Nine Paths to Creativity

Melanie Bell
Inspire Envisioning
The Creative Process

You want to create something. Maybe you dream of writing a novel, plan to self-publish a book sharing insights from your business, aim to update your website copy, or yearn to paint or sing. The creative urge is alive in all of us. I happen to believe it’s a vital part of being human. Some people will protest here: “I’m not creative!” Many of these protests are rooted in childhood experiences. If we look back on our memories of finger painting and constructing spaceships out of boxes, there may be a looming figure of a well-meaning adult critiquing our imaginative play. Maybe our English teacher chastised the spelling of our detective story, or our parent told us we were singing out of tune. As children, most of us were full of ideas and enthusiasm, but we may have been discouraged as we interacted with the world. We weren’t talented enough. Our creative enthusiasms wouldn’t help us get “a real job.” We needed to focus on more important things. And soon enough, our inner critic took up the chorus of those well-meaning adults. When we sit down in front of a blank page and a voice chimes in to criticize us before we make our first mark, creating stops being fun.

However, there’s something about creativity that speaks to you. You want to pursue it in spite of that critical voice, and you’ve decided to commit to a creative project. There’s something you want to express and share with the world, something that matters deeply even if you occasionally have doubts. Now’s the time to make what you want to make, to finish what you want to finish.

As you start the creative process, you may think the focus is on your idea, but you bring your whole self with you. Your gifts, interests, life experiences, and unique perspectives all show up to shape your project. Your fear, shame, anger, and insecurity pop up and get in your way. It might be nice if these difficult feelings stayed well away from your work desk, but confronting and including them will bring you into the depths where you can do your best work. Often, we gain insight into ourselves through the creative process, but there are also ways of knowing ourselves better and making use of that knowledge as we prepare to create. We can get a general sense of what inspires us and what roadblocks to expect, allowing us to craft effective ways of creating and be patient with ourselves and our vision - patient enough to finish. These things differ from person to person, but follow some general patterns that, if we understand them, can provide guidance along the way.
The Enneagram

One useful tool for self-understanding is a personality system called the Enneagram. It describes nine personality types, each based on a core motivation. It’s helpful for creators because it speaks directly to the “why” of your process, which can serve as a touchstone for continuing your work when you’re having trouble getting ideas flowing or you’re stuck on that tricky part in the middle. It’s also useful because it pinpoints the psychological challenges that recur for each personality type, and suggests strategies for dealing with them. As you move forward with your project, it helps to have an idea of which creative blocks to expect, and what you can do to work through them. The rewards on the other side are immense.

In this e-book, you’ll discover a little about the nine personality types and how the creative process plays out for each one. We all have a dominant personality type that brings our biggest gifts and challenges, but we have aspects of other types as well, so you might find that a few of them resonate. Pay attention to any of the sections that speak to you, and feel free to mix and match strategies from each one as you move forward with your creative project. If you let your personality’s insecurities run wild during the creative process, your personality will throw up obstacles at every turn, but with a little self-awareness and strategy, it will become a powerful creative ally.
Type One: Principles and Perfectionism

Are you a principle-driven person who feels called to deliver a message to the world? This personality type is motivated to create by the gulf between reality and a vision of the way things should be. You want your work to show a better way of being and doing. If you’re a One, you tend to be organized and meticulous in areas that matter to you. You might research your topic in depth, or make a detailed outline before you embark upon the work. You also excel at refining it.

But there’s a danger of being too meticulous. If you want your results to be just perfect, it may be hard for you to get started in the first place, or to move past revision into continued productive flow. That’s a lot of pressure to put on yourself out the gate. Conversely, you might be dedicated and disciplined, but find it challenging to connect with the spark of inspiration even though you’re doing all the right things.

One of the most exciting – and frustrating! – things about creativity is its non-linear nature. Even for those of us who create deliberately, our plans don’t always work out the way we want them to. A scene may be clunky, an idea a little weak. And as we progress through the process of making something, new ideas arise. When we let them, they can take us places that are purposeful and real, exhilarating and scary. Creativity is inherently a little crazy, a little out of control. Why wouldn’t it be? It’s making something that never existed before!

