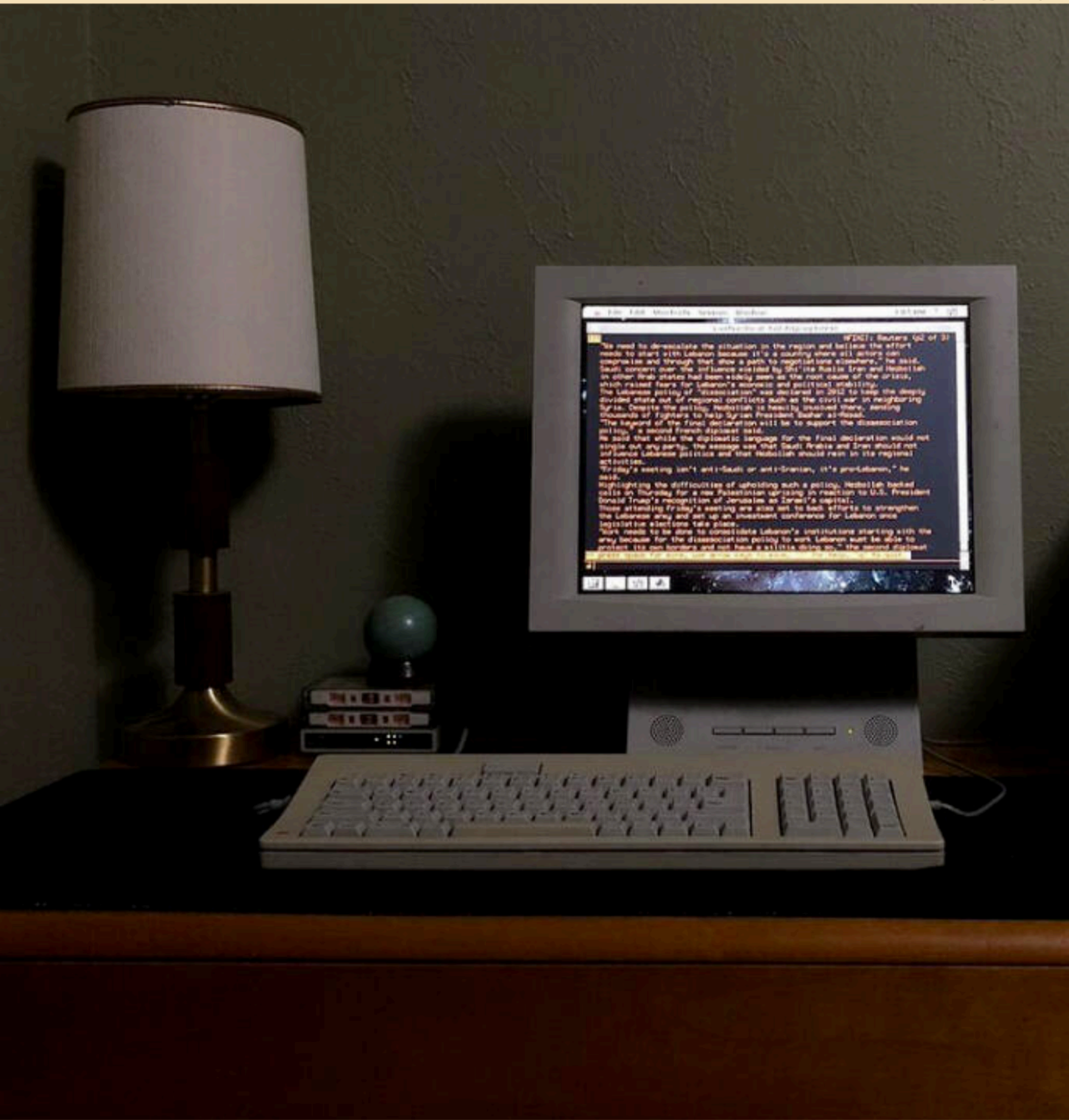


The Independent Scholar

A Practical Guide

Justin Murphy



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indiescholars.com

About the Author

I finished my PhD in 2014 and worked as a professor of Political Science for five years before leaving academia on a mad wager: that I could find a way to conduct all of my writing and teaching independently on the internet. I didn't know exactly how I would do it, but I knew that the "creator economy" was on the rise, and I knew that academia felt like a sinking ship. At 31 years old, I was just young enough to feel like I could get away with it.

It took me three years to cross six figures in annual income. Most of my revenue has come from philosophy courses, workshops, and digital products covering everything from Aristotle to Deleuze. It is only now, after more than five years on the outside, that I can confidently claim to have a working model. It is only now that I feel secure economically, and I spend most of my time reading and writing about serious ideas. I've also made countless mistakes and wasted a lot of time on failed experiments. In some periods, I was making great money (but not reading and writing enough), and there were some periods where I was reading and writing well (but not making enough money). I'm only writing this document now because it is only now that I spend more time reading and writing than I did as a professor, I have much more freedom intellectually and geographically, and my earning power is substantially greater. It's only now that I've earned the right to publish this document.

Over the years, many individuals have asked me for advice on how they, too, can become independent scholars. Gradually, I created various resources and built a community to help and connect these people. Eventually, I organized everything into a multi-week cohort program, which I now run a few times yearly and have run five times to date. I've got to see first-hand that the strategies and frameworks I've learned for myself also work well for others. I've distilled everything I've learned into this short document.

I've published peer-reviewed research in academic journals such as *International Studies Quarterly* and *IEEE Intelligent Systems*, as well as more popular outlets such as *Foreign Affairs*. I've supervised academic students across all levels, from undergraduate to PhD. I have also published hundreds of essays and taught hundreds of students on the internet, independently, using the knowledge and strategies I've collected in this document.

I'm making this document available, for free, in the hope that it may help thousands of other scholars find freedom and financial security on the new frontier.

Justin Murphy

Austin, TX

Who Is This For?

1. YOU ARE CALLED TO BUILD A BODY OF WORK

This calling is rare. If you have it, you know it. If you're not sure, you don't have it. There is a certain type of person for whom reading, thinking, and writing feel like absolute requirements, no less mandatory than breathing or eating. You might have one foot in academia, but you might not. Your experience, credentials, age, and even intelligence have nothing to do with the matter. You either have the calling or you don't. If you have the calling, this document is for you. If you don't know what I'm talking about, this document is not for you.

2. YOU SEEK "TO LIVE AT EASE," INDEPENDENT FROM INSTITUTIONS

The Greek term *scholastes* means "one who lives at ease." True scholarship is a form of leisure. Once upon a time, academia offered scholarly personalities relative leisure compared to the market. But capitalism accelerated, competition for academic positions increased, and what was once a leisurely profession for lazy eccentrics became its own kind of rat race. Ultimately, a scholar simply wishes to be left alone, to study and build knowledge freely. If that's what you want — you don't care about institutional legitimation or securing a bureaucratic sinecure, indeed you would prefer to not depend on such things — then this document is for you.

3. YOU BELIEVE IN TRUTH & BEAUTY BEFORE FAME & MONEY

Thanks to the internet, it is now possible to earn a sizable audience and surprisingly generous income by writing words on the internet. I will show you a system that will earn you some degree of audience, and some degree of income, as by-products of consistently publishing interesting work that is deeply meaningful to you. But if you want the largest audience and highest income possible, you will be disappointed with my methods. There are many books that will teach you how to build a bigger audience than I have, and earn more money than I have.

If you want to build the most interesting and sophisticated body of work possible — in a truly independent and internet-native fashion, over the course of your entire life, growing just enough of a *sophisticated* audience and income to live a modest life, where audience and money are welcome secondarily — then this document is for you. I won't say I've already achieved this goal, but I've optimized my life around it more ruthlessly than anyone I've yet encountered.

Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today. — ‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’ — Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh.

— R. W. Emerson, Self-Reliance

Table of Contents

N.1 **DISCONNECT**

N.2 **READ**

N.3 **WRITE**

N.4 **PUBLISH**

N.5 **COMMIT**

N.6 **CORRESPOND**

N.7 **REFINE**

N.8 **GROW**

N.9 **MONETIZE**

N.10 **AUTOMATE**

N.11 **REPURPOSE**

N.12 **ACCELERATE**

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

CHAPTER N.1

Disconnect

Remove noise from your life.

1.1 WHY YOU MUST DISCONNECT

Everyone knows we are over-stimulated—scrolling on social media, listening to podcasts, and staring at glass screens all day. The very first task of the would-be independent scholar is to disconnect. This is not optional, for three reasons.

First, empty space is required to hear yourself think, for original ideas to ever germinate in the first place.

Second, it is prohibitively difficult to read and write when your baseline is hyper-stimulation. Writing, especially, feels dreadfully boring and difficult when your default state is the passive consumption of extremely engaging media. When your default is silence, writing feels comparatively fun and interesting.

Finally, it is a matter of time. You will not have the time to read and write every day unless you are willing to sacrifice something in your current daily schedule. The average person spends about two hours looking at social media and another two hours or more watching television. By making a simple sacrifice that most people are not willing to make, you now have enough time to read and write well.

Remember, just a few hours per day, compounded over 10-30 years, is enough to make you a bona fide expert in your chosen field, and a master at the craft of writing. Thankfully, subtraction is less work than addition: You can make one massive stride to a superior form of life, starting today, immediately, without adding any new tasks to your plate. I genuinely believe this is a requirement; doing it will significantly improve your ability to produce original work, and failure to do it may really prevent you from living up to your calling.

1.2 DELETE APPS FROM YOUR PHONE

The easiest way to guarantee that you successfully disconnect in the way I've described is to delete several apps from your phone.

Delete your podcast app from your phone. Even if you listen to the Other Life podcast! My goal for the Other Life Company is not to capture a massive audience of addicted sheep. My goal is to cultivate a network of productive and original thinkers. So if I lose a listener because you're finally getting serious about your own work, then I'm not losing anything. You've simply graduated from consumer to producer, and I've succeeded in my goal.

