start writing. Don't worry about what you'll write about, don't strategize or doubt yourself. We have no time for that.

It's a *prompt*, by the way, not an "assignment," so you can't get it wrong. Whatever in the prompt flips a switch in your mind, whatever bright tail of a fish flashes by, follow it. **Let the writing lead and just write**—the way you maybe haven't in 5, 10, 25 years.

Here we go!

Writing Prompt:

Think of a time when you got lost in the act of making something.

Doesn't matter when it happened or how old you were. All that matters is you found yourself in that delicious flow, and time, the room, the world, slipped away.

Maybe you were a kid building a sandcastle, or a sketching something as a teenager. You might have been writing a story, taking apart a car engine, making cupcakes. There's nothing too big or too small (often the smallest things are the most interesting).

Don't feel the need to explain why it was fun or enjoyable—show us, in detail, what the experience of it was for you. Just paint the scene, help us see what you saw, feel what you felt.

A time when you got lost in a task, project, creative endeavor. Set the timer for 10 minutes. Start writing.

...Ok! How did that go? What did it feel like to write it, and what surprised you in the writing of it? Where did you feel resistance, and where did you find flow?



Reread what you wrote and look for your favorite parts. Underline, circle them. Notice what's working and what was fun to do. Even better—go back to it in a few days and read it again. What did you discover upon reading it again? You never know where even the smallest work might take you.

2 | Let the critic mouth off

There are a lot of jerks who say things with zero tact and sensitivity, who never take your feelings into account, who go out of their way to inhibit your growth as a professional, and as a person.

They don't have your best interests at heart and are perfectly fine with stomping all over your best ideas

I'm sure you can call to mind a short list of people like that.

But one of them lives with you: Your inner critic.

The voice in your head, a chorus of voices of those in positions of authority, or people you never could please. You can often hear the strains of parents and teachers, too.

This critic may lambaste you privately, but you have also learned to do its bidding. Anytime you disclaim your work in public or make excuses for yourself or your work, that's what you're doing (and why you should pay attention to whether you're doing that, and where).

"This might be a silly idea," "I don't know if anyone else would agree but," "This is just my opinion," "I don't know if this is right," "I didn't have much time to put this together..." and on and on it goes.

One of the quickest ways to cut the critic off at the pass before he/she/it does further damage is to lead with your work, not a preamble or excuse. You may think it keeps you humble, or approachable, but trust me—you don't need to soften your work to make it acceptable. When you do, you just make it easier to dismiss.

Let's be clear: Your critic is not "you."



It's also not your friend (even though it claims to be helping you out). It's not what makes you smart, or interesting, or creative. Quite the opposite.

While it might be really good at proofreading, it's really, really bad at helping you create anything of note. It quashes whatever you come up with, especially if it takes a risk. "Don't say that!" it says. "What will people think?"

This is not helpful.

There is no banishing of the critic, however. You can't delete him, or fire her, or have it surgically removed.

So we aren't trying to silence him (or it, or her, pick your pronoun; it's your critic). What we're doing is separating out that voice for what it is, acknowledging it, and deciding how we will respond – not reacting by putting our tail between our legs every time it shouts.

But first, we hear it out.

The critic exercise

Set a timer for 10 minutes and then, without stopping, let the critic loose on the page. Write down what she or he or they are saying to you. No matter how harsh, how painful, how rough.

Ask your critic, "*Go ahead. What are you all worked up about?*" Don't censor or question. Let her say what she must. Let your hand or fingers fly across the page, until time is up.

Go do that, and then come back.

...OK. Phew! That's a lot, right?

Go back through what you just wrote. It's time to question the critic.

- **Ask if it's true.** For each statement, accusation or anxiety the critic says, ask, "*Is that true?*" and maybe you think, "*Well, yes it is true.*" OK...but is it really true? True 100% of the time?



For instance, if your critic says, “*You’re lazy and dumb and you haven’t achieved a thing!*” Is it true? Is it *really* true? Are you lazy all the time? Have you done nothing that you’re proud of? How can that possibly be true? Easy: It’s not. Start to see the holes in the arguments that the critic makes.