Some of the most inspiring type One creativity connects with expression and play. Your inner voice, with its vulnerability and wisdom, has a lot to contribute to deepening your vision. The spirit of experimentation offers a wide range of tools for connecting with purpose, sometimes in ways that break the rules, and enjoying the process thoroughly! What will you create when you let it be fun? Can you move beyond the urge to create something impeccable and let inspiration be your guide?
Type Two: Connection and Caretaking

Do you dream of connecting with others through your creativity, of being of service and perhaps bringing more love into the world? Is creating an expression of self-love that calls to you, hard to find time for when the people you care about have so many needs and you’re often the only one to fulfill them? If you’re a Two, the urge to help and nurture is a strong source of inspiration. You want to speak to others, to connect with their hearts through your work.

At the same time, creativity can often be a solitary process. You might find yourself daunted by cultural myths of artistic isolation, believing that you’d be more productive if only you were better at working alone, or deterred from engaging in the creative process by worrying that it would make you less likeable, less connected, or selfish. You feel a lot of responsibility to others, and on some level, you’d rather be tending to their needs – even when it’s exhausting – than sitting in a quiet room by yourself.

It’s true that creativity involves connecting with yourself, accessing your own feelings and truths, and that can be scary. The creative energy that we encounter inside ourselves is not always sweet or nice. It has soapboxes to stand on and bones to pick. However, it doesn’t need to work alone. If you read the acknowledgments in any book, you’ll see that every author has collaborated with a network of people to make their vision a reality. Without community, creativity has nowhere to go.

You, too, can seek out artistic collaboration. Cultivate connections that encourage and nurture you. And give yourself undisturbed reflective time to work as well: no interruptions or helping allowed. It may be hard at first, but many Twos start finding themselves looking forward to it. It’s a way of connecting with your ideas, curiosity, and inspiration, of accessing new gifts that will connect with people in new and heartfelt ways.
Type Three: Value and Vanity

You want to create something that shines. You dream of bringing a polished project into the world, one that will have cultural value and speak to an audience. People will see it, connect with it, and be inspired. Indeed, you have a gift for creating polished work, and are able to do so efficiently. If you commit to a creative process, you’re able to work hard and produce consistently, throughout the ups and downs of life.

You excel at presenting things well, knowing just what to do or say to strike a chord with others. Flexible and adaptable, you can tailor your message to reach different people. It’s easy for you to get caught up doing what others want you to do, and believe that this activity is your inherent identity. If you take a hard look at yourself, you might realize that you’re engaging in something people around you saw as creative, rather than what truly inspires you.

You might find yourself using creativity to fulfill your desire to be seen and appreciated a certain way, and you might even take shortcuts sometimes in search of success. But being validated by an audience is different from being appreciated for yourself. Your project won’t be authentic unless you bring your true self to it, and when you do, it will touch and inspire others more honestly.

Build time into your creative process to connect with the values that speak to your heart. What kind of work is meaningful to you when you’re all alone and no one is watching? Make it part of your process to regularly do work that no one sees, just for yourself. The insights you find there will connect you to something real that can also be shared with others. You’ll find that you won’t lose your polish and sparkle. It’s part of you, and authentic creative work will only make it shine brighter.
Type Four: Self-Expression and Self-Absorption

You’re driven by the need to express your emotions, to create something deep and beautiful from your life experiences. Intensely introspective, you want to use the things that move you as raw material for creation. If you’re a Four, you might find that you often express things easily, bringing creative touches into your everyday life. Then there are the times you’re uninspired and get sidetracked by negative feelings. It’s easier for you to connect with mystery and inspiration when they strike than to create discipline for yourself. At the best of times, creativity offers insight into who you are.

As well as you know yourself, it’s hard not to compare yourself to others. This isn’t always a bad thing, because it can help you understand what inspires you and what type of creative work you want to pursue. It can, however, be painful when you compare quality and see yourself coming up short. There are always people out there who appear more successful and talented than you in some way. It’s easy to imagine an ideal self with dazzling gifts, and feel discouraged when you fall short of that fantasy, too!

You might have ideas about an artistic lifestyle you’d like to lead. Some of them are constructive, and can enliven your life and benefit your practice. Others can distract you from the creative process itself, such as giving in to moods or believing you have to create a particular type of art in a particular way. Yes, artists can be sensitive and temperamental, but when they produce their best creations by sitting down, doing the work, and being open to inspiration taking unexpected turns.

