

SUMMARY THE WAR OF ART

STEVEN PRESSFIELD



Summary of “The War of Art” by Steven Pressfield

Written by Lea Schullery

Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Creative
Battles.

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Introduction

For author Steven Pressfield, his days consist of waking up, showering, having breakfast, and making important phone calls. When that's all completed, he makes himself his cup of coffee, puts on his lucky work boots, and ties up his lucky laces. He then heads to his office where he cranks up the computer. His lucky sweatshirt is draped over his chair with the lucky charm he bought from a gypsy in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, he then puts on his lucky name tag. He then says a prayer, the Invocation of the Muse from Homer's *Odyssey*. At this point, it is about 10:30 a.m. and he finally plunges into his writing. He writes for hours, and he knows he's written enough when he starts to make typos, he's getting tired. That's typically four hours or so. He's hit the point of diminishing returns, so he wraps up for the day, copies his work onto a disk, and stashes the disk in the glove compartment of his truck, just in case there's a fire and he has to run for it. It is now 3:30 p.m. and his office is closed. How many pages has he written? He doesn't care. Are they any good? He doesn't think about it. All that matters is that he put in the time and gave it everything he had. All that counts for this day, for this session, is that he overcame *Resistance*.



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Resistance is a Powerful Force Plotting Your Failure

How often have you brought home that new piece of exercise equipment just to let it collect dust over the years? Maybe you've started a diet just to quit a few weeks later, or you've let your gym membership expire. Of course, quitting doesn't only happen when it comes to diet and exercise. Maybe you've wanted to be a mother, a doctor, an advocate for the weak and helpless. Maybe you've wanted to run for office and campaign for world peace or to preserve the environment. Do you dream late at night of the person you might become or the work you could accomplish? If you answer yes to any of these questions, then you know what Resistance is.

According to Pressfield, "Resistance is the most toxic force on the planet. It is the root of more unhappiness than poverty, disease, and erectile dysfunction. To yield to Resistance deforms our spirit. It stunts us and makes us less than we are and were born to be." It is the force that keeps us from realizing our dreams and accomplishing what we are called to do. It's the small voice in your head telling you that you can't, that you don't have enough money, creativity, time, or self-discipline to achieve greatness. Resistance is real for everyone and it can destroy you.

For example, did you know Hitler wanted to be an artist? At just 18-years-old, he took an inheritance of 700 Kronen and moved to Vienna to live and study. He applied to the Academy of Fine Arts and later to the School of Architecture. And yet, you've likely never seen a painting by Hitler. That's because Resistance beat him. For Hitler, it was easier to start World War II than it was for him to face a blank canvas.

Resistance doesn't discriminate and it never sleeps. For instance, Henry Fonda was an accomplished actor and he was still throwing up before each stage performance, even when he was 75-years-old. In other words, fear doesn't go away. It can manifest itself in many ways, whether it is through the fear of failure, self-doubt, or procrastination, Resistance aims to kill and will target the very epicenter of your being: your genius, your soul, the

unique and priceless gift that you were put on this earth to give. And when we choose to fight it, we start a war to the death.



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Resistance Manifests Even Stronger as you Near the End of Your Journey

Even when we begin to follow our dreams and become the person we vision for ourselves, Resistance will stick with us for the journey. In fact, Resistance will manifest itself even stronger the closer you get to the finish line. Let's take a look at the story of Odysseus who almost made it home years before his actual homecoming. At one point in his journey, he could see his home Ithaca, they could even see the fires of their families' on the shore. Feeling safe, Odysseus laid down to rest. Surely, he would be home with his family in just a few hours.

His men, however, believed he was keeping an ox-hide sack full of gold in his possession, so they greedily stole the bag and cut it open. But it was not gold inside, it was strong winds given to Odysseus from King Aeolus to help him get home. The winds burst from the bag and drove Odysseus' ship further from Ithaca. As a result, Odysseus and his men didn't return home for several more years. This story shows that the danger for Resistance is greatest when the finish line is in sight. Resistance knows that it is about to be defeated, so it hits the panic button and deploys one final assault and slams us with everything it's got. The professional must be aware and alert to this counterattack.

As mentioned in the first chapter, Resistance can manifest itself in many ways: fear, procrastination, criticism, and even self-medication. Some manifestations, however, can be an ally. Take self-doubt, for example. Self-doubt can serve as an indicator of aspiration because it reflects love. Love of something we dream of doing and desire. Like self-doubt, fear can be an indicator and tell us what we have to do. The rule of thumb is this: the more scared we are of a work or calling, the more sure we can be that we have to do it. The more fear we feel, the more we care about what it is that we want to accomplish. If it meant nothing to us, there'd be no Resistance.