Delete the YouTube app from your phone. Delete Instagram, delete TikTok, and even delete Twitter. Also, for the apps you keep, turn off all your notifications! It's crazy the default behavior is to let them ping you throughout the day.

1.3 GET RID OF YOUR TV

This might sound drastic, but there's a war being waged on your attention and desperate times call for desperate measures.

When my wife and I had our first kid, I quickly grew despondent and ashamed of myself. I've always read books and I've always seen myself as a serious reader, but suddenly, I wasn't reading any books at all. My excuse was that "I had no time for reading anymore," but that was a lie: In the evenings, after my work day was complete, and after we put our infant son to bed, I would sometimes watch Netflix for an hour or two—or even three—before bed. And then I realized: If I'm really committed to maximizing my potential as an independent scholar, while also being a father in our busy, modern world of philistinism run amok, then books need to be the only form of media available in the house. The following weekend, I sold our nice big-screen TV for a few hundred bucks.

I immediately started reading more. You have to remember that nobody reads real books anymore! Even educated people, even smart people. There is just too much tantalizing media in the world, in formats that are drastically easier to consume. But the death of reading—the near impossibility of reading for most people today—is our great opportunity. If you are willing to make sacrifices that others are not

willing to make, you are almost guaranteed to enter the upper quantiles of the well-read.

If you have a nice TV, sell it. If you have a crappy TV, give it away or bring it to a thrift store. If you have a spouse or kid who insists on having a TV, put it in their room and tell yourself it's gone.

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CHAPTER N.2

Read

Improve the quality and quantity of your inputs.

2.1 TO WRITE WELL, READ WELL

Reading great books is the single most important thing you can do to think and write well.

Reading quiets the mind to precisely the level best suited to thinking and writing. The content of great books will inspire in you the most thoughtful and elevated ideas you're capable of thinking. The style and form of great books will unconsciously improve your style and form. And finally, the more one reads great books, the more one comes to feel as if one belongs at the table. Of course, actual achievement is another matter entirely, but reading the greats is certainly a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for producing something great.

These are the reasons why, in the Other Life community, we generally focus on what is called the Western canon. One could spend a whole lifetime reading only the canonical works and still not cover all of them. If you think about it, there is very little justification for reading anything else. But alas we are weak, so we often wish to observe new developments in contemporary culture, and various vulgar tastes often get the best of us. Other than occasional departures justified by very specific reasons, try to read only the finest works that have stood the test of time.

2.2 YOU JUST GAINED FOUR HOURS DAILY, SPEND TWO READING

The average person spends more than 4 hours daily scrolling social media and watching television. To honor your calling, you have dutifully removed all of these from your everyday life. That means you now have roughly 4 unfilled hours every day.

Block off 2 hours daily on your calendar now, and start tomorrow. You'll spend the other two writing, but we'll discuss that later. You can adjust the balance if you have good reason. If you have a PhD but you haven't written anything interesting in years, perhaps you spend all four hours writing for a few months. If you're a high school dropout, you

might spend all four hours reading for a few months. To be clear, when I say “every day,” I mean every workday, i.e. every weekday. This is hard work. Most people need breaks.

2.3 ON WHAT TO READ (THE STACK)

People love to ask what books they should read; in what order they should read them; are they allowed to read multiple books at a time? And so on. The propensity to ask such questions reveals a certain pathological anxiety we have toward intellectual pursuits.

There are no answers to these questions, except that you should read whatever is most interesting to you. Whatever topic, theme, or author you are most motivated to read is what you should read. (I did say you should only read great books that have stood the test of time, but this still gives you thousands to choose from.)

I agree with Harold Bloom, who quotes Samuel Johnson, when he says that we should read what “comes near to oneself, what we can put to use.” Do not read to improve the world, do not read to project a certain image of oneself, and finally: “Clear your mind of cant.” In other words, do not bring someone else’s vocabulary to your reading. From among the great works, read what is most interesting to you, and relate to it in your own way, given your unique personality and context.

Having said all of that, I will give you one specific suggestion. Very few people will be content to read strictly one book at a time, and very few people manage to read a great many books at one time. I like to keep a modest stack of the books I am reading at any given time. I recommend you have at least two, but no more than ten, books in a stack. The problem with reading strictly one book is that, on days you are bored with that topic, you may not read at all, or you may succumb to weaker tea. The problem with more than ten is that you’re not actually reading them, you’re buying all of these books because buying them is an easier and faster way to feel like you’re reading than reading itself. If you keep a stack of 2-10 books you’ll never find yourself without something of

interest, but neither will you become one of those sad people who fill their house with books they'll never read.

Keep your stack somewhere specific in your house, right where you do your reading every day. Ideally, it should be close to somewhere you can write at any time. If you can afford a dedicated room, that's great. If not, one end of a family sofa with one small bookcase is perfectly adequate.

2.4 WRITE DIRECTLY FROM READING

Close reading of great books will inevitably give you interesting ideas and research questions. If you don't already have some kind of research agenda, you could do much worse than writing directly from great books. Specifically, all of the following are good ways to write from your reading: Write an idea or lesson from the book, in your own words, but citing the book (and possibly other books that provide corroboration, if you can think of any). Write something inspired by the book, but go in a different direction, not citing the book. Write a review of the book.

There are countless other ways to get writing, many of which flow from life and cannot be neatly enumerated, but these are natural templates if you need some structure and inspiration.

Some writing programs teach that you should write from social media, or from conversation, but social media and conversation tend to revolve around what is popular and socially respectable, thus writing from these sources is too often shallow, generic, and conformist—unlikely to accumulate into something original and profound, unlikely to stand the test of time. Reading great books, and writing from them, is the best formula for producing original and timeless lines of inquiry.

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

CHAPTER N.3

Write

Develop unique, honest, and noteworthy ideas.

3.1 THE ONE PLACE

So-called Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) is fake. We reject the popular obsession with writing tools and note-taking systems, for reasons I've explained elsewhere. The most prolific and brilliant people I've ever known have books and papers strewn about their room, and they do all of their writing in Microsoft Word. On the other hand, I know people who are PKM aficionados, who seem not to think or write about anything other than PKM. I'm not saying you should use Microsoft Word, I'm saying these things don't matter much.

I will make only a couple recommendations in this area. Use any writing application you please, so long as you put everything there. I think it's important to have one place, and one place only, where you put all of your writing, notes, ideas, essays, clippings, quotes, and links. The reason you should have one place is that you never want to think about where something is. As soon as you have to think "Where did I put that?" or "Where should I put this new idea or information?", you are burning precious cognition that you should be devoting to your work. It might seem small, but it's actually a massive distraction (and buzzkill). Implicit in "one place" is that your app should sync across desktop and mobile.

The only other requirement for a writing app is that it should have fast and effective search across all of your notes.

If you already have an application you use regularly, and it meets these criteria, just stick with it. If you don't already have one good place to keep your work, I recommend Obsidian. It's free and fast. All your notes are kept as a big folder of normal text files, not trapped in a database somewhere. Drag into your Obsidian vault (it's just a normal folder) any and all pre-existing notes or half-baked essays you have floating around other apps. Obsidian has some nice bells and whistles which we may discuss at a later date, but again: These things mean nothing compared to the basic work of thinking, reading, and writing.

3.2 BUILD A PERSONAL PANTHEON

As you build an independent platform, you will occasionally be required to describe your work or upload images representing it, for instance, when you have to provide a “tagline” for your newsletter, or a banner for a social media profile, etc. Doing all of this sensibly and tastefully is surprisingly difficult. This is essentially the art of “branding,” and I have observed that many writers find it prohibitively intimidating. Indeed, it is difficult: For many of us, we write in order to find out what we really believe; how could we possibly tell the world in one sentence, up front?

Through much experimentation I have converged on a solid solution to this problem: Start by simply dragging into your One Place some quotes and images that have, for any reason at all, loomed large in your mind through the course of your life. This is the most organic, authentic, rapid, and foolproof way to begin defining your “brand.”

Whenever you are required to supply some text or image, just grab something from your personal pantheon. Almost by definition, there will be some underlying coherence to everything you choose, and that coherence will be you. But since you’re only drawing on excellent artifacts from history, it’s very difficult to embarrass yourself. If you try to be a copywriter or designer, you’ll overthink everything, waste time, and very possibly do a terrible job, which you’ll dislike a few days later.

Your personal pantheon lets you move fast and confidently in the early days, and over time it will help you to arrive at an explicit understanding of what is currently only implicit in your ideas, values, and tastes. For instance, “Other Life” is just a phrase from a sentence I found in Foucault’s *The Courage of Truth*, a lecture that had a profound effect on me. When I started building a platform online, I had no idea what it would come to be, or even what my goals were, but I really liked that one sentence and I knew it captured something very close to my own spirit. So I just put “Other Life” whenever I had to give a title to anything. Many years later, I now have a better sense of what I’m all about, and

“Other Life” still works because there’s only ever been one underlying dimension: Myself.

3.3 WRITE THE RUDE TRUTH

What should you write about, and how should you write? Two common, terrible questions. In one of the greatest American essays, *Self-Reliance*, Emerson writes, “I ought to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways...” Emerson is reminding us to not be so precious. The independent scholar today is tempted to affect an overly polished tone and style, as if to compensate for a lack of legitimacy. But there is nothing more legitimate than a common man speaking common truths frankly. The professorial styles are the compensation; it is the professor who must always wonder if their work is meaningless outside of its institutional context. “The people, and not the college, is the writer’s home,” Emerson wrote. To affect a professorial style is to compensate for not having to compensate—an absurdity. Don’t do it.

Say what you mean in the fewest words possible, using the most precise language you have.

Finally, write atomically. If you have an idea with multiple sub-ideas, write out each sub-idea in the shortest and simplest fashion possible. This will make your life easier when it comes to publishing, for reasons we’ll explore later.

You will develop a personal style, authentic to you, over time, merely in your refusal to affect. Write anything true, write it rudely, and write it often, which brings us to the next point...

