

Paul Graham (How To Do Great Work)

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SUMMARY

The essay explores the essential elements of doing great work, emphasizing the importance of choosing a field that aligns with one's natural interests and aptitudes. It outlines a practical approach to discovering what to work on, advocating for curiosity-driven exploration and the necessity of hard work, while also addressing the challenges posed by societal expectations and educational systems.

- *Identify work that aligns with your natural aptitude and deep interest; importance is subjective and should not be a primary concern.*
- *Engage in projects that excite you and cultivate a habit of working on your own initiatives rather than tasks dictated by others.*
- *Embrace the process of trial and error; many successful individuals found their paths through experimentation and learning from failures.*
- *Develop a strong curiosity and pursue knowledge at the frontiers of your field to identify gaps and opportunities for innovation.*
- *Surround yourself with ambitious and talented colleagues, as collaboration can significantly enhance the quality of your work.*
- *Maintain high morale and protect your inner dialogue; setbacks are part of the process and should not deter you from your goals.*
- *Avoid letting societal pressures dictate your work; focus on what genuinely interests you, as this will lead to more fulfilling and impactful outcomes.*
- *Be willing to adapt and evolve your projects over time, recognizing that great work often emerges from iterative improvements rather than initial perfection.*

how to do great work if you collected lists of techniques for doing great work in a lot of different fields what would the intersection look like I decided to find out the following recipe assumes you're very ambitious the first step is to decide what to work on the work you choose needs to have three qualities number one it has to be something you have a natural aptitude for number two you have to have a deep interest in it

and number three it offers the scope to do great work in practice you don't have to worry much about the third criteria all you need to do is find something you have an aptitude for and a great interest in and right away we get to one of Paul's first footnotes he says doing great work means doing something important so well that you expand people's ideas of what's possible but there's no threshold for importance that's something he's going

to repeat many times in different in different ways throughout the essay so just keep that that idea in mind there's no threshold for importance it's a matter of degree and it's often hard to judge at the time anyway so I'd

rather people focus on developing their interests rather than worrying about whether they're important or not just try to do something amazing and leave it to the Future generations to say if you succeeded back to the top of the essay

he left off he says all you need to do is find something you have an aptitude for and a great interest in that sounds straightforward but it is often quite difficult when you're young you don't know what you're good at and some kinds of work that you end up doing may not even exist yet it's funny because that's the same advice I went and I went and talked at career day at my daughter School uh when she was in fourth grade

and I don't think the teachers liked it very much cuz I started the conversation with don't don't worry about what your parents or your teachers think uh just find out what you're naturally interested in and become a learning machine and so in my own way I told a bunch of nine-year-olds that because I was like listen when I was your age there was no such thing as podcasting it didn't even exist uh back to what Paul

said the way to figure out what to work on is by working if you're not sure what to work on guess but pick something and get going you'll probably guess wrong some of the time but that is fine and that's this is an idea that you and I have talked about multiple times you see it in these biographies over and over again the act of finding your life's work for an entrepreneur usually requires that you're going to have to

start more than one business I'd have to go back through the episodes to see if I could even find somebody that got it right the first time maybe I think the closest example of this might be Mark Zuckerberg uh back to this it's good to know about multiple things some of the biggest discoveries come from noticing connections between different fields develop a habit of working on your own projects do not let work mean something that other people tell you to do and

that is such an important sentence don't let work mean something other people tell you to do that is the lived experience of most people alive and dead in fact Paul has another essay called how to do what you love where he says only a few hundred, in his guess a few hundred thousand people ever actually figure this out let me read I'm going to just read an extra from that uh other essay real quick he says with such

powerful forces leading us astray it's not surprising that we find it so hard to discover what we like to work on most people are doomed in childhood by accepting the axiom that work equals pain those who escape this are nearly all lured onto the rocks by Prestige or money how many even discover something they love to work on a few hundred, perhaps out of billions and so I think that sentence hits even harder after you read the excerpt from his past essay