- **Look for contradictions.** Your critic will say anything to assert its power and authority—including statements that contradict themselves.

For instance: “*You’ll never give this talk!*” is followed by, “*You’re going to embarrass yourself up there with this garbage.*” Ok, critic, then which is it? That I’ll never give the talk...or that when I do, people will hate it? Because you can’t have it both ways.

Go through the piece and find places where the critic seems to be making no sense whatsoever and countering her own argument. That’s a clear sign that she’s not telling you the truth. She’s scrambling to gain control via empty threats. And she’s flailing.

- **Bring in the pragmatist.** Fact is, the critic goes all red in the face yelling at you about what you don’t have, can’t be, won’t do. But no one ever said you have to do things on your own. So that’s when we bring in the pragmatist, who is on your side. Your inner pragmatist seeks to solve problems, not judge them.

Look at where the critic is telling you things like “*You don’t know how to!*” or “*You can’t!*” and put those issues in the hands of your pragmatist. Ask yourself:

- What don’t I know yet, and need to learn more about?
- What resources are available to me so that I can address the issue?
- Who do I know who could help me with this?

And write out the answers so that rather than a head full of fears, you have a plan for who to reach out to, what to seek out, and why.

One thing for sure: The critic will be back, and there’s no pleasing him. In fact, you’ll notice that he rages even louder when you’re making strides in your work. Why? *Because he knows the jig is up.* You doing brave, creative work is a direct threat to his job. And he quite likes



his job. Don't be surprised when he gets even more surly when you realize you don't need him as much as you thought.

3 | Focus on what's working

When's the last time someone pointed out what you were doing right?

Not just "good job." I mean, specifically and in detail something you did really, really well.

Ok. And when's the last time someone pointed out an error you made, or a change you might consider, or ways to improve what you've done? Probably half an hour ago.

I believe that most feedback comes from good intentions. They think they're helping when they point out what's wrong, because that way you can be better.

In their popular piece in the *Harvard Business Review*, "[The Feedback Fallacy](#)," Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall take to task our traditional approach to feedback. And instead of asking, "What's the best way to give feedback" they ask, "What is the right way, the best way, to help people thrive and excel?"

Turns out, the way we typically offer criticism is anything but constructive, and serves to do little more than shut us down.

"People don't need feedback," the authors write. "They need attention to what they do best."

Now, you wouldn't *believe* the pushback I hear on this. People LOVE their criticism. We so want to believe we're right about what needs fixing. And maybe we are! But is being right about what's wrong the most important thing when you creating something new? Nope.

Part of the problem is we dive into fixing too soon—right at the tender moment when we're risking new ideas, new efforts.



And part of it is just that we assume that what's working is so obvious we don't need to pay attention to it.

But it's not.

We often *don't* know what we're doing right. We're all so focused on not messing up! We're out there tiptoeing around landmines, which makes it hard to do, well, much of anything else.

How helpful is positive feedback? Maybe at least just as helpful as negative? Maybe two times, five times as effective? Try again.

“Positive attention is 30x more powerful than negative attention in creating high performance on a team,” say Buckingham and Goodall.

Whoa.

Ok. So what does it sound like to focus on what's working? Take a listen.

Writer, workshop facilitator, and dear friend Becky Karush has a podcast that's based on the very approach I'm teaching here (and which we'll get into in the next part).

It's called [Read to Me: The Podcast to Listen for What We Love](#), and each week she takes a piece of work, ranging from song lyrics to classic works to modern authors, and shares a short passage, and then gives this specific type of feedback, focused on what we love.

([One particular episode](#) features a very fun mashup of Taylor Swift and our colleague Cass McCrory, a digital marketing strategist. Fun fact: Cass wrote this piece during a 15-minute writing exercise during my Pop Up Story Salon using this approach.)

It just goes to show what can happen when you give yourself even a short window in which to write and then pay attention to where the work sings.