3.4 WRITE FOR TWO HOURS EVERY DAY

In Chapter 1, you gained four hours every day. In Chapter 2, I directed you to give two of your hours to reading.

Give the other two hours to writing, every day.

If you think two hours is not a lot, you probably don’t know many writers. Two hours is more than plenty, so long as you stick with it every day. If you write for two hours every day, over ten years, you’ll be one of

the most prolific people in the world. It's that simple. Quality is another matter altogether, although it would be hard to write that much, that consistently, without becoming a decent writer.

A slight variation on this theme would be to write X number of words each day. Graham Greene famously held himself to 500 words a day. The words might be terrible, but that would be fine, as long as he wrote at least 500.

I think two hours is a better rule. Especially for internet writing, word counts can be misleading. A strong 280-character statement can be worth much more than a 500-word statement, so it doesn't make sense to optimize for word counts. Just commit to two hours daily inside your one writing application. No social media, no browsing. Remember, you can and should write from your reading, but do not write from browsing or scrolling.

Set a 2-hour block on your calendar, every day, dedicated to writing. If you must, wake up two hours earlier than you currently wake up. Do it now, then start writing tomorrow.

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

CHAPTER N.4

Publish

Combine long-form and short-form channels to balance depth and reach.

4.1 PUBLISH LONG-FORM VIA EMAIL

There are dozens of tools and platforms you can use to get your work in front of people. I'm going to recommend you only use two. Let's start with email.

Publishing your long-form writing directly to readers' email inboxes is the best way to build an audience and, later, monetize your value as a writer. Tools such as Substack have recently popularized this approach for intellectuals, but email has been the bedrock of many publishing businesses for decades. It's a safe bet. Email also has the advantage of being a distributed internet protocol, rather than a corporate platform that can get in between you and your readers. Twitter, for instance, will only show your writing to 1-5% of your audience.

When you send an email to subscribers, every subscriber receives it, and nobody can get in the way of that relationship. You own that relationship. If you're serious about publishing your work over time, you must set up an email newsletter. A newsletter includes a traditional website and blog that also showcases your work as normal pages accessible on the web.

At the time of this writing, you have three fine choices for publishing a newsletter: Substack, Ghost, and Beehiiv. Substack is popular, easy to set up, and free, though they will take 10% if you ever turn on paid subscriptions. Ghost provides more ownership and control (i.e. custom themes) and they will not take a cut of paid subscriptions, but for the fastest and easiest setup you'll pay \$10/month to get started. Beehiiv caters to more professionalized operations with a more growth-oriented feature set. At \$99/month for their flagship growth features, I would only recommend Beehiiv if you already have a very clear conception of your brand, audience, and business model.

Whichever tool you choose, it doesn't matter very much. Don't waste weeks researching and thinking about this. You can always change platforms later. Just take 30 minutes to set up shop on whichever sounds

best for you. When it comes to your title, description, logos, etc., just keep it minimal and insert some things from your personal pantheon. We'll refine it later (Chapter 7).

4.2 PUBLISH SHORT-FORM VIA ALGORITHM

The historically unprecedented advantage of social media platforms is that they will show your writing to new people, and if those people like your writing, they will show it to even more new people.

There are many social media platforms, but there is only one that is primarily focused on the written word: Twitter. Now, there are many things to dislike about Twitter: It incentivizes certain unhealthy attitudes and behaviors, the app is addictive, etc. But for independent scholars, who traffic in words and do so outside of traditional institutions, Twitter is just too powerful to not use seriously.

Thus, you must have a Twitter account. As with your newsletter, don't overthink it. When it comes to your username, bio, photo, banner, etc. just keep everything minimal and insert some things from your personal pantheon. We'll refine all of this later (Chapter 7).

4.3 NAME AND DESCRIBE YOUR WORK CLEARLY AND CONSISTENTLY

Branding is hard and it will take some time to effectively describe your project in words that are clear and compelling. But here's one thing you can do to start off on the right track. It's very easy and it will help you bring readers from social media onto your newsletter.

However you define your newsletter and Twitter account, make them consistent. Don't be clever, just be direct about who you are, what you're interested in, and what you write about. Use similar language in both places. You might even use the same exact language.

Don't be afraid to include past accomplishments or any claims to fame you might have. If you don't have any, that's fine. But if you do, humans are easily impressed creatures and things like this will move the needle. Finally, avoid self-deprecation. I've noticed this is a common

instinct among people just starting out. I suppose it's a way of taking the pressure off. It's not good. Do not be a braggart, but do not sell yourself short, either.

4.4 PUBLISH SOMETHING BEFORE IT'S "FINISHED"

Aspiring independent scholars tend to over-index on traditional academic norms, but this will hinder your ability to flourish. An all-too-common misconception is that a good piece of writing should be lengthy, backed by extensive research, and devoted to establishing some deep, original thesis. However, the art of essay writing, a tradition far more established and impressive than modern academic writing, paints a different picture.

Notable essayists from Montaigne to Johnson to Emerson produced a wide variety of pieces, varying greatly in length, sophistication, and depth of research. What we remember and praise today are their masterpieces, but an in-depth exploration of their work shows many shorter and weaker pieces, sometimes written off the top of the head, sometimes lacking an argument or thesis altogether.

Many writers just starting out on the internet fall into the trap of waiting forever to publish their first piece. Their instinct is to wait until they've crafted something lengthy and awe-inspiring. My advice? Do the exact opposite. Just break the seal. Take a humble draft floating around on your hard drive, give it a title, maybe one fast round of edits, and publish it today. Chances are, your subscriber count is relatively small. Even if you've accumulated two or three thousand followers, that's only a tiny fraction of the audience you'll have in five or ten years if you can get into the groove of publishing more.

Thus, what's crucial is settling into a more productive rhythm as swiftly as possible.

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

CHAPTER N.5

Commit

Create accountability mechanisms to stay on track.

5.1 THE SCOURGE OF INDEPENDENCE

The primary scourge of the independent scholar is that there is no external pressure to publish work. From my own experience, on the inside and outside, the biggest advantage of working inside the institutions is that there are people whose job it is to ensure that you produce a certain amount of work within certain periods of time. When there are people who expect you to get work done on deadline, and those people have the power to increase or decrease your pay, guess what? You will get work done, on deadline. As independents, we have many advantages insiders do not enjoy, but this one difference is such a disadvantage that I'm tempted to call it our existential threat. Hence, we must create our own structures of accountability. Allow me to recommend two specific tactics.

5.2 COMMIT TO A PUBLISHING CADENCE

First, it is imperative to commit to a specific publishing cadence. If you're just starting out, I would suggest you commit to publishing at least once, but no more than three times, per week. If you're unsure, just commit to publish once per week. After a couple of months of consistent delivery, you may consider increasing your frequency, but only after you've proven you can handle it. The most you should ever try to publish is once every day, but this level of consistency will only make sense if, one day, your newsletter becomes your full-time job. Right now, go and mark your publishing day(s) on your calendar and then force yourself to hit the publish button on those days, no matter how you feel about your work.

But remember, you're now reading and writing every day. It should not be too difficult to publish something interesting at least once per week. If it is, you're doing something wrong at the level of reading or writing, so you would need to tweak something about your daily reading and writing practice.

5.3 TELL FRIENDS

Next, you must inform others about your committed publishing schedule. Ideally, this should be a close-knit group of friends you interact with regularly, preferably those who also share a love for writing and reading. Your commitment to them will have more weight, and feel more significant, than a commitment to non-writerly friends. It's even better if you can find some friends trying to adhere to their own publishing schedules; that way, you can give and take accountability. If you don't have such friends, it's not impossible to go make some, e.g. on Twitter. Finally, I'm biased obviously, but if you need accountability you can always just join one of the upcoming cohorts we run. That's the easiest way to get strong accountability and support for reading, writing, and publishing on a consistent cadence.

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

CHAPTER N.6

Correspond

Forget “followers” and find some smart, friendly interlocutors instead.

6.1 THE PROBLEM WITH AUDIENCE-MAXXING

For a long time, I really wanted to build a huge audience. I constantly felt bad watching objectively dumber people build massive audiences. It was textbook mimetic desire, but nonetheless, I was trapped in it. Today, I can proudly say *amor fati*. It seems that my fate is to have a modest but sophisticated audience, big enough to build a unique and beautiful lifestyle business I’m proud of, but perhaps never big enough to be very famous or very rich.

There are reproducible ways to grow a large audience pretty fast, but what can be built quickly is often lost quickly.

In the business world, what others cannot replicate is called your “moat.” If you don’t have a moat, you’ll be replaced or washed out by a sea of competitors. Many individuals have amassed huge audiences by identifying a certain type of content that performs well. With discipline and skill, they produce this content daily for months, like they’re working an assembly line. This method can work, but the way of the independent scholar is different—and I think it’s better, for several reasons.

To grow fast, one is often forced to reduce oneself to a specific concept, to become known as an X guy: “The walkable cities” guy or the “the egg slonking” guy or the “traditional architecture” guy. But then there’s copycats and you’re in a sea of “guys.” I don’t know about you, but I did not set out to be an X guy in a sea of X guys.

Also notice that many high-growth accounts utilize pseudonyms and avatars. The reason why pseudonymity is disproportionately prevalent among high-growth accounts is that they are either using tactics that are embarrassing (they don’t want to be associated with what or how they are publishing), or the person behind the account does not quite live up to what they are projecting. I don’t envy either situation. I don’t judge, or begrudge, anyone who’s found success with these approaches, I just

don't think it's ideal for the modern, independent scholar. Something is being separated, shielded, but what is it?

People relate and connect with other people, not so much with conceptual brands. We admire and respect real, strange, and wild people, more than we respect people who purchase material success by shoehorning their soul into optimized categories in order to deliver standardized text-products on a virtual assembly line. No one will ever hold the latter individuals in the same esteem as they do their favorite writers of old. If you're maximizing your audience at all cost, you're essentially bracketing your soul. You're growing one metric, which is a kind of power, no doubt, but precisely at the cost of writing's greatest power. Call me crazy, say I'm "coping," but this approach strikes me as short-sighted and unlikely to succeed in the long run.