don't let work mean something other people tell you to do if you do manage to do great work one day it'll probably be on a project of your own what should your projects be whatever seems to you excitingly ambitious as you grow older and your taste and projects evolves exciting and important will converge but always preserve exciting I love that maximum always preserve exciting there's a kind of excited curiosity that's both the engine and the rudder of great work it will not

only drive you but if you let it have its way will also show you what to work on in a small degree this why I wasn't expecting to do this essay uh as an episode in fact I'm reading two other books right now that I thought I was going to do before this but so many first of all so many people that listen to Founders sent me this this essay and then I start reading it and this is

exactly what happened I feel like I have Goosebumps right now I get excited and I'm like nope like it completely cleared everything off it's like there's nothing else so like when I people ask like how do I pick books or do I have like a schedule or something like that for what I'm going to work on I just go to a bookshelf uh where I have tons of uh unread books it's like what am I most

excited to to learn about right now and I start reading Paul's essay and I'm like oh this there's the answer I'm most excited about this essay right now and so therefore I use that he just said it's both the engine and the rudder of great work it will not only drive you but if you let it have its way it'll also show you what to work on back to Paul's essay what are you excessively curious about curious to a degree that

would bore most other people this is what you're looking for so again I have another example of this so people assume because I read a lot of books that I must have great recommendations on what to read but time and time again I actually recommend a book and then I'll hear back from that person like oh that was how did how the hell did you read that like that book was too boring and this happened so many times I'm like oh

my god I didn't even understand that my threshold for quotequote boring books is so much higher than most other people's because those books weren't boring to me I was reading them because I had to satisfy whatever curiosity I had right so he just said what are you excessively curious about curious to degree that would bore most other people that is what you're looking for once you found something you're excessively interested in how I'm not I'm a few paragraphs into

the essay like he's he's telling you he's like follow your interest what Charlie merer says follow your natural drift what are you interested in go do that once you found something you're excessively interested in the next step is to learn enough about it to get you to one of the frontiers of knowledge and then once you're at a frontier of knowledge and whatever field that you're in excessively interested in you're that's where you're going to start to

learn and you're actually going to start to see you'll learn enough so you can actually see gaps and so this is his point many discoveries have come from asking questions about things that everyone else took for granted if the answer seems strange to you right so you're working in something that you're excessively interested in you're doing the work necessary because again you're not he said this essay is not for you if you're not ambitious if you're just

trying to like skate through life there's no point in reading it but he's assuming okay you're you're following you're excessively interested you're willing to you want to do great work which then means you'll do enough work to get to the frontier of knowledge and then once you get there you'll notice the gap apps and you're like oh wait other people are taking this for granted if the answer seems strange to you so much the better great

work often has a

tinure of strangeness and then he has advice on what do you do next boldly Chase outlier ideas even if other people are not interested in them in fact especially if they aren't if you're excited about some possibility that everyone else ignores and you have enough expertise to say precisely what they're all overlooking that's as good of a bet as you will find and then this next paragraph This last sentence in this next paragraph which I'll get to in one second is exactly why

you know Paul Gres essays all of them are worth reading and rereading and you've seen this through my own actions go back to what 275 276 277 it's been like three weeks reading and rereading all of his essays and like I've read them a bunch for years and you do this because he's able to compare uh ideas and in this case he's focus on great work in different fields entrepreneurship Arts mathematics whatever it is so he says four steps

number one choose a field number two learn enough to get to the frontier number three uh notice the gaps number four explore promising gaps and this is the punchline of the paragraph which I absolutely love this is how practically everyone who's done great work has done it from painters to physicists step two and four will require hard work I'll pause there there a good thing that Paul has another great essay called how to work hard so I will I will leave that

