

*This pdf is taken from the book  
A Creativity Workbook for Photographers  
by Emma Davies (available on Amazon).*

## CHAPTER 1

# What is creativity?

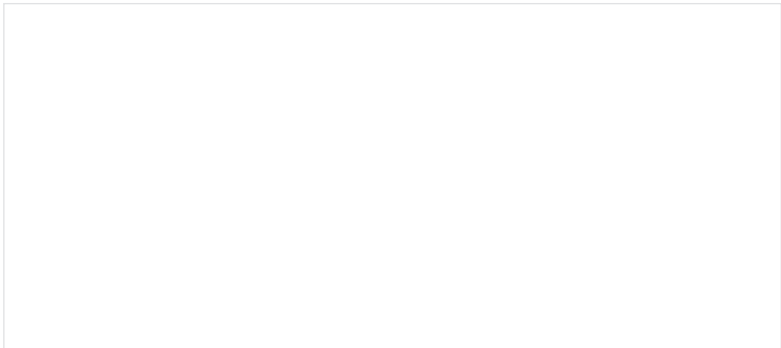
CREATIVITY ISN'T DEFINED BY SUCCESS. IT ISN'T BEING ABLE TO PAINT THE CEILING OF THE SISTINE CHAPEL, COMPOSE THE MOONLIGHT SONATA OR WRITE THE HARRY POTTER SERIES. IT'S NOT EXCLUSIVE TO WORLD-FAMOUS PHOTOGRAPHERS SUCH AS ANSEL ADAMS, HENRI CARTIER BRESSON OR DIANE ARBUS.

**Creativity is simply the ability to make something from nothing. It's the ability to start with only your thoughts and then let them out into the world in whatever form you want – it could be painting or writing, cooking or coding.**

Art is just one expression of creativity. But if you've ever looked at what you have in your cupboard and made a meal with that instead of following a recipe you have been just as creative as someone who makes a sculpture or draws a sketch.

Creativity is part of being human. The need to move beyond the status quo, to be curious, to follow a train of thought, to see what happens if we put this with that, to express an emotion with brush or pen or camera – this is what makes us different from computers.

**Why are you reading this book? What do you hope it will help you with?  
Write your thoughts below:**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the reader to write their thoughts in response to the prompt above.

Whatever your end goal remember that creative photography is achieved when you make something that is unique to you. It doesn't have to be a completely new style of photograph or an image nobody has made before. Nobody else has lived your life, seen the things you've seen, daydreamed your daydreams. Your brain is waiting right now to cook up some new ideas, make new connections, suggest new photographs: all you need to do is give it the right conditions to get to work.

### The process of creative photography is made up of:

- your mindset: your motivation, confidence and "get-up-and-go"
- your cognitive skills: your ability to make new connections, draw on your experience and generate ideas
- your practical skills: your ability to use your camera to its full potential

This book will help you achieve the right mindset for creative photography and will show you how to optimise your cognitive skills. If you need help with practical camera skills, take Emma's beginner's course, *A Year With My Camera* (details at [AYearWithMyCamera.com](http://AYearWithMyCamera.com)).

### Am I creative?

Do you consider yourself creative? Mark on this scale where you think you are, creatively:

	not at all creative									I couldn't be more creative
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If you give a five-year-old a pencil, a piece of paper and no other instructions they will start drawing or making marks. If you were given a pencil and a piece of paper, what would you do with them?

What happens between being five and being twenty-five or fifty? Where does that unbridled enthusiasm and lack of inhibitions go?

George Land did some research in the 1960s that involved testing the creativity of the same children at the ages of five, ten and fifteen. He also gave the same test of creativity to a cohort of adults.

- The five year olds scored ninety-eight percent.**
- The ten year olds scored thirty percent.**
- The fifteen year olds scored twelve percent.**
- The adults scored an astounding two percent.**

The good news is that the creative five-year-old inside every one of us is still there. We may have learnt to be less creative through the way our schools work, the expectations to conform and the pressures of adult responsibilities, but we can also unlearn this and let the five-year-old out again.

