



By Joe Byerly

When we hear the name Leonardo Da Vinci, the word “genius” immediately comes to mind. His 16th century works “The Last Supper,” “Mona Lisa,” and “Vitruvian Man” are still popular today. The Da Vinci namesake is a part of our modern pop culture as well: [The Da Vinci Code](#) dominated the *New York Times* best seller list, he’s been represented in cartoons, movies, and TV shows, and the episode of [Epic Rap Battle](#) about him has had more than 74 million views on YouTube. Most recently, in November 2017, one of Leonardo’s paintings broke a record, selling at auction for \$450 million.

There is something, however, we should know about his genius: he wasn't born with it or guided to it through schooling (he didn't go to one) — he worked for it. And as Walter Isaacson argues in his latest biography, [*Leonardo da Vinci*](#), his style of creativity is exportable, because we can all learn from and adopt one of his most important practices — keeping a notebook. Leonardo's creativity and artistic abilities grew out his talent for making connections across disciplines. And it is within his notebooks where those connections were made.

So what can Leonardo's notebooks teach us about creativity?

Carry a Notebook Everywhere

Leonardo began the practice of keeping a notebook in the early 1480s and kept at it for more than 30 years. Today, 7,200 pages have survived, which probably represents less than half what he actually wrote down. Da Vinci carried a notebook everywhere so that if a thought, observation, or passage caught him, he could write it down. He even hung a small notebook from his belt so he would have it with him wherever he went.

Too often, we come up with great ideas, solutions to problems, or key insights while in the midst of the chaos of our daily lives. If we adopt the practice of carrying a notebook, we can quickly capture these thoughts before they are gone. If you don't want to carry your government-issued green notebook everywhere, I recommend purchasing a small 3×5 moleskin notebook that fits in your pocket.

Be an Observer

Da Vinci was very curious, so he watched everything. He once wrote, “As you go about town, constantly observe, note and consider circumstances and behavior of men as they talk and quarrel or laugh, or come to blows.”

When we take the time to observe and write those observations down, it forces us to gain a better understanding of our environment and of people's behaviors. I've been able to solve plenty of problems by watching and listening instead of participating. I've captured many of the leadership practices I've wanted to adopt (or avoid) in my notebooks, which has served as a catalyst for my personal growth, and many of the posts on this blog.

Use the Space

Because paper wasn't cheap in his day, Leonardo had to fill the entire page with notes. His notebooks also included drawings of nature and the human body, draft sketches of work he eventually painted, to-do lists, and books he read. He sometimes even went back years later and filled in blank spaces or the margins with knowledge he once was missing.

By filling every inch, Leonardo was forced to see his old ideas over and over again until each page was full, and that gave him the opportunity to make connections between some of his many ideas.

Make Connections

Da Vinci captured everything in his notebooks, enabling him to see patterns in seemingly disparate fields. Walter Isaacson points out that, "Because he wrote on multiple topics, his eyes and pen darted across disciplines sensing connections."

Isaacson also notes that Da Vinci's understanding of optics enabled him to paint "The Last Supper" and his study of the human body aided him in painting the mysterious smile of the "Mona Lisa."

I used to keep separate notebooks, one for taking notes while reading and another for to-do lists and other miscellaneous work, but now I keep all my notes in one place. This has led to me taking way more notes than I used to, which has increased my productivity and

creativity.

Start Today

When we adopt Da Vinci's approach to keeping a notebook, we might see things that others overlook. We capture those thoughts or observations that may seem insignificant at the time, but will bear fruit later. Finally, we open ourselves up to the same muse that helped Leonardo create amazing works of art. Walter Isaacson said it best when he wrote, "Fifty years from now, our own notebooks, if we work up the initiative to start writing them, will be around to astonish and inspire our grandchildren unlike our tweets and Facebook posts."

If you want to learn more about Leonardo Da Vinci, check out [Walter Isaacson's latest book](#) or [this episode](#) from Art of Manliness Podcast.

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