TRY IT: Point out what's working

Go for a whole day just pointing out to people what they did really well. What you loved about what they did, shared, said, achieved. And I don't mean saying, “OMG you're so awesome.” I'm



talking specific feedback as to what is working and why (“*That moment on the call when you shifted the client’s attention at a critical moment? That was genius.*”)

Try it with coworkers, colleagues, superiors, friends, acquaintances. Even people you don’t like very much. Try it for a day. A week. A month.

EVERYONE needs to hear this stuff because we often have no idea what resonates with others. Of course there are times to point out areas for improvement. But what if you outweighed those comments by 3:1 with what is working?

There’s a reason I’m asking you to do this, and it’s not to put you in the running for the Nicest Person Award.

Your brain (and my brain, everyone’s brain) has a negative bias. It’s built into the software. We tend to see and spot things that are wrong, risky, dangerous—it’s a survival trait. It tends to crowd out the positive, and in so doing, you end up only ever seeing what’s wrong—with other people’s work, as well as your own.

But when you look for what’s working in other people’s work, it changes the way you see your own. It just does. It’s contagious. You start seeing what’s working in their work, in your work. You might even start to give your own ideas half a chance.

That’s worth it, don’t you think?

4 | Create a critic-free community

Creativity is not a solo act.

Just ask psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who coined the term “flow.”

“Creativity does not happen inside people’s heads,” he writes in *Creativity*, “but in the interaction between a person’s thoughts and a sociocultural context.”

What that means is that part of accessing your creative genius is sharing it.



You can't move the world with your work if you don't get it out there. But, before you do, share it with people you trust.

When work is new, like *brand* new, it needs to be held by those who can see what's working first.

I've studied for years with a brilliant woman named Suzanne Kingsbury—Fulbright scholar, novelist, and one of the most sought-after developmental editors in the country.

She's also the creator of the **Gateless Writing Method**, which I have used and am certified to teach (and which has inspired this guide). I've used it to great effect in my professional and personal life, and lead retreats and workshops all over the country using this powerful tool for accessing creative genius, in myself and others.

There are oodles of writing groups, retreats, and communities all over the world. But what makes this particular approach special, and why I've stuck with it, is because of the strong container it offers us in which to create. And it's strong because of a strict set of rules governing how we respond to one another's work.

One of the hallmarks of this process is that we write to a prompt in a short window of time, and then we read what we just wrote to each other.

And the one thing we never, ever do is criticize, judge, or fix another's work. We look for what's working, where the energy is, where the piece resonates.

I've walked into a retreat on a Thursday, and within 24 hours, those strangers are friends. By the end of the weekend, I'd defend them to the death. Why? Because of this rule. Because we can ease into one another without fear, and the trust is built into the room.

If you stick with me, you'll hear plenty more about the Gateless Method. If you have the chance I hope you'll join me for an event (and since you opted to receive this guide I'll be in touch about what's coming up).

It's worth having the first-hand, live Gateless experience (and you don't have to be a writer to do it!). But for now, what you can do is this:



Be mindful about whom you share first thoughts, first drafts, first work with.

And rather than hand it over to a friend and say “fix this,” share your work and ask specifically for what you want, which is to know where it’s working—that’s it. You need to know that first, or you’ll spend your time avoiding landmines instead of creating something worthwhile (or worse, fixing it to please one person, which is not how great work is made).

Even better, cultivate a small group of people with whom you can trust your first words, and set those ground rules so that you all know it’s safe to share.

Make a commitment to create a safe container: You won’t disclaim your work, and they won’t criticize it. And vice versa. That way you can turn your focus away from ego and toward the work.

The creation and generation stage is critical for your work, and you don’t need to be fixed out of the gate. There’s plenty of time for editing later.

5 | Ship it, share it, do it

In *The Icarus Deception*, Seth Godin writes,

“Art is the act of a human being doing generous work, creating something for the first time, touching another person.”

And then he says: “If it doesn’t ship, it’s not art.”

You can’t do the generous work you want to do without putting that work out there.

That doesn’t mean you have to take your first draft of anything and post it, or submit it for publication. It doesn’t mean you never seek out constructive feedback from other people or edit and refine.

But what it does mean is that you can’t hide your best work and expect it to do much.