The host of *Inside the Actors Studio*, James Lipton always asks his guests, "What factors make you decide to take a particular role?" Each time, the actors answer, "Because I'm afraid of it." These professionals take on projects that put them outside their comfort zone and compel them to explore parts of themselves that they do not yet understand. If they've done the role before, there's nothing new to learn, so they constantly seek something chal-

lenging and uncomfortable. So if you're paralyzed with fear, that's a good sign. It shows you what you have to do.



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To Defeat Resistance, You Must Stop Being an Amateur and Become a Professional

Those who are defeated by Resistance all share a common trait: they're amateurs. These amateurs have not yet turned into professionals. This isn't to say that they haven't completed the proper schooling or received higher degrees, this simply means that they share a common mindset. You see, amateurs play for fun while professionals play for keeps. Even more importantly, the amateur plays part-time and the professional plays full-time. So if you think you are going to beat Resistance by becoming a weekend warrior, then you're sadly mistaken.

Beating Resistance means treating your dream as a full-time job and becoming a professional. You see, the professionals love their work so much that they dedicate their entire life to it. For example, Somerset Maugham was once asked if he wrote on a schedule or only when struck by inspiration. "I write only when inspiration strikes," Maugham replied, "Fortunately it strikes every morning a nine o'clock sharp." Essentially, Maugham was saying, "I despise Resistance; I will not let it faze me; I will sit down and do my work." This is what a professional does.

Additionally, Maugham realized a deeper truth: "by performing the mundane physical act of sitting down and starting to work, he set in motion a mysterious but infallible sequence of events that would produce inspiration, as surely as if the goddess had synchronized her watch with his." Similarly, author Steven Pressfield understands the importance of showing up each day. He feels Resistance each morning as he goes through his daily obligations, but no matter how strong the Resistance is, he puts one foot in front of the other and keeps climbing. Eventually, his juices begin flowing and hours pass as he writes. By the end of the day, he has won the battle with Resistance, only to begin another battle the next morning.

Resistance is a war, and like war, it is miserable. For Pressfield, the Marine Corps taught him an invaluable lesson on how to be miserable. Like a marine, the artist who commits himself to his calling has volunteered for hell. When the artist decides to become a professional, he signs up for a life of isolation, rejection, self-doubt, despair, ridicule, contempt, and humiliation. Therefore, an artist must be like a Marine by learning how to be miserable and even *love* being miserable. Because the life of a professional artist

is war, and war is hell. So like Pressfield, show up every day no matter how miserable you feel or how hard the Resistance fights to pull you away.



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Professionals Learn From Their Failures and Are Patient For Success

Being a professional means more than just showing up every day. It also means that you perfect your technique by exposing yourself to judgment from the real world. This doesn't mean showing your poem to a friend who then says, "It's wonderful, I love it." No, that's not real-world feedback, that's just a friend being nice. Nothing is more empowering than real-world validation, even if it is a failure.

Pressfield's first professional writing job came after working hard for 17 years of trying. The job was writing a screenplay for a movie called *King Kong Lives* for Dino DeLaurentiis. Pressfield wrote the screenplay with his partner-at-the-time, Ron Shusett, who has worked on movies like *Alien* and *Total Recall*. After writing the screenplay, the two were certain that this movie would be a hit, so they invited everyone they knew to the premiere and even rented out the place next door for a post-triumph celebration. They warned their friends to get there early, the place would certainly be crowded.

Nobody came. The one guy in the line that wasn't one of their guests was some guy muttering something about spare change. In the theater, their friends endured the horrific movie and when the lights came on, they fled like cockroaches in the night. The next day, the review in *Variety* stated, "... Ronald Shusett and Steven Pressfield; we hope these are not their real names, for their parents' sake." Despite the bad press, they were still optimistic that the movie would gain traction in other areas. But it failed. Pressfield, now 42-years-old, divorced and childless, was crushed. He finally got his name on a big-time Hollywood production starring Linda Hamilton, and he failed. He felt worthless, like a loser, a fake.