link down below if you haven't um read it I'd obviously read this essay first and then follow all the links uh for his other essays but how to how to work hard I think could be in the footnote of of this essay so it says steps two and four require hard work it may not be possible to prove that you have to work hard to do great things but the empirical evidence is on the scale

of the evidence for mortality so he's essentially it's like a shirt B that's what he's telling us that is why it's essential to work on something you're deeply interested in interest will drive you to work harder than mere diligence ever could and we've seen this over and over again go back to all rant go back to Michael Jordan Edwin land Steve Jobs they'll say the same thing they find work that feels like play they're so intensely and deeply interested in it

that they have no choice and you just want it up a spot where this strange convergence happens where you're working all the time and it feels like you never you're never working and then he brings up the fact that you can't learn this without doing it let's talk a little bit more about the complicated business of figuring out what to work on the main reason it's hard is that you can't tell what most kinds of work are like except

by doing them you may have have to work at something for years before you know how much you like it or how good you are at it and in the meantime you're not doing and thus not learning about most other kinds of work and I love just sitting there reading and rereading that paragraph because this whole point you know it's like listen we're going to try to do great work we're going to try to find our life's work this you can't

expect this to be easy because if it was easy billions and billions of people in the past and currently wouldn't have failed to do it and he hits at one of the most important part because you don't know what it's like until you start doing it and that means you might be working at something for several years before you know how much you like it or how good you are at it and in the meantime you're not learning are doing

other kinds of work so you could go down a path and multiple paths even that are just a dead end all the way until you're in the grave and I think this is why I think the essay is so important that I would dedicate an entire essay to it to like really stop and think and read and reread because this is not easy and we only get one shot at life so then he goes into some of the things like like

why is this so complicated like there's there's certain structures and institutions that society's created that doesn't make this easier and if you read uh I think I have notes on this later but Paul's essay is a lot will just kind of like he's like constantly poking at the way we we like our Educational Systems are set up you can tell like he's just not a fan and he's not hiding the fact that he's not a fan so he says

Educational Systems in most countries expect you to commit to a field long before you could know what it's really like which is madness just doesn't make any sense it would be better if they at least admitted if they admitted that the system not only can't do much to help you figure out what to work on but is designed on this is so crazy this is the great thing about his writing because it's so like refined uh like he talks

about his edit editing process all the time I think he spent like half a year writing this essay if I'm not mistaken and so these ideas just get right into your brain but listen to this this is madness but it is designed on the assumption that you'll somehow magically guess as a teenager if I go back and think what I was like as a teenager and if you do the same like how many ideas did you believe are

true and that you thought were valuable uh when you were a teenager that you still believe I was thinking about this earlier I was like maybe one that reading books is probably a good use of my time right and reading the right books is probably a good use of my time the idea is like Hey we're going to pick what we're going to do and we're going to figure it out and not even figure it out guess the magically guess is a great

way to put it as a teenager and then this is what I was alluring to like why spend so much time thinking about like don't glaze over this sa say read it think about it they don't tell you but I will when it comes to figuring out what to work on you're on your own and so then he gets into the importance of you're only going to figure this out you have to take actions do not be passive

what should you do if you're young and ambitious but don't know what to work on what you should not do is drift along passively assuming the problem will solve itself you need to take action when you read biographies of people who've done great work it's remarkable how much luck is involved they discover what to work on as a result of a chance meeting or by reading a book that they happen to pick up I need to pause here

this has been on my mind a ton first of all obviously what Paul said there is completely right you can read a lot of biographies you just read people who've done great work which is this entire podcast it's remarkable how much luck is involved right just look at the last few weeks we don't have to go into the last seven years right how is it possible that both James Cameron and Christopher Nolan both watched the movie 2001 of

