

Big Feat

Small Steps

By Kate Hennessey

"I'm not working on my art anymore," my friend Melissa confessed. She pointed to her neglected studio. "Look at this disaster. I can't get it cleaned up. I'll probably die with this mess!" The "disaster" was her workspace, which was encrusted in paperwork, used-up art supplies, and old clothing.

The magnitude of the mess was staggering, so I helped her create a step-by-step plan to reclaim her workroom. Step one was clearing enough desk space for her to sit down with a pencil and sketchpad to work. Little by little, we expanded to cleaning and organizing the entire desktop, then the hutch and the overflowing art supply cabinet. Then onto the drafting board, the worktable, the closets, and even the area under the old leather couch. Every Saturday afternoon I sat with her as we filled three boxes (Keep, Donate, and Trash) and then emptied them appropriately. It took a couple of months, but eventually Melissa began painting again in a welcoming, tidy studio. Step by step, she had conquered the obstacle that had seemed so daunting.

In the field of project management, breaking a complex outcome into steps is called "decomposition." This technique doesn't belong solely to the world of corporate business. You can use it in your art as well, as in the case of a complex work of art or an art-related project. When you study a tutorial by your favorite polymer clay artist, you're witnessing how they've teased apart the various components of their craft into something that a fellow artist can view, test, and learn from. Anything you want to do can be broken down into steps.

Say you want to get your art into a gallery, which can seem like an impossible task when you're starting out. So, let's break it down into small steps.



Initial Planning

- Let yourself dream big. "I'm going to get my art into a gallery" is a good starting goal, but you want more than that, don't you? You want a gallery that matches your style, in a specific location, with a curator whose tastes you share. Brainstorm, mind-map, and allow yourself to dream. In his article, "The Importance of Daydreaming," author Will Willimon notes that "sometimes we are so intimidated by the magnitude of a problem that we dare not consciously think about it" and that daydreaming leads to important realizations.

Setting Goals and Creating Tasks

- Write down your goals. Putting your goals into words means that you specify exactly what you want. The written goals motivate you toward action and keep your aims at the forefront of your mind, allowing you to view your actions through the lens of your goals. Not sure how to get started?

Take a cue from the well-known S.M.A.R.T. goal structure. Create goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

For instance, "Get my art into a gallery" isn't as clear a goal as "By April, I will have my new line of romantic polymer jewelry featured in a local craft arts gallery."

- Divide the goal into big steps. For instance, "1) Find a gallery I like. 2) Publicize my jewelry collection. 3) Meet with the curator. 4) Get accepted." Typically, these big steps aren't too hard to figure out. These are the steps that immediately come to mind when you ask yourself how you're going to accomplish your goal.
- Divide the big steps into medium steps. These medium steps are sometimes called objectives. They are short-term actions that you take to achieve your goals.

Let's take the big step of "Publicize my jewelry collection." Medium steps could be, 1) Write a journal about my unique approach to polymer clay jewelry. 2) Add recent art pieces to my online gallery. 3) Enter contests and apply for grants. 4) Talk to my marketing guru friend Jennifer about how to use social media to promote my jewelry. 5) Order more business cards. 6) Find new gallery openings, fashion shows, and art events to attend.

- Divide the medium steps into baby steps. Repeat this process to break down the medium steps into baby steps such as, "Call Jen to set up a time to talk" or "Add five new pieces to my online gallery by Saturday." These baby steps become your to-do list.



- Set milestones. Milestones are key events that let you know you're on the right track to your big goal. They're events that shout out, "I've accomplished a big chunk of my work!" For this example, your most important milestone will likely be, "Sign gallery contract." Create milestones for your big steps as well. A milestone for "Publicize my jewelry," might be "Get 100 local artists and boutiques to follow me on Instagram by the end of August." If you're not sure what your milestones should be, ask, "How will I know if I've achieved this goal?"

Set Yourself Up for Success

- Get organized. To avoid losing track of all your goals and tasks, put a system in place that works for you. Consider using a spreadsheet service like Google Sheets. You can also turn towards a free, intuitive project management software like Asana to help you organize your lists.

Don't overcomplicate matters though. If technology doesn't suit you, try a wipe off board, notes on a corkboard, or sticky notes on a wall. All you really need is something that lets you list tasks, assign due dates, check off your tasks when you complete them, display what's coming up, and sort your tasks. There are plenty of suggestions and methods online so spend some time researching options until you find one that you like.

- Estimate the time needed. It's hard to plan a task



when you don't know how long it will take. If you're not sure, ask others in your art community for their feedback. Think of similar tasks you've done in the past.

- Plan for the unexpected by giving yourself a little wiggle room. Don't schedule your steps so close together that you'll be in trouble if something takes longer than expected.
- Consider the timing and the schedule for other projects you're working on, as well as industry schedules (do galleries in your city tend to have openings on a certain day of the month?), and your daily life or family needs.
- Determine your cost. Every project needs a budget, and cost planning sheds light on tasks you may not have thought about otherwise. Will you have to buy new frames or art supplies? Will you need taxi fares or event tickets? If so, adjust your budget and then add "buy frames" and "purchase event tickets" to your task list.
- Enlist help. Do you need to get a babysitter for a couple of days so that you can focus on your art? Will you need to contact an old friend to ask for a recommendation? If so, put these items on your task list as well.
- Do risk analysis. You can't plan for every unexpected event, but there are always challenges common to people in your shoes. Talk to your artist friends about their experiences getting into galleries. Search online

to see what lessons other artists have learned. If you find out that jewelry galleries often reject artists who don't have clear pricing documents, then "create a price sheet" goes on your task list.

- Build your task list into your daily life. Create routines that support your new project. Set aside time to regularly review your tasks, update your progress, and revise your next steps. Perhaps you update your task list and schedule on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday each week. Maybe you leave your day planner on top of your worktable so it's the first thing you see when you walk into your workspace.
- The most important thing is to accommodate your lifestyle and personality; don't put your task list where you'll never see it again. If spreadsheets bore you, but you always glance at your whiteboard when you walk past it, then use the whiteboard.
- Get support and stay accountable. Find a trusted friend who is willing to hold you accountable. Share your goal and ask them to check on you every week. Instruct them to gently prod you if you procrastinate and help you brainstorm solutions to obstacles. In Melissa's case, having some friendly encouragement each week made the difference between paralyzing despair and meaningful progress.

Breaking any task into smaller items makes it less daunting, which means you are more likely to achieve your goal. If you're feeling overwhelmed by the number of tasks, focus on one step at a time. Allow yourself to relax, refocus often, and don't fall into the trap of perfectionism.

It's natural to start off with a grand vision and have no idea how to accomplish it. Take a little step forward every day; from this new vantage point, the next step to achieving your goal becomes a little clearer.

And since you're making the effort to break down your project into steps, why not document what you're doing with a journal, video, or series of photographs? Who knows, you might have the makings of a tutorial that you can share with others.

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