

Over the past decade and a half, I've enjoyed a wonderful freelance life making relative mountains out of dirt piles – well at least that's how I'd like to perceive it. In many ways it's what we all do in the arts – take whatever we can and make the best of it. We choose this because more often than not we love what it is we do, and who it is we do it with. This mentality is an ever-growing necessity too, as we continue to operate in one of the most underpaid areas of creative enterprise. Recent reports on annual incomes from groups like the Australia Council For The Arts indicating the acute nature of this predicament.

Having remained freelance throughout my professional life has proved challenging at times. Early on there were months where baked beans and toast were literally a staple, but thankfully I've been fortunate enough to get by year to year thanks to a little luck, some strategic thinking and a lot of generosity and support from wonderful and creative people who have encouraged my curatorial/artistic endeavours. To these people I am eternally grateful.

So now, on the eve of my 15th year working at this ever evolving beast we call freelancing in music and the arts, I feel it may well be time to publish a few of the small rules and ideals that have sought to guide me during this voyage.

The title *A Young Person's Guide To Hustling In Music And The Arts* is a homage to those inspiring introductory book and record series of the same name, that summarise a body of work in one short, sharp burst. Some readers might consider there being a touch of cynicism ascribed to the choice of the term 'Hustling', but as a freelancer it's probably one of the most apt verbs for how the process of realising projects can appear at times.

Rather than the more negative associations attached to the word, I'd like to think of hustling referring to the determination shown and the willingness to do what it takes to get a project off the ground. There are no set rules in this game, no 'how to' manual or university course you can take to get a grip on it all. It's freeform, irrational and chaotic – a beautiful chance for creative individuals to do the best they can to realise their work and the work of those they support.

Sadly, looking back over my time freelancing, I've seen so many wonderful and visionary curators, producers and artists shrivel up and pass into other work before they reached their peak. These people, many of whom I can't help but feel could be producing incredible work right now had circumstances been different, stopped practising for a variety of reasons many of them concerning the economic instability (feast and famine, you could call it) of the freelance producer/artist work life. There's no simple answer on how to increase sustainability within these areas, but one thing that certainly has assisted me has been the insight and mentorship of elders and those more experienced in the field. It's partly this sentiment of sharing that has brought about the writing of this little guide.

It's important to state, this guide isn't a cure all. Nothing is universal, there's no one answer or solution to the challenges faced in creativity and sustainability. This text is merely one freelancer's thoughts and reflections about the particular set of circumstances and challenges that have presented themselves over the past decade and a half. I hope there's some useful and thought provoking points here and that some of these views might prove poignant to you in sustaining your interests, passions and creativity.

Lawrence English June 2011.

The following guide is divided into three sections – work, others, self.

For The Work

Let the quality of the work speak for itself

Hype isn't usually the answer to success. Well not in the longer term. If you're out for a spike of recognition, sure, hype will do that. With today's social media the ability to create a gust of attention quickly is like some wonderful fantasy Edward Bernays may have had in the 1920s. But easy come, easy go – especially in the ever-distracted world of today.

For something to linger, for art and music to capture minds and be remembered there needs to be something powerful, meaningful and evocative in the work you present. That's what we're all striving for to varying degrees, to be remembered and ultimately to be relevant in future times, and the best way to do that is to commit yourself to producing the best work you can.

Talk is cheap, and getting cheaper, each project you undertake should offer some legacy and lend itself to the overall vision of what it is you do. Time is precious, and while it mightn't seem so when you're starting out, it only becomes compounded as you keep on creating. So spend that extra bit of time working at that piece or project. Cutting corners eventually catches up with you – if not publically then certainly it affects your own approaches and processes when making work.

The most obvious road is almost always a fool's road

William Burroughs is sorely missed and it's little gems like this that remind us just how spot on he was. The middle road, the road of mediocrity, this is not the road to aspire to. Take some chances, reach that little bit more than you think you should. Of course, don't burn yourself and the work out – but at the same time don't fall short, don't give in to the easier well-trodden path. There's nothing more satisfying than the sense you've worked, pushed and achieved something that took more than just simple delivery. We're often faced with mediocrity, conservative creativity and work that occupies at the lower register of innovation – there's no need for you or your work to exist here.

Document (at least a little)

To quote The Simpsons;

Krusty "What have you done for me lately?"

Bart "I got you that Danish"

Krusty "And I'll never forget you for it"

Collective memory is short at the best of times. Lets face it there's so much creation happening daily that it's easy for people's memories to become full. Do you remember what art you were experiencing this time last year? Or what music was capturing your ears? Possibly not.

So for all us cultural producers, documentation plays a crucial role in helping jog the memory! It's both personal and public – sometimes returning to documentation a couple of years on can be a real learning. What worked, what didn't and why?

Documentation also helps build a portfolio that's crucial when you're attempting to attract new work and partners. There's nothing more useful than being able to give examples of what it is you do and hopefully the quality to which you do it.