The recent acceleration of AI threatens to commodify any kind of text production that is maximizing a specifiable, objective function. Seeking to maximize "the ultimate truth as I am able to ascertain it through the details of my own perspective" might only grow an audience slowly, but at least you can sleep easily knowing that no man or machine will ever do it better than you. In the not too distant future, the best "writers" could very well be differentiated not by follower count (scores on one objective function), but in their very ability to constitute and maintain a unique and original function. Taste, in other words, might be the only differentiator left, when everyone and their mom has 1M followers (thanks to equally perfect machine assistants). Knowing what to train your models on, and training them in a unique way, will matter more than anyone's ability to generate "performant" text products.

Even already, an absurd number of people have more than 1M followers. You've only even heard of a few, you respect even fewer. The most interesting writers you read and talk about with your friends, even the "biggest" ones, are small compared to any moderately successful TikTok dancer. This is all the proof you need that audience size is not the name of the game.

Someone who grows rapidly by committing to a specific type of standardized content often believes they can later evolve into something more dynamic, significant, and mature. Perhaps they can and will; all of this is still very new. Personally, I fear that such a transition is likely to be harder than one might expect. Once you're accustomed to growth, any slowdown feels like failure. The hedonic treadmill and lifestyle creep commit one to keeping growth rates high. Moreover, a significant, original, and erudite perspective can only result from years of dedicated study. You cannot spend your 20s focusing on business and then suddenly in your 30s start publishing sophisticated books. Realistically, you would need to spend your 30s reading and writing as a humble, derivative novice in the hope that by your 40s you may have earned an original and educated perspective. But once you're making good money and you're successful in one domain, it's extremely difficult and uncommon for someone to voluntarily become a loser for 10 years.

My approach has been to focus on constructing the ideal model and lifestyle organized around independent scholarship, biting the bullet of lackluster growth and just-barely-scraping-by income growth. I make principled decisions around the business model, then I scramble like a madman to somehow drum up enough growth and revenue to pay the bills. That has been incredibly stressful, to be honest, but the advantage is I no longer wonder nervously if or when I'll be able to transition my career as a "content creator" to my vision of being an independent scholar.

In the couple years where I was thinking in more mercenary terms, where I was really just trying to grow, and I was testing all kinds of "content creation" in the hope of unlocking faster growth, I always told myself I'd return to focusing on scholarship later. But I hated myself, and I was often quite miserable, because I knew that, with every passing day, the chances of actualizing a real scholarly life diminished. One is what one does on a daily basis, and the older one gets, the harder it becomes to reinvent oneself. Having our first kid was the last straw; it became brutally clear to me that if I did not simply focus everything on

a slow, patient, dedicated submission to great reading and great writing and great teaching (even possibly, in the worst case scenario, at the cost of all growth), then I would never, ever achieve my mission and the life I set out to build when I quit my academic career.

I've lived a wild life (for better and for worse), and I've tried to bare my soul at every turn. I can't yet claim to have achieved very much, but I have managed to remain a free man; I read a lot, I write a lot, I teach what I learn, and my current audience growth seems good enough to pay the bills. My audience includes smarter and more influential people than I ever would have hoped for when I first committed to this vocation 17 years ago, at the age of 20. I've met and in some cases befriended people I never would have through my former institutional career.

I certainly intend to keep growing my audience, but what's different about my model is that everything else has already been achieved. The core requirements of my ideal lifestyle are in place. Now, I can keep working hard to grow the business side, but from a position of deep inner contentment. My life is hard but it's beautiful to me; I now do, every day, the type of work I initially set out to do. I have to hustle pretty hard, but I have found that I'd rather scrap for cash in one tight month, from the base of a daily lifestyle I'm proud of, than keep the bank account buffered comfortably through a daily life that betrays my calling.

Write with your blood. Burn yourself at the stake and signal through the flames. As Deleuze once wrote in reference to Heinrich Von Kleist: "Bring something incomprehensible into the world!"

If you're not called to be an independent scholar, then I wouldn't recommend my path. I wouldn't wish it on my enemies. But if you are called to chart your own course as an independent scholar, certainly do not fall into the trap of believing that your primary job is to grow your audience. Perhaps it is your number one secondary job.

6.2 WHY YOU WANT A SOPHISTICATED AUDIENCE

There exists a tradeoff between quantity and quality when it comes to followers. Attracting a million followers quickly with efficiently standardized content means the average intelligence of that audience will be lower than if you attract a smaller audience slowly with unstandardized soul. This seems likely because the work of evaluating and deciding to follow unstandardized content is more cognitively taxing. When the decision to follow is easy and obvious, it jacks up the number of lower-IQ folks coming on board. That's fine, you just have to discount for it when you assess the value of any given audience.

Writing one important piece that makes a difference to someone like Elon Musk is arguably worth one million low-IQ followers, if not more, in the realest sense of economic, social, and cultural power. The problem today, which confuses a lot of people, is that such power is far less liquid. You can sell to an audience of 1 million low-IQ folks a random product for \$50 and score a pretty nice payday. In terms of shaping the culture, earning the respect of Elon Musk is almost certainly more powerful, it's just hard to cash that out—it's hard to prove it or benefit from it. But if the game of high Arts and Letters is, ultimately, long-term public impact, then it's a no-brainer. If given a choice, the independent scholar will prefer a small elite audience that respects his or her work over a large audience of average people.

The realm of Arts and Letters is an agora, a competitive arena where success is determined not by mass approval but by the genuine discernment of quality by a minority possessing intelligence and taste. It is true that everything now takes place on the internet, outside of institutions, but it does not follow that the world-historical selection process is therefore suddenly a democracy. The intrinsically elitist and aristocratic nature of cultural competition has always been, and always will be, a relatively insular affair among a relatively small number of people. What's different now is just that anyone has a chance to earn their seat at the table, through an open and decentralized arena with no formal

gatekeepers. Confusing audience size for success in the transhistorical agora is as good as suicide for the independent scholar.

6.3 CORRESPONDENCE IS THE LIFEBLOOD OF CULTURE

Instead of “audience building,” start corresponding. Private correspondence between fellow writers has been, historically, the lifeblood of high culture. Today, it’s easy and free to do, and the “networking” benefits are greater than ever, and yet very few people even bother to try it. Many of the greatest writers in history—including but not limited to T. S. Eliot, Sigmund Freud, Gertrude Stein, Hannah Arendt, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, William Faulkner, Graham Greene, and C. S. Lewis—wrote such interesting and thoughtful letters to each other that they would later be collected and republished as books, which we still read and admire today.

Writing to someone whose work you find interesting isn’t just about paying respect, it’s about developing your own perspective and style in a way that’s hopefully useful to others. The act of corresponding with peers can also have a surprisingly powerful effect on one’s identity and motivation. It’s a way to convince yourself that you belong at the table. Indeed, if your letters are any good, it actually proves to yourself that you do, in fact, sit at the table.

However, the art of letter-writing requires finesse. In the internet era, it’s easy to draft egotistical, tone-deaf emails. Instead, aim to write something interesting, thoughtful, helpful, and short, to writers you respect. It’s easier than ever and the indirect “networking” benefits can be immense over time. Ideally, this should be done in the same medium, or in the same channels, where you publish your work. Private correspondence is the more sophisticated version of what others call “audience-building.” If you’re not sure where to start, or you’re intimidated, this is why I’m so bullish on the future of private community and it’s why we’ve built the Other Life community. There are plenty of

people there, including some names you may recognize, who are there because they are keen to correspond with others.

6.4 GIVE AND YE SHALL RECEIVE

What can you do to genuinely help others with their work? It could be substantive, or it could be practical. But something I've seen clearly in the past few years is that writers who thoughtfully engage with others are much more likely to receive thoughtful engagement. Writers who give thoughtful replies to other writers are more likely to receive thoughtful replies; writers who publicly engage with the work of other writers are more likely to find their own writing cited in the work of others; writers who invite a guest post or invite a guest on their podcast are more likely to be invited to such opportunities. You can be a lone wolf if you'd like, but it's harder.

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

CHAPTER N.7

Refine

Forget “brand” and launch a research agenda instead.

7.1 INTERSECT YOUR FEELINGS AND ANALYTICS

In the early stages of building your project, I suggest you “throw spaghetti at the wall” to see what sticks, in two different senses of the word “sticks.” Dabble in varied topics, explore diverse styles and formats, and feel free to oscillate between lengths and tones. After consistently publishing over a few weeks, review the data of your feelings and then, secondarily, your analytics.

The intersection of the two, where your authentic voice meets audience appreciation, is where your unique “brand” lies. Some pieces will leave you brimming with pride, feeling invigorated and eager to delve deeper. Others might evoke feelings of alienation, discomfort, or boredom. These emotional responses are invaluable data points. At the same time, certain posts will resonate more with readers, garnering positive feedback, above average sharing, and a spike in subscribers.

While analytics should never dictate anything, you definitely should let them break the tie among any topics or formats you’re equally passionate about. The process of measuring where your feelings and analytics intersect is never-ending. The more you publish, the better your dataset, and the more conviction you will have about what your public project is all about.

7.2 DECIDE A RESEARCH AGENDA

After you’ve published consistently for a few weeks and observed at least a couple spikes of engagement with your work, I recommend you commit to a research agenda. Throwing spaghetti against the wall is a great way to start but a terrible way to advance. Meaningful achievement in any domain requires some degree of focus and constraint. Constraints amplify the pressure and force behind your efforts. Writing on a bunch of random subjects is akin to perpetually refilling a leaky bucket. A reader might be enamored with one post, but indifferent to the subsequent five. The reader hesitates to recommend your standout

piece to friends because who knows what's coming next. You might be very smart, yet smart people encountering your work will not feel like they should subscribe or engage because overall the author is not a force that demands reckoning. You want your project to demand a reckoning from the smartest people, which requires a certain threshold of focus and value on a singular topic or theme. Now, as independent scholars, we also cherish our freedom, naturally. The concept of the research agenda strikes a balance between the need for focus and the need for freedom.