Space Odyssey when they were kids and both arrived at the same conclusion that I can do that that I can make movies maybe even the the best example recently you got to go back and listen to The Mark Train episode I think it's like episode 312 or something listen the whole thing because it's about his young life it's really about this essay like he's a young ambitious person doesn't know what to work on he literally turns

from Sam Samuel Clemens to Mark Twain towards the end of the episode in fact I'll tell you I think it's like 50 minute mark because I have the transcript in front of me I'm going to read from this like the series of events that had to happen for Mark Twain to finally find his path listen to the whole episode but this is in case you haven't heard it I'm just going to give you this like two paragraphs right this

is me reading from transcript from The Mark Twain episode and so I say let's look back at what is taking place first he thinks he's going to be a cocaine dealer he travels down the river stumbles upon the best job that he thought he would have forever which is the Mississippi riverboat Steamboat pilot which is kind of crazy that Mark Twain wasn't planning on being a writer and a lecturer it's like no the best job

ever is the the steam Ste boat captains or steam boat Pilots then something completely out of his control the Civil War comes and causes him to flee to go out west and have all these series of Adventures he turns from Sam Clemens into Mark Twain along the way he meets a bunch of people along the way that give him fantastic advice and change the trajectory of his life he experiences unbelievable highs and then at the very

bottom unbelievable lows where he literally has a gun to his head he is contemplating suicide then right after that he does something smart puts down the puts down the pistol picks up the pen right he finds the opportunity of Life writes what he thinks is just a silly story that story goes viral that story then creates all all all these other fans and people that love Twain and want to help him he turns that into a trip to Hawaii he meets another one of

his fans who happens to be a very influential Diplomat who leads him to the greatest journalistic scoop he has of all time that scoop leads him to his lecture career which further enhances his public profile which then leads him to this 23 we trip in Europe which in turn is going to lead to the source material for his first great book the first publishing success that he ever has which then in turn changes his life forever that example from M Mark Twain

is a microcosm of exactly what Paul Graham is talking about here what you what you should do if you're young and ambitious but don't know what to work on Mark Twain was young and ambitious he had no idea what to work on he put pen to paper he took action is another way to think about that right when you read biographies of people who have done great work it's remarkable how much luck is involved they discover what to work

on as a result of a chance meeting or by reading a book that they happen to pick up at the end of that paragraph Paul has a fantastic footnote there are many reasons curious people are more likely to do great work but one of the most subtle is that by casting a wide net they're more likely to find the right thing to work on in the first place okay so back up top when in doubt optimize

for interestingness Fields change as you learn more about them a field should become increasingly interesting as you learn more about it if it does it's probably not for you do not worry if you're interested in different things than other people The Stranger your tastes are in interestingness the better strange tastes often are strong ones and a strong taste for work means you'll be productive and you'll be more likely to find new things if you're looking where

few others have looked before one sign that you're suited for some kind of work is when you like even the parts that other people find tedious or frightening so that's another he's introduc he's reintroducing that idea right find work that feels like play if you're interesting the work will pull you wi fields are not people you do not owe them any loyalty if in the course of working on one thing you discover another that's more exciting do not be

afraid to switch if you're making something for people make sure it's something they actually want the best way to do this is to make something you yourself want write the story you want to read build the tool that you want to use this should follow from the exciting this rule so what is he saying there make what you are most excited about that's the main message of what he's trying to teach us he also has this uh

there I think I talked about this before but in other um essays he he couldn't figure out like he he would notice a pattern when he's doing like office hours with Founders at ycombinator that the ones uh that were kind of lost or like kind of not doing well they were weren't even using their own product they were building a product that they thought other people might want or trying to solve a problem that they didn't really understand and that's

a big problem if you're not if you if you don't love your own product if you're not using your own product there's nothing like to orient yourself around so it's like why why don't you just write the story that you want to read build a tool that you want to use I mentioned this case explicitly because so many people get it wrong instead of making what they want they try to make what some imaginary more sophisticated

audience wants and once you go down that route you're lost so I kind of just ran over uh the point that he was making there there are a lot of forces that will lead you astray when you're trying to figure out what to work on pretentiousness fashion fear money politics other people's interests and other wordss like distractions that get you off your your true authentic path but if you stick to what you find genuinely interesting you'll proof