For Others

Respect

If there's one overarching rule to this game it's respect. Very few of us are getting rich here, most of us are in this because we're driven by a foolish desire to support work we care about or feel passionate about. Much easier livings could be sought in any number of academic, corporate or public service positions – jobs with actual benefits like superannuation, holiday pay and sick days.

What we have (or should have) is mutual respect. There's room for everyone's work and curatorial pursuits here in Australia. There might be moments where you feel you're overlooked or someone else gets that chance you thought you might be best suited to, but something else will pop up.

Another thought, be diplomatic. Belligerence, though an utter necessity from time to time, can be a bit of a drag for people around you.

If you say you will, then do follow through

It's a simple one, but often overlooked or forgotten.

If you agree to do something, then live up to your word. There's nothing more frustrating for a freelancer than having a whole array of things promised to you by a third party for a project and then one by one have them dismantled or not honoured. Sometimes these things are unavoidable (act of god, we've all been there) and you just need to accept it and move on, but that's not always the case. Sadly sometimes people (either through lack of experience or something less excusable) simply don't deliver what they promise.

So just as it's frustrating for you to experience, think of people on the other end. If you agree to help on a project or offer a fee to an artist or agree on certain conditions, then try everything in your power to respect those agreements. It's the least you can do to honour those things you agree to as best you can. And if you can't, own up to them. Be honest enough to take responsibility for those shortcomings and (if possible) in a timely fashion.

Remember why you started

It sounds easy enough to do, but give yourself the better part of a decade in the throws and woes of the freelance arts and music environment and you'd be amazed how foggy your early memories can become. It's easy to lose track of what it was that first got you started. Over time your reasons for doing what you do may ultimately change, but it pays to remember what sparked you to start this voyage. That reason that made you take the leap of faith into uncharted waters might seem naïve, perhaps even foolish, but there's a kernel in that thought, that when returned to down the line reveals something new each time you consider it.

As circumstances change, that reason remains anchored in a time and place and offers you a chance to consider where it is you've come from, where you thought you might go and whether or not you've come close to that. Perspective can be difficult to get and little things like this can be vital in giving you context and understanding for what is you're doing now and why.

Remember your friends

As I said before, memories can be short. That said it's not too much to remember and think about those who support you. Freelancing is about peaks and troughs and not everyone's wave cycle is at the same frequency. You can almost guarantee that people you see on the way up, you'll more than likely see on the way down in your cycle.

Having friends, supporting them and hopefully having them support you is vital in the ebb and flow of creative freelancing. This point is relevant to other thoughts in this guide, like respect and taking things for granted. It's important to remember that we're all creative people trying to work out a place for our projects and creations. There's room for everyone, so don't be shy giving people a lift up when they need it. Who knows before long they might be doing the same for you when you need a helping hand.

Thank people

It's not hard to do and more often than not we don't do it enough. It's the least you can do to show people what they do for you actually matters and is meaningful.

For You

You've got to have a line in the ocean to catch a fish.

In the early 2000s, when I was supplementing my income with freelance writing, I had a curious conversation with Gene Simmons from Kiss. Part way through the interview meant to be about an upcoming tour, the interview drifted into Simmons' real passion – business. He said to me the one rule he lived by was “You've got to have a line in the ocean to catch a fish”. This comment stuck with me, as it's inherently relevant for any hustler. If you're not visible, how do people know about all the work you're up to and how it might fit into their needs or projects? Now this doesn't mean you rattle off your resume every time you meet someone (that's tedious, truly it is), but it does mean you should be out and about open to projects and ideas.

‘Yes’ is an important word, especially when you are starting out. Even if a project isn't exactly aligned with what you're interested in, there are probably lessons and skills to be acquired. So be open and be interested – that's not to say agree to everything that pops up in front of you, more just think about the scope of what a project might offer in the longer term, rather than the immediate outcomes that will result. Basically it's about thinking strategically. I can attest, saying yes to projects like a lecture on location recording has led to commissions for Museums and agreeing to produce a show for an artist has led to new commissions for similar projects both for myself and the artist involved. It's win, win!

Don't take things for granted

Entitlement is a big no no. We're blessed to be in a country where there are some good opportunities and a fairly high standard of living. We're lucky to enjoy some decent access to government and council funding, to work with supportive venues (both public and private) and to have a few patrons of the arts. Let's be honest, we could always do with more (and should actively advocate and encourage such growth), but we need to realise that not everyone is in the same boat and we can't just take these things for granted.

If you're supported by a patron or awarded a grant, then try to make the most of it. Who knows that tomorrow brings – this is particularly the case for freelancers who exist project

to project. After all, policies change, government interests shift, patron's come and go - each opportunity you have is something you should take hold of and remember that it may not always be this way.

On top of that, a personal recommendation – spread your risk. If you happen to operate entirely on government support, a patron or any kind of income from a single source, then keep in mind that support may not always be there. The stability we may have known before is eroding quickly and without remorse. If you're serious about staying active in the longer term there's nothing more important than having back up plans and incomes streams to see you through those difficult times. This might take the form of part time work, or a nest egg you build for yourself in the better years. It might also be thinking strategically to secure yourself a buffer of activity so you know where your meals are coming from for the next 12 months. Whatever works for you, your projects and your creativity. Just remember, nothing is forever and nor should it be. Change is a beautiful and chaotic thing, wild and exciting, don't ever settle into freelance stasis unless you want to decay.

