

Steal Like an Artist

by Austin Kleon · Language: SQ

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Overview

Steal Like an Artist by Austin Kleon is a practical guide for creatives, emphasizing that true originality is not about inventing something entirely new, but rather about embracing influence, collecting ideas, and remixing them in unique ways. Kleon argues that all creative work builds upon what came before, and aspiring artists should view themselves as collectors and curators of ideas, rather than striving for an impossible 'pure' originality. The book encourages readers to start creating immediately, without waiting for inspiration or a fully formed identity, and to learn by doing and by studying the work of others.

The book champions a hands-on, process-oriented approach to creativity. It advises artists to use their hands, pursue side projects, and share their work with the world. Kleon also stresses the importance of cultivating a healthy creative environment, both physically and mentally, by being nice to others, embracing routine, and understanding that limitations can foster creativity. Ultimately, 'Steal Like an Artist' demystifies the creative process, making it accessible and actionable for anyone looking to unlock their creative potential by leveraging existing knowledge and inspiration.

Key Takeaways

- Embrace the idea that nothing is truly original; all creative work builds upon what came before, so learn to 'steal' good ideas and transform them.
- Don't wait until you know exactly who you are or what your art will be; start making things now, and your identity will emerge through the process.
- Create the kind of work you wish existed in the world; be the audience for your own creations.
- Engage in physical work and use your hands, as this can stimulate different parts of your brain and lead to unexpected creative breakthroughs.
- Cultivate side projects and hobbies, as they often provide a low-pressure environment for experimentation and can feed into your main work.
- Share your work openly and consistently, as putting it out there helps you connect with others and receive valuable feedback.
- Establish a consistent routine and embrace boredom, as discipline and focused time are essential for deep creative work.

- Be nice to people and make connections, because the creative world is smaller than you think and collaboration is key.

Chapter Summaries

Steal Like an Artist

Kleon argues that true originality is a myth; everything is a remix. He encourages artists to embrace their influences, collect good ideas, and combine them in new ways. This 'stealing' is not plagiarism but rather a process of learning, transforming, and building upon the work of others to create something new and personal.

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

This chapter advises against waiting for a moment of perfect clarity or inspiration. Kleon suggests that identity is not something you find, but something you build through your work. The best way to figure out what you want to do is to start doing it, even if you're just imitating your heroes initially.

Write the Book You Want to Read

Kleon encourages creators to make the art they wish existed. If you can't find the kind of book, music, or art you're looking for, then you should be the one to create it. This approach ensures passion and authenticity in your work, as you are creating for your own ideal audience: yourself.

Use Your Hands

This chapter emphasizes the importance of physical work in a digital age. Kleon suggests that stepping away from the screen and engaging in tangible activities—drawing, writing by hand, building models—can stimulate different parts of the brain and lead to unexpected creative insights and breakthroughs.

Side Projects and Hobbies Are Important

Kleon advocates for having multiple creative outlets. Side projects and hobbies, free from the pressure of your main work, can be spaces for experimentation, play, and learning. They often cross-pollinate with your primary creative endeavors, leading to fresh perspectives and preventing burnout.

Do Good Work and Put It Where People Can See It

The advice here is twofold: first, focus on creating quality work, and second, don't keep it hidden. Sharing your work, even if imperfect, is crucial for connecting with an audience, getting feedback, and building a presence. It's about being findable and engaging with the world.

Geography Is No Longer Our Master

With the internet, physical location is less important for creative success. Kleon notes that you can connect with like-minded people, learn from anyone, and share your work globally, regardless of where you live. He encourages building your own world and community online.

Be Nice. (The World Is a Small Town.)

This chapter stresses the importance of kindness, generosity, and building positive relationships within the creative community. Kleon reminds readers that the creative world is interconnected, and being a good person and collaborator will open more doors than being competitive or unkind.

Be Boring. (It's the Only Way to Get Work Done.)

Kleon argues that a stable, routine, and even 'boring' personal life is essential for sustained creative output. He advises taking care of yourself, managing your finances, and establishing a consistent schedule to free up mental energy for your creative work, rather than seeking constant drama.

Creativity Is Subtraction

The final chapter highlights the power of limitations. Kleon suggests that true creativity often comes from choosing what to leave out, what to ignore, and what constraints to impose. By embracing boundaries, artists are forced to be more resourceful and inventive, leading to more focused and impactful work.

Themes

- Creative process
- Embracing influence
- Action over contemplation
- Sharing your work
- The power of limitations

Notable Quotes

- "Steal like an artist." — This is the core mantra of the book, encouraging readers to embrace influence and remix ideas rather than striving for impossible originality.
- "Don't wait until you know who you are to get started." — Kleon advises against procrastination due to self-doubt, suggesting that identity is forged through the act of creating.
- "Write the book you want to read." — This encourages creators to make the art they personally desire, ensuring passion and authenticity in their work.

- "Do good work and put it where people can see it." — A concise summary of the two essential steps for any creative: create quality work and then share it publicly.
- "Creativity is subtraction." — This statement emphasizes that setting limitations and choosing what to omit can be a powerful catalyst for innovation and focus.
- "The only way to find your voice is to use it. It's to get started and keep going." — Reinforces the idea that action and consistent effort are key to developing a unique creative identity.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Steal Like an Artist about?

Steal Like an Artist is a non-fiction guide by Austin Kleon that encourages creatives to embrace influence, collect ideas, and remix them to create original work. It argues that all art builds on what came before and offers practical advice on how to start creating, share your work, and maintain a sustainable creative practice.

Is Steal Like an Artist worth reading?

Yes, it is widely considered worth reading, especially for aspiring artists, writers, designers, and anyone in a creative field. Its concise, actionable advice and inspiring tone make it a quick read that can shift one's perspective on creativity, encouraging immediate action and a more open approach to inspiration.

How does Steal Like an Artist end?

Spoiler: As a non-fiction guide, Steal Like an Artist doesn't have a narrative ending. It concludes with its tenth and final piece of advice, 'Creativity Is Subtraction,' which emphasizes the power of limitations in fostering innovation. The book leaves the reader with a sense of empowerment and practical tools for their creative journey.

Who should read Steal Like an Artist?

This book is ideal for artists, writers, musicians, designers, entrepreneurs, students, and anyone who feels stuck in their creative process or is looking for practical, encouraging advice on how to start and sustain creative work. It's particularly helpful for those who struggle with the concept of originality.

How long does it take to read Steal Like an Artist?

Steal Like an Artist is a very short, illustrated book, typically taking about 1.5 to 2.5 hours to read. Its concise chapters and engaging format make it a quick and accessible read, often finished in a single sitting.