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The Most Important Thing BEFORE Planning Your Creative Project

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You've decided you want to hike a new trail and camp overnight in the woods. What's the first thing you do?

Set off?

Hopefully not.

If you're the tiniest bit savvy, you'll get out your hiking and camping gear and check that everything is in order.

- Water bottle - check.
- Sleeping bag - check.
- Bear repellent - check.

If you find your hiking boots have a broken lace, you'll make a note to buy some new laces. Unless you're a real wuss, that broken lace won't dampen your enthusiasm for your hike. In fact you'll probably get excited about visiting the hiking gear outlet. Maybe you'll buy a new backpack while you're there.

Preparations are part of the deal. They tell you, you're almost on your way. And that your path will be smoother because you've made them.

BIG creative projects are the same. Especially those which involve new techniques, approaches or processes.

So the time we spend doing some Pre-Project Check & Prep, is a signal to our subconscious. We're off on a creative journey and we're serious about reaching our destination!

To say nothing of the angst it will save us later. (Hiking up the trail with no shoelace, anyone?)

Troubleshoot your project - before trouble occurs

This Pre-Project Check & Prep is a form of troubleshooting. It's an opportunity to clarify your goal, and what it's going to take to achieve it. You assess your readiness for the trail and figure out where you have short-falls so you can address them before you set off.

Here's what Pre-Project Check & Prep looks like.

1. Recap your objectives

The time to do this Check & Prep is once you have **decided the objectives for your project**.

These objectives will direct the rest of your actions - even before you actually begin your project.

Write them down here in a short, concise sentence. You can then centre the rest of the exercise around them.

- What are the objectives of my project? (What does DONE look like?)

Now you need to look at how you're going to achieve those objectives. A couple of questions I like to ask myself at this point are:

- What's the fastest, simplest way I could reach my project objectives?
- Is there a different way of doing things I could use?

(Sometimes this means questioning the fundamental approach to the project.)

If you come up with lots of different ways to reach your objectives you'll need to evaluate the most likely ones.

Once you've narrowed down your options, it's time for a bit of research.

2. Research your project

I'm the first to acknowledge that extensive research can easily turn into procrastination. But some defined information-gathering before starting a project can be invaluable.

(This is research about how to do your project, not what your project is about. You should have already clarified the what in your objectives.)

Directed research helps you get up to speed on what other people already learned about similar goals.

Yep, the wheel has already been invented. You may be aiming for a completely different kind of wheel. But it's definitely worth bearing in mind that a square one has been proven not to work.

(Even if you find conflicting advice in your research, it helps highlight the opportunities and pitfalls you might encounter.)

So before jumping in to your project, set aside a *finite* amount of time for research and confine it to information relevant to your project objectives.

I do mean FINITE and it's imperative that you stick to RELEVANT information. Otherwise you will definitely enter the black hole of procrastination. And we all know how difficult it is to get out of that, don't we?

3. Identify potential sticking points

The next step in the Check & Prep is to scrutinise your ideas to make sure you anticipate - and plan for - any possible glitches.

Pitfalls and sticking points are often caused by using new tools, techniques or technology. So brainstorm a list of as many possible sticking points as you can. Ask yourself,

- Am I using new tools, techniques or technology?

For example, I'm considering making decorated paper fans. The kind of questions I need to answer are:

- What weight of paper is best for making a paper fan?
- Can I use my usual acrylic paint on this kind of paper or do I need different paint e.g. watercolour?
- Which kind of paper fan mechanism is easiest to make?
- Are there any precedents for creating a folding fan that has a long handle?

By looking for answers to these questions, I am already anticipating some of the likely pitfalls I might face. E.g. the paper being too light or too heavy to make the fan effective; the paint buckling the paper; a long handle making it impractical to use the fan; and so on.

Psychological sticking points

Of course, with any creative project there are also potential psychological sticking points. It's outside the scope of this article to go into all these here, but some of the most common are:

- Not defining your objectives sufficiently

- Lack of motivation when 'nobody's looking'
- Losing interest in your project mid-way or towards the end

Once you have your list, jot down the main questions you need answering before you can proceed with your project.

4. Brainstorm solutions to your sticking points

Now it's time for yet another brainstorm - this time for solutions to each sticking point.

(Take advantage of [free access to my Quick Unblocking Workbook](#) for possible solutions to psychological problems and the [7 Step Troubleshooter workbook](#) to work through general sticking points.)

You may need to seek advice from people in the know at this point.

Remember, devising the answers to these sticking points is part of your project! So you only need potential solutions not proven ones.

By figuring out possible problems in advance, they're much less likely to derail you mid-way.

When you have potential solutions to all your sticking points, it's time to expose your ideas to a bit of constructive external input.

5. Present your project proposal

It's easy to get lost in our own heads and fail to see the wood for the trees. Explaining your plan to someone else help reveal any gaps in your strategy that might cause problems later.

'Presenting your proposal' sounds much grander than it is. I'm simply suggesting you explain your project to a trusted other.

Trusted being the operative word here.

This person doesn't need to be an expert in the field, but someone you know to be insightful and constructive.

Gather support materials such as sketches and idea maps to support what you say.

What might other people not understand about your ideas? How could you increase their understanding?

But what if you don't have anyone to present your project to? Present it to yourself out loud! And let your 'other self' play devil's advocate by looking for holes in your strategy.

6. Analyse your proposal

Once you've done your 'presentation', you're now ready for the some analysis to further clarify the direction of your project.

Read over the lists of problems and solutions you've encountered. Ask yourself:

- Do you have all the materials/skills/tools to make this?
- Does your proposed idea contain elements of your signature style/voice/brand?
- Have you encountered any problems that you don't have potential solutions for?
- Are there any gaps in your strategy which might cause problems later?
- Is there anything you need to adjust in the light of this?

If you can't see a way to plug gaps, don't worry. It's enough to be aware of them and allow the missing bits to become clear as your project unfolds.



First attempts at mock-up of Pomegranate artist's book ©Cherry Jeffs 2019

7. Run some tests

Before finally committing to the project, you may now want to take a break from analysis. Depending on the nature of your project you could do some preparatory sketches or test your materials, make a mock-up or write an outline.

This will give you an even more realistic idea of the level of commitment the project is going to involve. Ask yourself,

- How quickly can you do these preparatory sketches, test your materials, make a mock-up or write an outline?

Remember this is just a simple test-run for your final project. So ignore the finer points!

It's tempting to skip this stage but I've found it saves me a lot of time and heartache later.

I used to leap in and begin a new [artist's book](#) without testing anything. Then I'd often end up having to re-do parts that had gone wrong. Now I always construct a basic of mock-up for each project, so I rarely hit those stumbling blocks in the middle!

8. Post-testing analysis

Once you're as confident as you can reasonably be that you've got a good overview of your project commitment, ask yourself these two final questions:

- What's your guesstimate for time to produce a finished version?
- What is your gut feeling about going ahead with this idea?

The value of Pre-Project Check & Prep

That's it! You've now finished the Pre-Project Check & Prep! You should have a clear idea of what your project involves and where the sticking points might be.

Forewarned is forearmed!

If you decide to go ahead with your creative project, making a coherent and easy-to-follow plan will now be a breeze.

You have a clear overview of the trail, where the bears might be lying in wait, and how to avoid them!

Now why not use the [Simple Project Planning](#) system to quickly decide exactly what you need to do. And in what order. It will help you breakdown tasks step-by-step so you don't get overwhelmed by complexity. And help you estimate how long you'll need.

But before you go, grab your...

Check & Prep Cheatsheet

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