While it sounds counterintuitive, creating structure for yourself will help your creative yearnings take form organically. Any structure that you implement is positive, as it helps you complete your work and gives inspiration a regular place to show up. It’s also constructive for you to seek feedback from others involved in similar work. Learn to accept it graciously, and you’ll find that your fellow journeyers offer much insight to enrich your work and help you communicate your vision.
Type Five: Innovation and Intellectualization

You create out of an interest in unique ideas. You have areas of special interest that you enjoy researching endlessly. You play with concepts, combining them in novel ways, or even inventing new systems and methods of doing things. You would rather think than do, and your favorite kind of doing is all about thinking. Your best creativity has a “Eureka” quality, producing something innovative that seems deceptively simple. Offbeat and intellectual, you are most alive when engaged in the life of the mind.

It can be easy to make your life all about your ideas. The more time you spend researching and playing with them, the more you may find yourself disengaging from the wider world. You might think that you don’t know enough to do justice to your interests, and keep doing research without producing anything. You may find yourself diving into an intellectual rabbit hole, where your ideas respond to other ideas to the point where they’ve moved far away from the real-life topic that they were originally about. When this happens, the clarity you seek to bring to the world becomes obscured.

 Creatively blocked Fives find that they have withdrawn into their minds and disconnected from others, but more importantly, from themselves. You may feel that your inner landscape has dried up. The solution is to bring reality back in. Check in with your feelings. Create time and space for personal expression. Ground yourself in your body. The key is to bridge your ideas and your whole self.

The external world, too, can offer important reality checks. After all, your curiosity about it is the source of your inspiration. Seek out feedback from knowledgeable others who can let you know whether your ideas are on the right track. Engage in activities that catch your interest. Block out time to start creating, even if you haven’t done all the research or discovered everything you feel you need to. Just getting started will set you moving in the right direction.
Type Six: Participation and Procrastination

You believe in the importance of engagement. You might be a strong supporter of a social cause, a group that you are part of, or a search for the real in this ephemeral world. You value creativity that works to create a more just world, and that cuts through the nonsense to expose the truth. Intellectually curious, you believe in testing ideologies and conventions to see if they hold water. When you’ve found something real, you’re willing to defend it.

You might have a lot of creative ideas, but find you have no time for them due to other commitments. Other things seem more important than “your stuff,” such as working hard, preparing for troubles you have an eye for anticipating, and supporting the people and beliefs you care about. You’re just one person in a complex world with lots to get done. It’s easy to doubt yourself, and hard to believe in the value of your contributions if they’re not directly tied to supporting a bigger reality.

You’ll access your creativity more easily if you find ways to tie it in. Rather than procrastinating, moving your project around between the “tomorrow” pile and the “someday” pile, seek out teamwork and accountability. Find a group or friend to check in with, where you can regularly keep each other on track. You’ll feel more productive and committed, as well as enjoying the company. Try a collaborative project. Look for a problem in the world that you can expose and address creatively.

The hero’s journey is a great model for any creator, but especially for you. Like the hero, you can take it upon yourself to step into action and commit until completion of the task. You already know you’ll face dragons in the process of creation: doubts, fears, the works. Cultivate a sense of humor about them. These universal feelings are great material for creativity! How can you speak to the truth seeker in all of us? Can your own engagement inspire others to engage, too?
Serendipity and Scattered Focus

You’re full of inspiration, generating ideas easily. Your associative mind jumps from one possibility to another, making you an adept and flexible brainstormer. A generalist, you have many interests and find joy in pursuing a diverse array of experiences. You tend to know a little about a lot. Your flowing creative juices can lead to prolific bodies of work and fascinating hybrid ideas. They can also bring stress and uncertainty.

Sevens don’t often suffer from creative block, but the expansive nature of your personality means it’s easy to get overwhelmed. With all of these exciting ideas, where do you start? One day you begin a project, and the next, you’re struck with another inspiration. The first idea suddenly seems boring in comparison. You might end up starting a lot of projects and abandoning them. When you do pursue one and stick with it in earnest, your abundance of ideas may result in something too big, wild, and unstructured, rather than clear and concise.

Focus is helpful, while understanding and creating space for your imagination’s diverse leads. Keep a place to store ideas, such as a notebook or file where you can write them down. Rather than jumping to enact them, let them mature in this “holding area,” with the understanding that you can come back to them when your current project is finished. When choosing a project to work on, think strategically. What’s not just exciting but doable and heartfelt? Others’ feedback can help you narrow it down.