Feed yourself

I'm not talking physical health here, but spiritual health. Time swiftly disappears when you're freelancing – it's a DIY world and you can bet no matter how hard you beg the admin fairies won't do those budgets for you or reply to the mountain of emails. With that said it can be difficult to commit time to exploring new art, music, installation, writing etc. That's where trouble can start. There's nothing more important for the mind than being constantly stimulated and excited by new ideas and new creative pursuits.

I'm not saying go to every opening in town, to the contrary, sometimes interests outside your area of work will be most useful for sparking new ideas and concepts. Don't forget that there's a whole world out there for the exploring – a world rich in possible inspirations and curiosity, don't be afraid to make time and go explore it.

Think laterally

I've rarely found that a project presents itself in an entirely complete (and funded) state. This is where the hustle is most pronounced – how to cover shortfalls? How to find the right partners to support particular aspects of a project? More often than not finding answers to these problems won't be a singular exercise. It's going to require strategy and thinking outside the square. To realise a recent project, I've had to secure 4 partners in three states to meet the expectations set by a commissioning partner. Whilst a general lack of support from that commissioning partner is frustrating, it highlighted to me how important this kind of thinking is.

It pays to think about these things ahead of time too. It's partnerships and working relationships that can really dig you out of difficult holes. Building diverse contacts with a group of people/organisations/patrons/funding sources that can be utilised from time to time is a must for longer term survival and also in some respects for the recognition and understanding of the work you are doing. It's important to recognise the potentials and limitations of these partners and to be respectful of their needs. A force fit isn't ever the best fit. Equally no one partner should be 'milked' – that's a short-term fix and always ends with someone feeling they've been done wrong by. There's no need to suck any one partner dry, not if you want to work with them again.

Think globally

Australia is a joyously small place, and let's face it, that's one of the charms. We all generally know each other and people we don't know are usually only a few degrees separated. This is a blessing and a curse. If you need help it's never too far away, but if by chance your work/ideas don't gel with the current state of play here, things can feel constrictive. Don't fret though, there are always overseas opportunities to be found or grown. It might seem a bit distant, but a little research online, a few emails and who knows what might reach back out of the virtual darkness.

It's also worth remembering what we do fits into a much wider ecosystem and often we can find ourselves caught up in local politics or issues that may weigh down on us more than they should. It's always vital to remember it's a much bigger world out there and what we do often fits into that frame just as much as it does within Australia. Sometimes it's nice to remember we have brethren across the globe, all fighting the good fight.

Have a companion (or companion animal) and a life

Seems obvious to say this, but seriously, this is a must. If you're not in a position to have a close companion, have friends and family to rely on. As important as this work feels (and is), there's more to life than this. There's a whole world out there and it's important to remember that, as sometimes you can feel quite crushed and disheartened after a rough year or two.

It's at that time, the pat on the back from a loved one, the warm glow of a dog or cat on your lap or a nice walk or run in somewhere green can offer you a chance to reflect. Always remember that there's more to your life than that project that won't get up or that opportunity that just keeps eluding you.

Moreover it's all that experience that happens outside your practise that actually helps shape it. Like your general health, creativity relies on a good and varied diet, too much of one thing is never really a good option in the long term.

And finally love what you do...

I mean it. Art, music, film, theatre, dance, literature and the list goes on – the best work is always driven by passion. It is what carries you through the troughs and allows you to enjoy the highs.

If you loose that, it's ok, maybe it'll come back and maybe it won't. The thing is be aware of that feeling, and don't lie to yourself about it, that only catches up with you down the line. If you do loose your passion for a spell, there'll no doubt be other options open to you – other ways that you might facilitate or foster great work being produced. Loving what it is you're doing and who you are doing it with makes things that much more worthwhile and satisfying.

As useful and reassuring as money can be, it doesn't ever satisfy like passion does. As many freelance producers and artists can attest to this – often there's nothing more difficult than having to create and deliver a project, which you're not actually passionate about. If you are passionate about the project and it doesn't turn out the way you'd hoped, well it's never that much of a problem because you had a great time doing it, working with people you care about and want to see do well. If it does work out then that satisfaction is only amplified. So be true to yourself and create work and opportunities you care about!

About The Author

Lawrence English started his first fanzine when he was 15. He started a label the following year and has since been heavily involved in music, sound and media arts. Over the past 20 years he has tasted the bounty of arts related work, including freelance criticism, artist management, event production, tour managing, label production, exhibition curation, design, creative consultation and more. As an artist he has presented artworks and performances on every continent on the planet (yes, even Antarctica) and continues to produce works that prompts questions of field, perception and memory. He lives in Brisbane with his family of 2 humans and a schnauzer.