A research agenda is a concentrated plan of reading and writing centered around a specific topic or theme, spanning a defined duration, anywhere from a week to a year or more. I would recommend somewhere between one and six months for the average internet writing project in the vein of the indie scholar. During this period, you try your best to abstain from indulging in unrelated interests. There's some likelihood of being momentarily perceived as "The X Guy" (or Girl) where X represents your research focus. Upon concluding your research agenda, you're free to embark on a new one.

Contingent on your subscriber count, a research agenda can be seamlessly paired with a monetization strategy. For instance, if you're studying medieval theology for six months and have at least a few hundred subscribers, you might consider offering a short course on the subject at the end of this period. Your writings during these six months should subtly promote the course, and the public commitment to the course might help to keep you focused. You can scale up or scale down the scope and complexity of your offering, depending on your circumstances. If it's your first time and you have a very small audience, try offering something humble, short, and inexpensive just to get your feet wet and see how it goes.

The execution of this strategy can vary immensely based on your objectives, personality, and prior experiences. However, after an initial phase of throwing spaghetti at the wall, I do believe it's imperative to eventually commit to some kind of research agenda. If one resonates

profoundly with you and your audience, you can nurture it indefinitely, perhaps it becomes your enduring brand and project. If you lean towards a more eclectic approach, or if your initial choice doesn't resonate, you're free to design a new research agenda. However, I strongly recommend you see any research agenda through to its conclusion. That way, if it doesn't work well, at least know it didn't work well, whereas if you're always quitting projects you always have to wonder if they fail merely because you're undisciplined.

7.3 UPDATE YOUR BRAND

During a particular research agenda, feel free to update how you describe yourself and your work across all of your web properties. The more aligned your properties are, the more likely your short-form writing will convert to long-form subscribers. But do update your properties all at once.

Your "brand" as a writer is not set in stone and, especially in the early days, you should use research agendas to try on for size, as it were, different framings and descriptions of yourself and your overarching vision. Every public writer periodically changes their self-description. Nobody cares, nobody is paying attention. People only pay attention to what they're looking at on any given day. Also, until you catch a real inflection or two in your growth trajectory, nothing matters at all.

A really important fact to keep in mind, which should make you very relaxed experimenting with everything in the early days, is this: So long as you stick with it, the overwhelming majority of all the people who will ever know your work have not found you yet. All that matters is eventually getting to the correct vision for you, and finding the right words to describe it, for you. Once you get there, and you've put in the work long enough for a bit of luck to find you, and you have under your belt genuinely meaningful work on topics of importance and public interest, at that point anything you've ever done beforehand means nothing.

7.4 UPDATE YOUR PANTHEON AND STACK

It's needless to say that a research agenda will dictate the stack of books you're reading and studying. But you should also update your personal pantheon with new images, videos, quotes, and any other relevant multimedia. Remember that your pantheon is almost like an ammunition depot for your own personal outpost in the machine war. You'll want and need images for various posts and for future courses, books, and so on. Related videos or films will be personally edifying for you but curating them for your audience is also good practice.

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

CHAPTER N.8

Grow

Increase your reach without stressing or selling your soul.

8.1 GIVE AWAY SOMETHING GREAT FOR FREE

No independent scholar wants to be a salesman. It's not only against our nature but it also conflicts with the brand. The independent scholar must be more discreet than the average internet marketer. In my experience, there's one technique that stands out for gaining new subscribers or paying customers without resorting to vulgarities: giving away something genuinely valuable, for free, in exchange for only an email address. In the business world, these offerings are called "lead magnets." These free offerings attract leads, i.e. the type of people who are likely interested in purchasing a related offering, which you will email them later. The phrase "lead magnet" is beyond vulgar—it seems to suggest your patrons have the agency of a metal shard, or perhaps a mosquito. In our context, let's just call it a gift.

The problem with many "lead magnets" in the business world is their lack of quality; often it's a one-page PDF or something quite unsubstantial. If you aim to gain subscribers or a list of potential customers, invest time in creating something thoughtful, useful, and beautiful. The goal is to make it so compelling that people not only think, "That's a sincere, generous person who is serious about publishing valuable work," but then, also, "If this is what they give out for free, then I'd love to see whatever they're charging money for."

Study guides, reading lists, reading highlights, and short ebooks are excellent candidates for gifts you may wish to offer. Such gifts can be tightly on-brand, thoughtful, valuable, desirable, and often nicely aligned with monetization options befitting an independent scholar (see Chapter 9). It doesn't take too much time or effort to make such things way more valuable and nicer than the industry average. Especially if you already have some education in an area, there could be very valuable offerings you could create in a weekend from memory, which would be quite impressive and useful to a novice. For each of our philosophy courses, we produce a simple but detailed and expertly

sequenced reading list. They are genuinely useful for self-study, but they also happen to attract the kind of people who may just be interested in paying for a full course.

By creating and giving away gifts, you rewire the awkward and stressful necessity of selling into a creative and generous activity where everyone wins. You'll make some money, as a predictable function of the number of downloads, but you're also helping many people who will never give you anything back. A businessman might find my extended meditation here absurd, but for the independent scholar it's worth reflecting on. Scholarly types generally don't want to be running around hawking their wares, but to succeed you do have to get your work out there and you have to get the emails of people who would like to pay you. Creating a valuable gift you're proud of is a game-changer because it allows you to spread the word vigorously without shame or anxiety. You can honestly feel good about it.

To maximize the impact of your gifts, you'll eventually want to connect them to some kind of automated email system. This can provide subscribers with additional valuable insights, and help them convert the information into action. Of course, afterwards you may also humbly inform them about some things they may wish to pay for.

Gifts allow you to showcase your expertise and establish your authority. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that people will choose to invest in your more valuable offerings. However, it's essential to ensure that the lead magnet aligns closely with your work overall and specifically with what you aim to sell. A mismatch here will significantly decrease the conversion rate (the percentage of emails that choose to become customers). I made this mistake for a very long time. I spent way too much time in the "throwing spaghetti against the wall" phase (years), so the probability that any new visitor to my work was the kind of person who wanted to buy one of the courses was, at first, very low. It was only as I iterated and converged on my own real underlying brand—and executed research agendas, which, at least for a few months at a time, unified my free writing/content with specific gifts that were linked

to specific products—that I started to unlock decent, and decently predictable, revenue.

8.2 ENGAGE BETTER

Independent scholars should think of themselves as “premium content creators.” Especially if you have a background where you’ve worked hard for many years reading, studying, or teaching at a high level, you have every right to position yourself above the average 20-something pontificating on YouTube. But to build a premium brand, you have to act differently than the average content creator. One of the most important opportunities to distinguish yourself is in how you interact with readers and potential customers. Especially in the early days, when you’re not overrun with replies to your emails, and you don’t have that many customers, and you don’t have many replies on social media. Just be extra thoughtful in how you communicate and care for the people who are interested in your work.

In Silicon Valley, there’s a bit of famous startup advice from Paul Graham that says, “Do things that don’t scale.” If someone replies to your newsletter, reply with more care and attention than might be expected. Spend more time than is normal to help people, to teach them something, or share something special with them. Let anyone book a free call with you. Offer to give feedback. The details will be different depending on your situation, but the point is that you need to engage more thoughtfully than the average creator because you are positioning yourself as something more elevated than the average creator.

Ultimately, the independent scholar charges money for things that are not commonly seen as worth much money, so you should aim to live and treat people uncommonly well. For a certain type of person, the things you have to offer are worth more than all the money in the world, but only if you’re the type of person who knows that to be true—and acts like it.

8.3 CREATE PILLARS

The word “pillar” also comes from the internet marketing world. But again, we’ll spin it to our purposes: A pillar is just a piece of content, typically writing, that is particularly comprehensive, impressive and valuable. A pillar piece makes it clear to any random visitor (and to search engines) that the author is a foremost expert on the subject of the article.

Once you have some sense of what you’re doing, probably once you’ve embarked on a research agenda, it’s usually pretty obvious what your pillar should be. It’s just a big, long, thorough post that answers all of the biggest and most popular questions that anyone could have about the topic you’re working on. A pillar is different than an essay, because it’s not necessarily meant to be read in one sitting, and it’s not necessarily fun, charming, inspiring, or beautiful. It might be some of these things. But the purpose really is for that piece to earn a reputation as the best single place on the internet for anyone exploring that particular topic. A common pattern would be to combine a pillar page with a gift at the bottom. So anyone in the world who is interested in that topic, after some sleuthing, should eventually cross your web page, and then find your gift to be precisely what they were dreaming of.

This begins to accentuate why brand and focus are requirements for a financially viable operation. If you’re not constraining yourself to study and create value within a particular area, then there will be no alignment between your core public writing, your gifts, and your monetization events. Any newcomer to your work will be statistically unlikely to wind up as a paying customer.

As mentioned above, I learned this lesson the hard way, in fact, for the majority of the five years I’ve been working as an independent scholar. If I prevent you from making the same mistake, this little document could very well earn you thousands of extra dollars. Focus, constrain, and impose a tight alignment between your reading, your studying, your writing, the gifts you share with the world, and whatever you eventually plan to monetize. Remember, if you get bored of the focus

you create, the concept of the research agenda gives you some flexibility and freedom later, but all of your best results will come from your ability to create pockets of focus and alignment down this entire chain or “funnel” from free public writing down to monetization.

8.4 GREAT ARTISTS STEAL

The internet is intrinsically remixed. The meme, the lingua franca of the digital commons, is essentially based on theft without citation. If you study social media closely, you’ll soon notice that a great fraction of any given day’s most viral content is stolen or remixed without citation. Most people are shameless and there’s so much content that it’s impossible to track. In the world of more serious writing, however, the norms are still being settled, so I will just give you my perspective.