His friend Tony Keppelman asked him if he was going to quit. Pressfield thought that question was absurd, he couldn't quit now! So Keppelman replied, "Then be happy. You're where you wanted to be, aren't you? So

you're taking a few blows. That's the price for being in the arena and not on the sidelines. Stop complaining and be grateful." That day Pressfield realized he had become a professional. Sure, he wasn't a success yet, but he'd experienced his first real failure. Pressfield learned from this experience and he worked hard to learn more and perfect his craft.

A professional is also patient and understands delayed gratification. You may have heard the story of Sylvester Stallone staying up three nights straight to write the screenplay for *Rocky*. Whether it's true or not, it gives a false belief that greatness can be created in as little as three days! This is simply not true. Greatness takes pain, persistence, and patience. The professional understands that his project will take twice as long and cost twice as much, but accepts it and recognizes this fact as reality.

Lastly, the professional seeks order. Pressfield once lived in the back of his Chevy van where he had to dig his typewriter out from beneath layers of tools, dirty laundry, and books. His truck was a filthy hellhole on wheels. A professional, however, cannot live like that. Instead, a professional aims to eliminate chaos from his world and his mind. "He wants the carpet vacuumed and the threshold swept, so the Muse may enter and not soil her gown."



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A Professional Doesn't Make Excuses, Asks for Help, and Seeks Constructive Criticism

Each day, we are faced with new obstacles. Each professional has their own obstacles they must overcome and has unique experiences that make their path different from everyone else. A professional, however, doesn't make excuses and learns how to play the game that's given to them. For instance, Pressfield and his friend were once playing a golf course at Prestwick in Scotland on a particularly windy day.

On the first hole, Pressfield started an eight-iron thirty yards to windward, but the gale caught it and the ball sailed to the hard right. Pressfield, angry, turned to his caddie and exclaimed, "Did you see the wind take that shot!?" The Scottish caddie simply shrugged and stated, "Well, ye've got t' play th' wind now, don't ye?" In other words, the professional must learn to conduct his business despite adversity, injustice, bad calls, and even good breaks and lucky bounces. In the world of the professional, he understands that excuses aren't going to get him any closer to his dream.

This also means that a professional must be mentally prepared every day to confront his obstacles. The field alters each day, and the goal is not victory but to handle himself as sturdily and steadily as he can. He must remember that each day is a battle, and he must show up each day prepared to fight that battle. Of course, when a professional inevitably finds himself struggling in the midst of war, he should not hesitate to ask for help. For instance, Tiger Woods is the greatest golfer in the world, yet he too has a teacher. And Tiger doesn't simply endure the things that Butch Harmon aims to teach him, he revels in them.

Even as a professional, Tiger understands that he doesn't know everything, or that he can figure everything out on his own. Instead, he seeks out a knowledgeable teacher and listens carefully to what he teaches him. "The student of the game knows that the levels of revelation that can unfold in golf, as in any art, are inexhaustible."

Finally, the professional doesn't take failure or success personally. As humans, our fear of rejection isn't just psychological, it's biological. Resistance knows this and will use it against you to paralyze you and prevent you from completing your work or exposing it to the public. Pressfield once had a friend who spent years writing an excellent and deeply personal novel. After he completed it, he had it in his mailbox, but he couldn't make himself send it off. Fear of rejection got to him. Ultimately, our enemy is not editors, critics, or the public. It is Resistance. Therefore, the professional must learn to validate himself and assess his work objectively to improve it. Lastly, the professional must seek criticism to learn and grow, no matter how much it hurts.



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Hard Work and Dedication Can Help You Invoke the Muses

Just like there is a force that is aiming to work against you, there are forces that want to see you succeed as well. Pressfield calls these forces the *angels in the abstract*. You can think of this angel as an ally that is working to provide you with inspiration and motivation. For Pressfield, the most important thing that matters is showing up each day to write. When he sits down, he says a prayer to the Muse aloud and prays that she will fill him with insight, ideas, and more.

When Pressfield was in his late twenties, he rented a house in Northern California. He had gone there to finish a novel or kill himself trying. At that time, he had just destroyed a marriage with a girl he loved and screwed up two careers. He didn't understand then that his failures were because of his inability to conquer Resistance. He had written two novels that he simply threw away in the trash; unable to beat Resistance, he fell prey to every vice and distraction. Eventually, his actions led him to a sleepy California town with his Chevy van and his cat. He then met a guy named Paul Rink, a writer who lived in his camper. Each day, Pressfield started his mornings with Paul who shared with him the Invocation of the Muse from Homer's *The Odyssey*.