When you commit to a project, you’ll find that you have more energy for the rest of your life, and are better able to be with and enjoy the creative experience. You might find it helpful to create an outline or timeline, and stick to it as best you can. Chunk your project into pieces. Pare it down to the essentials. Setting limits will minimize stress and let the fun of creation shine through.
Type Eight: Gusto and Grandstanding

You want to make a real impact. You’re an energetic person with big ideas, and your creative life is no exception. Rather than merely participating in life, you want to be a leader. You find it’s easy to take charge, to be the person people look to when you walk into the room. You might feel energized by an idea for a creative endeavor and the power it will bring into the world. It’s natural for you to go out and do things, but those things will not always be your creative work.

You may feel responsible to people in your life who you see as more vulnerable than you, and devote your energy to protecting them. You might feel vulnerable around your own creative work, as it tends to take you places that are personal and tender, and in a tough world, that’s scary. It’s easier to go do something else that gets immediate results. You find yourself putting off your creative work rather than implementing structure to complete it. Alternately, you might overdo it, cavalierly churning out work to the point of burnout.

Being a person who lives life to the fullest, you relish the fruits of your five senses. A lot of artists with this personality type “live large” and indulge in drinking, posturing, substances, wild flings, and other fast-lane habits. This may make you feel alive in the short term, but it’s unsustainable in the long term. Take a critical look at your daily habits. Are any of them harmful to you? Are there healthier habits you can implement to give yourself sustainable energy? Can you harness your keen senses in your work?

Eights have a knack for strategy, but don’t tend to give themselves time for rest and reflection. Combine the two by structuring time for yourself to strategically reflect. Step back from your project and look at how you can most effectively create something that matters to you and the broader context that speaks to you, rather than just doing something big. Give yourself quiet time for ideas to arise and evolve.
Type Nine: Harmony and Hesitation

You’re a dreamer, at times grounded in your body, at times afloat in the world of ideas. You have an expansive, unified vision of the world that encompasses the cycles of life and death, ebb and flow. As a creator, it’s easy for you to tap into the unconscious and bring up interesting things. You understand that the creative process is cyclic, and when at its best, harmonious. Your creative work finds common ground between people and promotes a feeling of unity.

When you’re in touch with this sense of wholeness, creativity flows, but no one lives in this state all the time. When life’s conflicts get in the way, you try to recreate this sense of harmony by going with the flow. This might mean going along with what other people want rather than pursuing the creative work that matters to you. It might mean neglecting a problem that needs to be addressed before you can get back to your work.

It takes assertion and initiative to create, and it also requires confidence. For Nines, all three can be challenging. You don’t want to rock the boat, and what if your ideas cause discomfort? Do you really know that they’re any good? You feel so small in the world, even invisible, so it’s hard to believe that something that comes from you can have power and value. It takes so much energy to act, and it’s less stressful to stay in the backseat.

The key is to make the first move. Set yourself a timeline and stick to it. Talk about your ideas with others who will encourage and motivate you. It doesn’t have to be about you: it can be about the project, which has a life beyond yourself, a connection to something bigger. Once you start moving, it’s easier to continue the momentum. You’ll find worthwhile things and a sense of liveliness in the process of creative engagement.
Moving Forward

Creativity is an exciting, challenging, and deeply rewarding journey. No matter your personality type, you have strengths to bring to this process, stories with the power to make an impact, and truths that are waiting to come through. Treasures of expression and growth await you as soon as you commit to picking up that pencil, paintbrush, camera, or keyboard and showing up with your full, messy, vibrant, and multifaceted self.

The Enneagram makes a wonderful guide throughout this process! If you’d like to explore this system’s complexities and insights on a deeper level, you can learn more from my book with Kacie Berghoef, The Modern Enneagram. If you’re ready to pursue and complete your own creative project and seeking guidance along the way, I offer writing and creative coaching through InspireEnvisioning.com. Feel free to explore the wealth of resources on this site to inspire you on your own creative journey. You’re welcome to reach out to me if you’d like to connect personally, or are curious about the possibilities of working together and bringing your project to completion. I’d love to hear from you!

Wishing you inspiration and success on your creative journey!