Anytime you encounter online highly interesting or useful material that you use in your writing, you should default to linking back to where you found it, when possible, if the source is a thoughtful writer or some entity you respect. I see this as decency, courtesy, and networking, not primarily ethical obligation. Cultures of citation are really more social than ethical, despite the pseudo-ethical gravity that institutional teachers try to cultivate around the prohibition of plagiarism. Plagiarism is only a measurement problem for teachers, and a reputation problem for students.

The internet is a radically decontextualized and decentralized plane of data. I am not at all sure that you owe anything to anyone, frankly, in an ethical sense, except to the degree that you respect some people and wish to do right by them, partially because you intend to earn their respect and you hope that they will do right by you. Other than this heuristic, which I do think you should obey, I believe independent scholars should be quite comfortable digesting and recapitulating just about anything they find or learn anywhere, to whatever degree they please, including without citation. Copying someone else’s words verbatim and publishing them as your own is, obviously, the mark of a poser. Never do that, but if you read something and believe it’s true,

then it's common property, and you have as much right to speak it, organically and immediately, in your own tongue, as the person you got it from.

We are inundated with fascinating information, stories, images, and videos every day, and many of those are themselves copied from someone else without citation. It would be absurd to spend precious time and effort attributing everything to sources.

I find writers with an academic background are often overly concerned about citation and bookkeeping of sources. I think that's wrongheaded and an unfortunate self-imposed handicap in the new digital world. Cite original work by thoughtful entities because you hope thoughtful entities will cite your work in turn, but other than that, great artists steal.

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

CHAPTER N.9

Monetize

Build a simple and tasteful profit engine tailored to your strengths.

9.1 OVERVIEW OF OPTIONS

There are several types of monetization. There's no science for deciding a monetization strategy—you can find successful creators combining different monetization levers in any number of ways—but each lever definitely has some tradeoffs. My authority for writing this section is not that I've determined the best possible monetization model, it is only that I've tested just about all of them. Roughly, I'd say these are the relevant categories for independent scholars:

Services. A service is selling your time and expertise for money. Services relevant to independent scholars include tutoring, coaching, counseling, consulting, and editing. **Digital products with a one-time fee.** The most obvious examples for the independent scholar would be books, self-paced video courses, and other downloadable educational material. **Digital products with a recurring fee.** The most popular example right now is the paid newsletter popularized, at least for the highbrow set, by Substack. **Software.** An independent scholar with programming skills can build and sell software instead of educational products. Alternatively, one can contract developers. Sam Harris launched a meditation app because he became known for his ideas about meditation.

Private community. Private communities are essentially a combination of service, product, and software (usually third-party software you rent from another company and sell to your members.) The fee can be one-time or recurring. If you're not a hacker and you can't afford a developer, it's still possible to give your audience a custom software product by leveraging a third-party software provider. A good example of this is creators who sell a job board—effectively their own marketplace—by relying on companies like Pallet to provide the software.

Partnerships. Instead of selling something, it is possible to partner with someone who is selling something. You bring your distribution to

their product, and you get paid in some way. I would break partnerships into three sub-categories.

- Affiliate commissions are similar to ads but you're only paid for the measurable results you drive with your content (either link clicks or sales). The process is more casual than the process of selling ads to companies; in many cases you can start right away, without approval, just by generating an affiliate link on an open platform. Advertisements. A company pays you to feature them in a newsletter or podcast, for example.
- Brand deals can be negotiated creatively, sometimes combining advertisements with consulting and/or in-house service work for the company. I've recently noticed startups and VC firms hiring creators in-house.
- You'll quickly notice the above categories are not mutually exclusive. Private communities can run on a one-time or recurring fee. A live group course (also known as a "cohort" course) is part service, part product, part community. It's not a scientific taxonomy, just a loose inventory of the levers you can think about pulling when the time is right.

9.2 SOME TRADEOFFS

As far as I can tell, there really is no one, perfect formula. In a capitalist economy, there is never a "free lunch." If there was one way to monetize better than all the others, if one of these approaches could earn you huge amounts of money for less work than the others, the word would get out and everyone would flock to that approach until the extra profit is competed down. I can only tell you the tradeoffs, the pros and cons of each.

The best thing about services is that they can be incredibly quick, easy, and low-risk to launch. Usually, it boils down to merely posting a link that allows your audience to book a call with you for a fee. You can get your first dollar in the door rapidly. In the worst case scenario, if

nobody is interested (or your audience is too small) and nobody pays, it costs you absolutely nothing.

A product with a one-time fee is also easy to launch, with low-risk. There is some risk if you spend a lot of time or money building the product in advance, but this can be solved by not doing that. Start with something simple before you create something complicated and sophisticated. The obvious benefit of a subscription model is that you get some future cash flow without having to make an additional sale. But again, there's no free lunch. In reality, the pressure to keep selling new subscriptions is not very different from the pressure to sell new one-time products. And subscribers can cancel their subscriptions at any time, obviously, so recurring revenue is not quite as dreamy as it sounds. Not to mention, people are generally less willing to initiate a subscription so it's a harder sell than a one-time fee. The final major downside of the subscription model is that you are always on the hook for generating new value for your subscribers. If you have an annual option, every new subscriber extends your obligations for another whole year. That's no joke.

When you sell a book or a course with a one-time fee, the customer gets what they purchased and you don't owe anyone anything after that. That's a nice feeling. If you offer a subscription, you need to be very thoughtful about what you're promising and what it will feel like to deliver that thing over and over and over. You also need to think about some intangibles, which I can only explain with a story.

9.3 THE TIME I TURNED OFF \$40,000/YEAR (A LESSON ON SUBSCRIPTIONS)

In 2019, I built a subscription-based community around my earliest vision of the post-academic business model. I decided I would aim for premium positioning. Expensive, exclusive, etc. At \$450/year, it was about 3-4 times more than your average paid newsletter. I ran community events multiple times per week and it was pretty solid. I grew it to \$40,000/year and everyone who came through was great. There was

only one problem, which I never would have anticipated: It just didn't feel right.

We would have a big IRL meetup once a year (we still do), and at one of these gatherings I just thought to myself: These people are my friends more than my “customers.” What we had there (and still have) is extremely valuable, but I did not authentically feel like some fancy CEO providing them a “premium” networking product or professional development service. The business model was implying things about me, and these people, and what we're doing together, which just felt wrong once the seed really started to blossom. One can never be sure about what, exactly, one is building. At a certain point, it escapes you. I felt then as I feel now, which is that you have no choice but to conform yourself, and the business model, around the real self-determination of whatever forces you are lucky enough to be vaguely steering. I just decided I did not want a very expensive subscription product to be the centerpiece of my business model, and I went home and turned it off. I emailed everyone telling them they wouldn't be charged again; from then on, the main revenue driver would be the courses, which they'd be grandfathered into indefinitely, and there would be a very modestly priced annual subscription for members who would like to “pay dues.” I'm not sure it was the right move; from a business perspective it was possibly naive, I sometimes think back and feel stupid, as if I should have just kept it going with some changes and today I'd have a bigger business. I'm not sure, but I feel like you can never go too wrong trusting your heart and trying to do the right thing.

The moral of the story is that you should be careful about subscription models. If you're not sure about what you're really doing yet, and you haven't validated product-market-founder fit, then paradoxically product-market fit could become a problem.

9.4 WRITING AS A PRODUCT

For the independent scholar, one popular form of the subscription model today is the paid newsletter. For example, someone like Byrne

Hobart is essentially an independent scholar of technology and finance. He publishes a newsletter, called The Diff, five times every week. Four of those posts are exclusive for paid subscribers and one is shared with the public. With a price of \$220/year and thousands of paid subscribers, it's a simple and brilliant business model.

Or consider Razib Khan, a genetics expert and PhD who's been blogging for decades now. His paid newsletter and podcast, Unsupervised Learning, publishes deep work on population genetics and cultural history multiple times a week, also to thousands of paid subscribers. Byrne and Razib are exemplary independent scholars who fit the paid newsletter model perfectly. Both are widely respected by a large audience of sophisticated readers, and from public data alone we can be quite sure they earn from their writing significantly more than the average professor.

For my part, I've always had a strong sense that I would prefer not to monetize my written words as my primary business model. There are a few reasons. First, I think paid newsletters are ideal for writers who have specific expertise in a technical domain that generates either 1) actionable alpha or 2) some kind of strong, legible tribal/aspirational value. The Diff sits comfortably in a proven niche, alongside others like Stratechery and The Generalist, providing clear, original, and market-relevant information and perspective to business executives and investors. Not only does the target reader have plenty of disposable income (and often a company research budget), but if an original and well-informed writer gives them only one unique, correct, and actionable/investable idea each year, that alone could easily justify the subscription cost. As long as they are constantly supplying valuable information and original perspective (that's the hard part!), paid subscribers will generally be happy with their subscription and tell their friends. I'm not saying it's easy, I'm just saying the value proposition and the customer psychology is relatively clear and proven.

If you look at all of the biggest, highbrow, paid newsletters not selling actionable or investable alpha, what are they actually selling? Here I'm

thinking of everyone from the liberal historian Heather Cox Richardson (by many counts the single biggest writer on Substack), to Matt Yglesias, to the smaller but still influential Curtis Yarvin. It seems to me, whatever the many deep merits of these authors might be, they all have something in common: They're all political. It's not a jab in the slightest; these names and many more like them are extremely smart authors, powerful writers, and often highly impressive independent scholars of a certain kind.

My point is only that the paid newsletter model seems to have pretty clear requirements, at least if you wish to make a proper adult income. If your expertise and your creative vision do not align with these requirements, I would discourage you from rushing into this model, despite its popularity at the moment. That said, there is some wiggle room, no doubt. To Razib's credit, for instance, Unsupervised Learning seems to work through a unique mixture of scientific alpha and a little tribal-aspirational appeal, although it is largely non-political. There are not many pure rules about where you can, or cannot, make a place for yourself in terms of medium and business model.