In his tiny house, Pressfield didn't watch TV, read the newspaper, or even go out to enjoy a movie. Instead, he simply worked. One afternoon, he heard his neighbor's radio playing outside with a voice proclaiming, "...to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." When Pressfield came out to ask about the radio broadcast, his neighbor replied, "Didn't you hear? Nixon's out; they got a new guy in there." Pressfield was so engrossed in writing his book, he had completely missed the Watergate Scandal. He continued working, and after 26 months, he finally got to the last page and typed out: THE END. He went straight to Paul to tell him he had finished and Paul replied, "Good for you. Start the next one today."

Pressfield invoked the Muses to help him stay focused and inspired. The only way to invoke them is through dedication and hard work. Hard work will open you up to other positive forces outside your control and help you defeat Resistance. Plato once described these forces as "madness." The madness can seize an artist and give him creativity as he has never experienced before. According to Plato, an artist untouched by the madness of the Muses cannot succeed on technique alone; instead, he must become a madman to destroy Resistance.



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Professionals Work Territorially, and Not Hierarchically

Many of us define ourselves hierarchically whether we are aware of it or not. It's hard to avoid in today's society as we go through school and become exposed to a materialistic culture that believes our worth comes from the opinions of others. If you just wear this outfit, get this job, and buy that house, then everyone will love you. Hierarchies surround us. They are in Hollywood, Washington, Wall Street, and even high school. The problem is that when the numbers get too big, the hierarchy begins to break down. Today, our world has grown too big and hierarchy no longer works.

An artist who defines himself hierarchically can be fatal, and here's why. When an artist defines himself by his place in a pecking order, he will try to compete against all others in the order. He will then evaluate his happiness, success, and achievement by his rank within the hierarchy, feeling only satisfied when he's high and miserable when he's low. He will act towards others based on their rank in the hierarchy, ultimately excluding those who don't fit within his own. He will evaluate his every move solely by the effect it produces on others.

But artists cannot look to others to validate their work. Just ask Van Gogh, who produced many masterpieces but never found a buyer in his entire life. Simply put, a hierarchy forces artists to look up and down when the place they should be looking is within. Instead of working hierarchically, an artist should work territorially. Like animals, humans have territories too. For example, Stevie Wonder's territory is the piano. Arnold Schwarzenegger's territory is the gym. Bill Gates' territory is in Microsoft. So how can you find your territory?

First, your territory should be the place where you feel *sustenance*. It should be the place that provides you with fuel and challenges you to become better at your craft. In your territory, you should feel satisfied and challenged, you should better yourself when you spend time there. For rock

climbers, it might be on the walls of the biggest rocks in Yosemite. For Olympic swimmers, it'll be in the pools of the training facilities. Each time they summit that rock or finish that final lap, they'll feel better than they did before!

Next, your territory can only be claimed by work. For instance, when Arnold Schwarzenegger goes to the gym, he's on his own turf. Sure, others may go to the gym as well, but Arnold makes it his own. He laid claim to his territory through the many hours and years of sweat that he put into the gym. A territory doesn't give, it gives back. Lastly, your territory returns exactly what you put in. Territories are fair and what you deposit, you get back, dollar-for-dollar. To tell if you are operating territorially or hierarchially, take a look at your actions when you feel anxious. Do you pick up the phone and call your friends and seek their validation? If so, then you're operating hierarchically.

To operate territorially, look at Arnold Schwarzenegger. On a bad day, he wouldn't seek his friends for validation, he would simply head to the gym. All he would do is show up and work out, he might not even talk to anyone. He would simply know that working out would bring him back to his center. Furthermore, think about if you were all alone on the planet, what would you do? Arnold would still go to the gym. Stevie Wonder would still play the piano. If you want to operate territorially, you need to show up every day to the studio, rehearsal lab, or laboratory, even if you're the last person on earth.



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Final Summary

So what was it that you were born to do? Were you born to write? Paint? Be a scientist? Advocate for justice or peace? In the end, you can only answer this question by action. Do it or don't do it. Maybe you are the one meant to cure cancer or write a symphony and you don't do it. By not taking action, you are hurting yourself, your children, and everyone else. You hurt the planet. You shame the angels who watch over you and spite the Almighty, who created you and only you with your unique gifts. Creative work isn't selfish or a bid for attention. Creative work is a gift to the world and every being in the world. So don't cheat us of your contribution. Give us what you've got.



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