Learning creativity as an adult is essentially one long unlearning process: you will be unlearning rules, assumptions and habits that have built up over the years. It will be uncomfortable at times but ultimately liberating.

The most effective way to make progress is by doing – not by reading or listening. That's what this workbook is for: to show you how to peel away the inhibitions you've built up since you were a child and allow your innate creativity to have a voice again.

## **DRAWING: WHERE THE INHIBITIONS STARTED**

When you were a small child with a pencil in your hand you just drew. You drew mostly out of your imagination. It didn't matter if it was realistic. You didn't care. The adults around you didn't care. You were praised simply for drawing.

At some point, usually around eight or nine years old, you became aware that some people were really good at drawing. They could look at a tree and draw a realistic picture of that tree. They could sketch a landscape or illustrate a bird beautifully. You looked at your own drawings and decided they weren't any good. Nothing had changed in you. You were still the same person who was praised aged three for doing the same thing.

A small minority of people at this stage seek out drawing teachers. They ignore the critics (both themselves and other people) and work hard to make the transition from naive mark-making to being "someone who can draw". It doesn't just happen. They have to practise.

But if drawing and art weren't a priority in your family or school when you were a child then it's unlikely you were helped through this transition. You probably put down your pencils and mentally consigned yourself to the bucket of "people who can't draw". And because drawing is so closely related in our minds to creativity you might, at the same time, have labelled yourself, consciously or subconsciously, "not creative".

## TRY THIS

Take five or ten minutes now and draw these eight items in the space provided. Four are common items and four are made-up items. Notice if you find either set easier and/or more enjoyable.

a bird

a zagger

a house

a mumflump

a tree

a smee-fly

a bicycle

a tractoid



## THREE STAGES OF CREATIVITY

**Researchers of the creative process agree there are at least three distinct stages to any creative endeavour:**

- information gathering
- incubation
- output

The first and last stages are conscious acts, involving effort and action on your part. The incubation stage (where you let your subconscious do the work and make new connections) is passive, but you can actively create optimum conditions for this stage.

The model of creativity that involved these three distinct stages was first cited in the 1920s by Graham Wallas. The idea of "stages" of creativity was groundbreaking at this time. Previously it was assumed you had to be a genius to be creative, that creative insight arrived in a single "Eureka!" moment and that creativity was a gift from the muses. The relatively new science of psychology (born as an independent discipline in the 1870s) gave scientists the tools and methodology to study the human brain and ultimately build and test theories of the cognitive origins of the creative process.

Since the 1920s many models of creativity have been proposed but the one thing they all have in common is the idea of these separate stages, each adding something critical to the process. If you omit the information gathering stage you will keep repeating what you already know. With no incubation stage you deny your brain the opportunity to make new connections. And with no output stage all you have is daydreaming.

The rest of this section of the book gives an overview of the three stages of creativity. All of the exercises in the following chapters have been designed to help you make progress in each of these three stages: information gathering, incubation and output. Don't forget there is no "right" way to be creative. Work with an open mind even if you think an exercise is pointless or doesn't apply to you. You are allowing all the ideas to percolate with the goal of enabling your unique expression of creativity.

## INFORMATION GATHERING

You have been gathering information your whole life. Every book you've read, every film you've watched, every conversation you've had – they have all added their mite to what is your life experience. To become more creative as a photographer you simply have to take a more active, conscious approach to your information gathering instead of passively consuming out of habit.

How does this affect you, practically? Before you start on a particular project, you should take the time to gather inspiration and outline your goals. And, in general, try to become more open to new experiences.

In Chapter 5 you will find detailed exercises to help you identify new, helpful and inspiring influences. At this beginning stage however, you just need to be aware that curiosity goes hand-in-hand with creativity. At school or work you may have been encouraged to narrow your focus, to become an expert in one small area. Now you have permission to read, watch, consume anything you want to. The more diverse the better.