As with all things in the creator economy, you should pick the approach that is most complementary to your personal traits and quirks. If there is anything out there that approximates a free lunch, this is it. It's one of the only ways that you, personally, can hope to beat the market. But it requires a lot of self-knowledge and honesty about what you're good at, what you're not good at, and what you love to do.

One reason I've never wanted to sell my writing directly is that I'm not confident I have a comparative advantage in the types of writing I described above. My role models have always been the wild men, the scholars and writers who go off on quixotic, often illegible personal quests, who militate nervously and unpredictably against what most people consider valuable, only to show everyone after hundreds of years that they understood something nobody else understood. I haven't the slightest delusion of having earned a place in this camp (yet), it's just the only archetype I've ever personally identified with since I chose this

vocation 17 years ago. So I've never sought to monetize my writing, although I will certainly write more books, and I do expect book revenue to become a substantial share of my revenue in the long term. The customer psychology for buying a book is very different, and historically, more compatible with my personal orientation.

You should also be realistic about your intelligence and other well-understood traits like conscientiousness. I'm a pretty smart guy, but I also know where I'm likely to be outgunned. The difference between 125 and 135 IQ, or even 130 and 135 IQ, can be tremendous when it comes to calculating your probability of success in weird performance environments like highbrow internet writing. In other words, maybe I could do something similar to what Byrne and Razib do, but I don't believe I have the traits to be the best in the world at that game—the specific game of IQ-maxxing several thousands of words every week for money. And in a context of complete freedom, there's just no reason to play any game other than the one where your natural traits almost guarantee you'll win. If you haven't found that game yet, you just have to keep looking and keep experimenting until you find it.

You have to be really honest with yourself to survive under the scourge of freedom (Chapter 5). When there's nobody whose job it is to reign you in, pride is suicide and humility can be a lifeline.

9.5 MY EXPERIENCE WITH COURSES

I didn't crack a six-figure income until I started focusing on courses. In the years 2020 to 2022, most of my revenue came from independent, academic, cohort courses I launched, marketed, and operated in collaboration with a handful of friendly post-academic friends from around the internet. We've mostly offered cohort-based courses that run between four and eight weeks, typically charging somewhere between \$200 and \$1,000 per course (we've experimented a lot with price). I've played around with all the parameters and, in my experience, the overall best experience for everyone is a live cohort course, with a reading schedule

moderately more aggressive than is comfortable, meeting once a week for two hours, over six weeks, for a fee of about \$500.

Our most successful courses generated nearly \$30,000 each cohort, but I've seen a lot of variance across topics, market conditions, and multiple runs of the same course. Our worst-performing courses have generated as little as \$2,000, but usually due to predictable factors, such as insufficient growth in the list between running multiple cohorts of one course.

If I have innovated on anything with respect to the business world, it is likely this—bringing the cohort-based course model to independent and disinterested, “pure” academic topics. Before my courses, not many people thought there would be any demand for a six-week intensive group experience that promises no credentials or material benefits whatsoever, at a cost of \$500. To my knowledge, along with my collaborators, I was the first to prove that there is demand, and enough that one can build a real business around it.

The majority of our courses have earned the lecturer more than what is earned by the average lecturer for an average course given at an American university. This is not saying much, of course, because the average lecturer is an adjunct professor and their average pay per course is only somewhere around \$5,000. So you only need to find 10 people out on the internet to pay you \$500 to make as much as you would as an adjunct professor. But it's also less teaching and admin work because there is no paperwork, no commute. There's no bureaucracy whatsoever and you have complete freedom in all aspects. Of course, someone has to market the course and run logistics (which is a lot of work), but for most of my lecturers I took care of all that. So their experience was typically better, easier, and more lucrative than it would have been at an average university. Though free lunches don't exist, I do believe that live group cohorts on difficult but important academic topics are currently an underestimated opportunity. In my experience, revenue is pretty predictable from the number of interested people you have on a list. If you took my advice from the previous chapter on giving your audience

thoughtful educational gifts, you can bank on somewhere between 2% to 20% of those people choosing to take a course for somewhere around \$500. Of course, this is assuming you can credibly convey real authority on the subject. But the number of people on your list is all the proof you need that you've credibly conveyed authority!

Many different variables can affect the conversion rate, which is why I'm giving you such a huge confidence interval. But if the course is tightly aligned with the free resources you've been sharing, then I would say a 2% conversion rate is the very worst that can happen. I generally recommend that you fully expect and plan for the worst, just to be safe; so if your goal is to launch a course, you can just do the math to calculate how many emails you need to make your course launch worth your time and effort.

Other relevant variables include the topic itself because different topics attract different kinds of spenders. For instance, our course on Leo Strauss outperformed our course on Ivan Illich for a reason that was unclear until I met the participants, but blindingly obvious as soon as I did. Leo Strauss is a popular name among high-income men working in tech and Ivan Illich was an itinerant Catholic anarchist who wrote generously about poverty. The topics you teach will determine your customers.

A careful study of successful internet writers will show that all of the above monetization levers have been combined in any number of ways. But there is at least one thing that the most successful creators have in common: In almost every case, there is more than one monetization lever being pulled. Sometimes there are many, but at the very least there are usually a few at any given time. If you're on the smaller side, it might be hard to make it work with only one, and if you're on the bigger side, you're probably leaving a nice chunk of change on the table if you're only using one.

9.6 MY EXPERIENCE WITH CONSULTING/SERVICES

Around December 2022, a new possibility crossed my desk. I was asked by a startup called Uqbar if I wanted to help with some writing and marketing work. From the beginning of my post-academic adventure, I had been adamantly opposed to any kind of paid work. I felt like working for a company would be admitting defeat, or at least distract me from the mission. But I wanted to learn about everything, it was only part time, and the pay was good—so I said sure. Uqbar was building a blockchain on Urbit, which is essentially an alternative internet that I became fascinated with in the year prior. I had been writing and speaking about Urbit for many months, just out of curiosity and enthusiasm, so for the small number of startups building in this ecosystem I became a natural candidate for this kind of work. After a few months Uqbar changed course and no longer needed me, at which time I happened to receive another offer for another Urbit company. At this point I should have known I was getting distracted, but again I said sure. I joined Holium to help with their marketing work, but I quickly started getting my hands dirtier than that. Startups are messy and I wanted to be useful, so before I knew it, I was in the office several days a week doing all kinds of things. I didn't mind, and I don't regret it; it was an interesting and often fun experience “working for a startup,” but by this point I was totally neglecting my company. In retrospect, it was really in this time, from December 2022 to June 2023 (when Holium changed course and no longer needed me), that my business had gradually stalled. My audience growth stalled because I wasn't producing enough quality content, which meant I wasn't adding people to my email lists. By September 2023, things were grinding to a halt. Revenue and audience growth were flatlining. I was burned out from hustling for revenue every month since leaving academia, then going down this detour of hustling for startups. I didn't know who I was anymore. This was the lowest point of the entire adventure. I knew I could do six-figures annually with courses, and I could also do six-figures annually with service work, but I didn't see how I could do both. I had spread my business too thin across a big, messy

portfolio of courses and half-baked products so I knew that everything had to be redesigned. But at this point I had no money coming in, except about \$3,000 a month from the business barely humming along.

It was at this time that I really learned how consulting and services really fit into the indie-scholar business model. Fortunately, another Urbit-adjacent company approached me. Zorp asked for my help, again with marketing and their content operation. This time was different because of the lessons I learned previously. I was now more aware of the opportunity cost (the business revenue I was giving up by doing service work), so I increased my rate. I also knew that contract work can get fuzzy and expand (if only from my self-imposed tendency to take initiative), so I was more explicit and confident about managing expectations on that front. But most importantly, the help they wanted was simply more aligned with the indie-scholar lifestyle. They just wanted me to develop their brand by writing interesting and original work under their banner. They wanted to develop in public the philosophical motivations behind the company and its vision, so they would bounce ideas off me, and I would be given complete autonomy to produce a few pieces of interesting work every week. To be precise, one essay, and a few tweets. This relationship is still ongoing, and to this day it's the best paid gig I've ever had in my life. Not only is it exactly the right way to think about marketing (I'm really driving results for the company), but it's perfectly consistent with, even symbiotic with, the indie-scholar vocation. In the 6 months I've been working with them, I've been able to redesign my business for the long-term, return to serious daily research, and write this entire book you're reading right now without ever once worrying about money. It gave me just the space I needed to digest all the lessons I've learned, and restructure my business for the long-term. From these mixed experiences with contract work, we can draw a few key lessons:

1. Be open to contracts and commissions from the beginning, but know your worth, be selective, and charge a lot. It was an error of pride that I was against paid work in the beginning. Had I been open

to that sooner, it would have smoothed out my income sooner and I probably would have avoided some really stressful periods. Now that I have a good track record, and some word of mouth around my power as a hired gun, I suspect this will be a valuable arrow in my quiver for a very long time. At the same time, I would have positioned myself more aggressively, more upmarket and with a more narrow focus fitting the indie-scholar lifestyle. Even if nobody hires you, who cares? It's essentially free to mention it here and there, embedded in whatever you're publishing already. Include an appointment link and see what happens. Do it for a friend—for free—and now you have a track record, etc. Do as much, or as little, as you want on this front, but be open-minded from the beginning. In my case, when I learned how great service work can be, I just added to my email newsletter template a button that says “work with me.” If a company wants to chat, I'm happy to take a call. Maybe one day I'll remove this, maybe I won't.