against all of them if you're interested you're not astray and so when I read that the first time I said that may be my favorite paragraph so far and really cuz that line if you stick to what you find genuinely interesting you'll be proof against all of them if you're interested you're not astray this idea will be very familiar to you and I it's why my number one recommendation is still James Dyson's first autobiography against the odds following your

interests usually means following them past rejection and failure it does take a good good deal of boldness while you'll need boldness you usually don't need much planning in most cases the recipe for doing great work is simply work hard on excitingly ambitious projects and something good will come of it the trouble with planning is that it only works for achievements you can describe in advance you can win a gold medal or get rich by deciding as a child

and then tenaciously pursuing that goal but you can't discover natural selection that way I think for most people who want to do great work the right strategy is not to plan too much at each stage do whatever seems most interesting and gives you the best options for the future I call this approach let me pause I need to repeat that at each stage do whatever seems most interesting he's repeated that to us what 15 times maybe

so far in different ways at each stage do whatever seems most interesting and gives you the best options for the future I call this approach staying up wind this is how most people who've done great work seem to have done it even when you found something exciting to work on working on it is not always going to be straightforward there will be times when some new idea makes you leap out of bed in the morning and get

straight to work but there will also be plenty of times when things are not like that you don't just put out your sail and get blown forward by inspiration there are headwinds and currents and hidden shoals so there's a technique to working just as there is to sailing for example while you must work hard it's possible to work too hard and if you do that you'll find you get diminishing returns fatigue will make you stupid and

eventually even damage your health the point at which work yields diminishing returns depends on the type some of the hardest types you might only be able to do four or five hours a day ideally those hours will be continuous to the extent you can try to arrange your life so you have big blocks of time to work in Edwin L said it best I'll never stop repeating this quote because it's one of my favorites my whole life has been

spent trying to teach people that intense concentration for hour after hour can bring out in people resources they didn't know they had Paul Graham says ideally those hours will be continuous to the extent you can try to arrange your life so you have big blocks of time to work in it is usually a mistake to lie to yourself if you want to do great work but this is one of the rare cases where it isn't when I'm

reluctant to start work in the morning I often trick myself by saying I'll just read over what I've got so far 5 minutes later and I found something that seems mistaken or incomplete and I'm off and running so he's talking about tricking himself into working even when you don't feel like it and he talks about like similar techniques work for starting new projects and he says it's okay to lie to yourself about how much a project will

entail for example lots of great things began with someone saying how hard could it be he's absolutely right on that how many times I've lost count of how many times I've read in these biographies at after this is done they'd be like I would have never done this to begin with I would have never even tried it if I actually knew going into it how hard or difficult or painful it would wind up being so there is some kind of like

benefit to I don't want to call like Blissful I guess Blissful ignorance maybe is the way to think about that try to finish what you start though even if it turns out to be more work than you expected finishing things is not just an exercise in self-discipline in many projects a lot of the best work happens in what was meant to be the final stage so I got to pause there cuz I had a weird um idea that that but that came to

mind that was prompted by reading that so it's like listen you just try to finish what you start even if it's more work than you expected finishing things is not just an exercise in self-discipline in many projects a lot of the best work happens in what was meant to be the final stage I would say in that's true for people's lives too I was trying to figure out like when you're when you're reading these stories like why do so many like you're not

going to find many people I'm talking about in like entrepreneurship not like scientific discovery or something like you're not going to find many people that like make their best business or their best product when they're like 20 or like 25 and I this happened so much I was like why do so many people wind up doing their best work many decades into their career I think the obvious answer would be like I was thinking about this