### **Openness**

Wenfu Li (a professor of psychology in the USA) has demonstrated that being willing to encounter new situations or information – basically being curious about things – is one of the main predictors of a higher degree of creativity in an individual. And the good news for us all is that this "openness to new experiences" is not a character trait you have to be born with. We can all actively get out of our comfort zones, try new things, go to different places and meet new people.

## **INCUBATION**

Incubation is the stage where you simply mull over your ideas. You have been curious, read around a subject, gathered inspiration – now you need to let your brain digest all this input. Give it the right environment for incubation and your brain will take the new information, add it to your life's experiences and start to make new connections. You may be aware of this happening, you may not be. You might have a "Eureka!" moment or you might just find yourself drawn to take photographs of a particular subject or in a particular style.

The "right environment" is being in a state of relaxed awareness. You are not watching TV or running a personal best. You are not cooking a complicated meal or helping children with homework. You are doing something slightly engaging that doesn't need active thought: walking, driving, showering. This state of relaxed awareness is covered in more detail in Chapter 3.

If you've followed my work for any time you may have heard this story: when I had the idea to start a free, online photography workshop for complete beginners the main thing I wanted was to be the opposite of all those courses that promise you can learn photography in a weekend – because you can't. I didn't know at that stage what structure my workshop would take, what order the lessons would be in, or exactly how I would differentiate myself in the very crowded online photography course market.



I had spend weeks researching the competition, talking to students I already taught, doing lesson plans, drawing out ideas (the preparation stage). Then (to my slight annoyance) Christmas got in the way. I had to curb my enthusiasm, put all my notes away and focus on the celebrations. And – of course – I had my "Eureka!" moment when I was half way through peeling a mountain of Brussels sprouts. Vegetable prep is perfect for incubation: slightly engaging (or you'll cut yourself) but repetitive so it doesn't need any decision-making. The name "A Year With My Camera" just popped into my head, fully formed. I wasn't even thinking about the course – I wasn't thinking about anything. I put down my paring knife, registered [AYearWithMyCamera.com](http://AYearWithMyCamera.com) at 4pm on Christmas Eve, then got back to the kitchen to finish the pile.

You can't force this stage. Preparation and output are conscious, active, directed stages. During incubation you just have to let go and trust your subconscious to start making neural connections that will present as a new idea. Sometimes it will and sometimes it won't. It helps to be in an optimistic frame of mind otherwise you can easily shut your subconscious down with thoughts like;

"I'm not creative"

"I never have good ideas"

"This is pointless"

"This is taking too long"

Instead, prepare your subconscious for success with thoughts like;

"The ideas are in there just waiting to come out"

"I trust myself"

"This is fun - who knows what might happen"

"I have a lot of creative energy"

### TRY THIS

Pick one of these positive thoughts and write it down, and stick it somewhere you will see it every day.

## OUTPUT

At some stage you just have to start taking photographs. You've researched the light, the settings, the subject and the inspiration. You may be overwhelmed with different ideas or you may think you have none. You've taken some time – five minutes or five months – to incubate your ideas. Now you just have to make a start.

There's no correct time to start but the more you repeat the cycle of preparation, incubation, output, the more you come to recognise when you are good to go.

In Chapter 7 you will learn many techniques to overcome common blocks that stop us from picking up the camera and starting the output stage. Be aware that your first shots will not be your most creative ones. You need to trust your subconscious and just give it the freedom to express itself as you go forth with your camera.

### **Photographing in a group**

Think carefully (and honestly) about how you react to being in a group. Many people enjoy the energy that comes from working with others. But I think many more people, even if they won't admit it, don't do their most creative work in a group setting. You have to be able to manage the distractions that arise in a group which affect your ability to sink into your own mind and indulge yourself. You need to make compromises. These aren't optimum conditions for individual creativity.

If this sounds very selfish it's because being creative is a selfish endeavour. You are making time for your own personal development to the exclusion of everything else. It doesn't mean you will never again photograph with friends – it just means that the aims of the day will be different. In Chapter 8 you will learn how to find creativity in collaborative work but this collaboration is a very specific situation where all parties are committed to a joint creative output rather than a photo walk with friends where everyone has different priorities.