2. The opportunities that come your way will be strongly shaped by what you're publishing. This is obvious when you think about it, but it wasn't clear to me until after the fact. By writing extensively and enthusiastically about Urbit, I quickly became a top candidate for communications/marketing assistance in that ecosystem. It was not my intention whatsoever. The more niche the area of interest, and the more sincerely enthusiastic and skilled you are, the quicker and more likely you may become literally the top candidate for such work. And unlike the old world of applying for jobs, these gigs are more likely to come to you (entry-level baller status unlocked).
3. Don't sell your time or labor, rent your cultural capital. Contract work is best when a company understands that it is renting your mind—your knowledge, your perspective, the brand and audience you've already built for yourself, and your track record building a successful project on the internet. This is the reason you can charge a lot, without necessarily working many hours. You should embody this principle in your speech and body language, and you should sense that they not only understand it, but respect it and positively

desire it. If they see you as general labor power—rather than a singular mental power—it is unlikely to be the type of gig that is ideally fit to the indie scholar lifestyle. You might still take an imperfect gig along the way, but if you're truly executing on the indie scholar playbook, then you should know that you will be eligible for highly lucrative and efficient consulting and service work. My scholarly output has never been more productive. The contract brings in low six figures by itself, and my business still earns a few thousand from products and subscriptions.

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

CHAPTER N.10

Automate

Create automations to save time on repetitive tasks.

10.1 SHORTCUTS AND TEXT EXPANDERS

The first line of attack for automating legwork is keyboard shortcuts. I'm always surprised by how many knowledge workers never bother. Any computer actions you take multiple times a day, you try to do without your mouse or trackpad. Every operating system has keyboard shortcuts that are slightly different, but it's easy to search and bring them up. I'm on a Mac, so that's what I know. If you're on a Mac, one example of an essential hotkey is Command-Tab, which lets you move back and forth between two apps. If you use Obsidian, another good example would be shift-[and shift-], which slide open and closed the two sidebars, respectively.

One step up from keyboard shortcuts is text expansion. There are multiple text-expansion apps for every operating system but they all do the same thing: Define short, simple words that expand into whole sentences, paragraphs, or even documents. Any set of words that you type multiple times a day should go into your text-expansion app, e.g. if you find yourself replying to emails frequently with the same response. Most of them also let you create forms with variables, so you can write genuinely personalized messages with only a few personalized words and all the boilerplate automatically copied over.

10.2 DICTATION

For many kinds of writing, dictation can be significantly easier, faster, and less cognitively draining. For other types of writing, like editing and polishing serious work, sitting down at a keyboard is necessary. But for jotting down ideas and observations, taking notes on books, writing emails, and even producing first drafts of serious work, dictation is a cheat code. I've been dictating occasionally for many years but it's only now, thanks to AI, that speech-to-text transcription is essentially perfect. The error rate is probably lower than the error rate of typing, or thereabout. The advantage is not only that you can write at the speed of thought, but you tend to write in a more natural style as well.

10.3 API CONNECTORS

The next level up is API Connectors. Also known as no-code programming, the two biggest and best platforms are Zapier and Make. If I could only use one, I would use Make. API Connectors allow you to move data from one platform or web app to another, automatically in the cloud. Most common examples would be, for instance, if you want to move a new paying subscriber to your newsletter into your private community. But you also want to send them a message. And maybe you also want to put them in a spreadsheet for record-keeping. An API Connector would allow you to do all of this in your sleep every time there's a new paying subscriber. If keyboard shortcuts streamline the specific actions you take on your computer, and text-expansion streamlines all of the boilerplate text you're slinging, API Connectors automate the dragging and dropping of data across web apps.

10.4 AI

The new wave of AI will certainly change the strategic landscape for writers. It's a rapidly developing space, which I've written about at length elsewhere, but a few things seem clear enough. The new Large Language Models are best thought of as interns or editorial assistants. At the time of this writing, they are not capable of discovering or generating deep insights in the Liberal Arts. They do perform something quite like reasoning, but they remain too derivative and fallible to be the source of new insights and discoveries. But as text and data processing machines, or middleware between original human thinking and tedious human paper-pushing, they're truly extraordinary. In addition to transcription, which I dealt with separately above, I recommend you use them for: Cleaning up loose notes Brainstorming titles for publications Summarizing texts Formatting work for specific purposes (newsletter, book manuscript, etc.) Translating work into different formats (video scripts, tweets, etc.) Writing emails (just dump the key points and it will do the rest) Drafting copy for business purposes Coding scripts for complex file and folder operations

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

CHAPTER N.11

Repurpose

Scholarly knowledge is timeless — make the most of it.

As independent scholars, we make some sacrifices. It's not for us to ride trends or fish for the largest possible audience. We read more than is rational if one's goal is only to build an audience. We pursue topics and styles that don't always resonate with the average person, or certainly less than a good copywriter will. But there's one massive advantage that we purchase with our sacrifice. If we are doing our work correctly, its value should increase over time. Whereas hot topics and trendy frameworks and viral memes run their course, the indie scholar gradually builds a unique store of value that appreciates over time.

Because we make sacrifices up front, we need to make up for it, as the golfer says, "on the back nine."

Repurpose, repackage, and republish your best ideas periodically over the years. It can feel weird sometimes, like cheating, but that's wrong. It can also feel lame; pushing the ball forward with new work is always more exciting and satisfying, but that's wrong too, because new work takes much more time, and it's extremely satisfying to republish something old that still feels true today. Remember, only a fraction of your audience will see anything you publish, even at the time you publish it. Your audience in five years should be significantly bigger than your audience now, so anything good you published in the past year will be wasted if you don't also send it to your followers in five years. I keep an Airtable of ideas, arguments, quotes, and artwork that best represent my perspective. It's all timeless material that I can draw on for any purpose, at any time. I think of it as a personal pantheon. Download your archive of analytics from your blog, Twitter, or any other place you share your work. Use GPT to do some automated data analysis. Don't obsess over it, but review the top-performing content. Put all of those ideas back into circulation. Find them, republish them verbatim, but also paraphrase them, and extend them. Arbitrage platforms. It's likely you published some work on one platform that you never developed on the other platform. Review, find work that you still think is worthy, and publish it on the other platform. That's low-hanging fruit, just

do it. Revisit and refresh. If you have monetized products like books or courses, you should have organized a whole stockpile of your past, free work related to them. So long as it drives some traffic to your paid offerings, every repost of that timeless work will have some positive cash value. Refresh the book, or refresh the course, even modestly, and that's more than enough pretext for a whole new round of public messaging around it. There's nothing stopping you from "launching" products multiple times. What was once a disadvantage gradually becomes an advantage, but only if you remember to use it.

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

CHAPTER N.12

Accelerate

Prepare to benefit from emerging technologies without getting sidetracked.

12.1 PAY ATTENTION, DON'T GET DISTRACTED

We are living through a tremendous wave of technological progress, from crypto to AI. Transformative scientific and engineering discoveries seem to arrive every few years now, threatening to completely change how knowledge is created, circulated, and rewarded.

Every new wave of innovation will tempt you to change course on your focus, in order to better leverage the new innovations. The heuristic I would recommend is: Pay attention, but do not get distracted.

The whole point of the indie scholar approach is to build something that will be made more and more valuable through *every* wave of technological acceleration, something that no person and no technology will ever take away from us—namely a genuine, cultivated, original human perspective on the world.

Crypto portends a massive paradigm change in the logic of financial and legal institutions, but it will take decades to play out. Same for the current AI inflection. Give some “R&D” time to following and playing around with these tools, and try to maintain a mental model of where the winds are blowing. But never get distracted from your main task, which is to compound the value of your own ideas and writing. Developments like crypto and AI will disproportionately reward precisely those who build the most interesting and valuable perspectives. For instance, now that AI can write as well as mediocre human thinkers, the value of a mediocre human thinker is already dropping precipitously toward zero. We'll be training private AI models on our own writing, or bootstrapping novel commercial entities on crypto rails, but only to the degree we've built a body of writing that is unique, specific, and authentic, over a long period of time.

12.2 INCREASING RETURNS TO BRAND AND COMMUNITY

It's a fool's errand to predict the long-term future, but I'll close with a few thoughts about how I see it. Let's start with AI because its transformative implications are more concrete and immediate. LLMs will improve, as companies spend more money to create bigger and better models. There is no technical reason not to expect additional improvements simply from within the already working frameworks. Most people will be able to create and publish decently interesting and meaningful writing, more or less instantly, with or without any cultivated original perspective.

Look around the internet already. It's easy to see what most people want. They want content that delights, stimulates, energizes, and inspires, but especially on the topics of self-improvement, money, business, health, and of course, sex. The average piece of content about these topics is not sophisticated, unique, or important. Much of it is inflated, of uncertain validity, and in many cases, flat-out wrong. The gap between currently winning internet content and what LLMs can produce is a very small gap. Thus, a lot of what is currently winning content will soon be losing content, I suspect, as its supply is going to balloon.

There are currently winning writers and "creators" who are not going to survive. It will be like a receding tide that gradually shows how many people have been swimming naked.

At the same time, it has always seemed to me that crypto has similar implications. Right now, to create millions of dollars of enterprise value requires significant psychological and behavioral gifts in many areas: You cannot just be extremely good at something that the world wants or needs. To really create value at scale, you also need to have the traits required to build functional business structures. The paradigm change that crypto heralds is one in which all of these frictions are drastically reduced. A fully developed crypto economy would remove all of the friction separating value creation, value circulation, and

value compensation. Just as AI asymptotically equalizes intelligence by giving powerful machine intelligence to all people, crypto mechanically neutralizes bureaucratic skill differences by asymptotically removing bureaucratic dependencies across value chains.

The million-dollar question is, of course, who or what will be left standing after these transformations run their course? When raw intelligence and bureaucratic skill are commoditized and negated by AI and crypto respectively, what will be left standing are the weird, incommensurable, human elements. Everything good about human life that was once too irregular and illegible to command money, or too irregular and illegible to command bureaucratic power, will increasingly become the scarce factors and the key principles of differentiation. Authentic and unique emotional profiles; uncommonly cultivated virtues; strong value systems; statistically anomalous practices and lifestyles that beat the average lifestyle for particular types of people. The communities that emerge around such traits, rooted in human interaction, will also be durable moats, at least for some time.

That's my hunch, anyway, and it informs how I've designed the indie scholar system.