Sharing your work involves risk. If it doesn't, then it's hard for anyone else to put much stake in it.

Plenty of people will never chance it. No wonder there are more critics than creators.

Neither I nor anyone else can tell you when something is ready for public consumption. We can share our opinions and encouragement, but only you decide when a project or idea is ready to launch, share, post, or present. But it is a decision you must make. We can't benefit from what you're hiding.

My hope is that this guide has given you a small but sturdy foothold on the great wall of creative endeavor, to give you some leverage and tools for changing your mindset around how you see and share your work.

What's next?

The next step is not to go 'do everything,' but to find one thread of an idea, a project, a story, and let the work lead.

Use the page to explore and discover the things that are stashed away in your head under piles of other things.

And: It's okay not to know where it's going! If I sit down already knowing what I want to say, I'm bored before I begin.

The day I pitched my idea for a TEDx talk to the organizer of the largest TEDx event in the country, all I had was the idea. That's it.

I didn't have the grand lesson or the punchline. Or the outline. Nothing. But that's not what mattered. What we were trying to decide, the organizer and me, was whether this was a thread worth following. And it was.

So I just started writing the talk. *Without knowing* what I'd write. I let the work lead, and it did. We got on another call to review it, and he said, "Keep going." And within a few weeks, I had a talk that was ready for the TEDx stage. You know when I knew what the talk was about? Just days before I set foot on that round red carpet.



To say I knew all the answers would be a lie. *I didn't know it until I'd written it.* Then it became real. To date, that talk has earned nearly 6 million views.

You never know where your work will take you, either. That talk changed my life in many ways—and continues to. And I'm still following its lead.

Is work sometimes hard? Does it feel like dragging an old dog out for a walk when it doesn't want to go? Sure. But when you give yourself the tools, the time, the focus, even for a short window, to get a few words down, one line turns into two, turns into three.

And instead of one old dog on a leash, you've got a pack of sled dogs hooked to your sled, and once they get going, you'll be bounding across the plain. Where are you headed? Who knows. You'll find out when you get there.

Better grab a hat.

Want to do more writing—together? Let's do it.

Nothing will get your wheels turning and your pen moving like a good prompt and a timed writing exercise. And I've got 30 of them for you.

It's a new audio program I created called [30 Days on the Page](#), a month-long program designed to stoke your creative flame and generate exciting new work.

Every morning you get an audio session delivered to your inbox. Throw on your headphones, grab a pen, press play, and 20 minutes later, you've written something new. It's like a portable writing workshop that you can drop into whenever you want!

Join me for 30 days on the page for just \$1 day. Go to 30daysonthepage.com to register!

⇒ [LISTEN TO DAY 1 FOR FREE!](#) ⇐



About the Author



Terri Trespicio is an award-winning writer, speaker, and brand advisor, and works with individuals and organizations to help nail their messaging and engage clients, customers, and fans. Her TEDx talk, “Stop Searching for Your Passion,” has nearly 6 million views to date. She was recently named by Hubspot as one of the “Top 18 female speakers who are killing it” (she came in at #2—Oprah was #8), and cited as one of the world’s leading creatives by Creative Boom magazine.

A former magazine editor and radio host at Martha Stewart, she has appeared on the *Today* show, *Dr. Oz*, *The Early Show*, *The Martha Stewart Show* and *The Anderson Cooper Show*. Her work has been featured *Oprah* magazine, *Marie Claire*, *Prevention*, *Business Insider*, *Forbes.com*, and *Inc.com*. A writer and facilitator certified in the Gateless method for capturing creative genius, she leads workshops and retreats all over the country to help professionals of all stripes take their stories and ideas from page to stage and beyond.

An in-demand speaker who presents at conferences across the country, she was rated the #1 speaker at Barron’s Top Independent Women Advisors Summit and How Design Live. Terri is also a stand-up comic and has performed at famous Manhattan venues including Caroline’s, Dangerfield’s, Gotham, and New York Comedy Club, and was a quarter finalist in the She Devil Comedy Competition. She lives in Manhattan. Visit her at territrespicio.com.