I like okay well yeah it's like they've had three decades of as an entrepreneur to practice like they started a bunch of businesses now they know their industry better they just understand the shape of the work and what they want to do and I think that is true but I one thing that I just can't let go of is I think a key to doing truly great work is building a business that's authentic to you to your

true self and what I realized is like oh yes they have more experience but they know themselves better this process of self-discovery of like really figuring out who I am I truly am I imitating what's around me like who am I truly what are my true interests and like what do I actually want to do with my life that process usually takes many many decades so it's like yeah they had a lot more experience and practice as an

entrepreneur but they also know themselves way better multiple decades into the career than when they started and I think there's a relationship between those two things back to this essay another permissible lie is to exaggerate the importance of what you're working on at least in your own mind if that helps you discover something new it may turn out not to have been a lie at all that is a fascinating idea that it might be a good

idea to lie to yourself exaggerate the importance of what you're working on at least in your own mind if that helps you discover something new it may turn out not to have been a lie at all and so the footnote on that idea is he says this is an idea I learned from this book called a mathematician's apology and he says I recommend to anyone ambitious to do great work in any field and he follows that interesting

idea up with another one this is Paul's theory on per project procrastination per project procrastination since there are two senses of starting work per day and per project there are also two forms of procrastination per project procrastination is far more dangerous you put off starting that ambitious project from year to year because the time isn't quite right one reason per project procrastination is so dangerous is that it usually camouflages itself as work you're not just sitting around

doing nothing you're working industrious industriously on something else you're too busy to notice it and then I love his simple guide on how to catch if we're actually doing this the way to beat this is to stop occasionally and ask yourself am I working on what I most want to work on when you're young it's okay if the answer is sometimes no but this gets increasingly dangerous as you get older just ask yourself am I working on what I

most want to work on great work usually entails spending what would seem to most people an unreasonable amount of time on a problem I have to pause there when I read that sentence immediately what comes to mind when Steve Jobs said that everything great has a shared ingredient time Paul says great work usually entails spending what would seem to most people an unreasonable amount of time on a problem great work happens by focusing consistently on something you're

genuinely interested in when you pause to take stock you'll be surprised on how far you've come the reason we're surprised is that we underestimate the cumulative effect of work oh another great paragraph This is going to be an essay I'm going to read multiple times throughout my life uh I hope you read the entire thing when you're done listening to this writing a page per day doesn't sound like much but if you do it every day you'll write a book a year

that is the key consistency people who do great things don't get a lot done every day they get something done rather than nothing and if you do work that compounds you'll get exponential growth the trouble with exponential growth is that the curve feels flat in the beginning it isn't it is still a wonderful exponential curve but we can't grasp that intuitively so we underrate exponential growth in early stages something that grows exponentially can become so valuable that it's worth

making an extraordinary effort to get started this is so good okay something that grows exponentially check this out um I'm going to tell you something that I was thinking about when I was reading this something that grows exponentially become so valuable that it's worth making an extraordinary effort to get started so I listen to podcast with my daughter she's 11 and right now she loves Taylor Swift so uh we were listening to the acquired podcast episode on Taylor Swift and acquired

made by my friends Ben and David and I can't remember if B or David said it but uh one of them said that Taylor Swift early in her career right she personally responded to like 25,000 messages from fans on the blogging platform Tumblr that was like popular back in the day when when she was just starting out so it's like this idea it's like 25,000 personal responses to the small fan base that she had it had to feel at that time to her like the

curve is going to feel flat to her because it's still the beginning now you fast forward what 15 years later or maybe 20 years later I don't she might have been like 15 when she was doing it so it might be 20 years ago and now she's selling out stadiums back to back to back like multiple days like I was just looking her show in La I think she's doing the the stadium there like five nights in a row or something like

that but then this idea something that grows exponentially becomes so valuable that it's wor worth making an

extraordinary effort to get started this is something that a young Taylor Swift understood intuitively it's it's amazing work doesn't just happen when you're trying there's a kind of undirected thinking you do when walking or taking a shower or lying in bed that can be very powerful by letting your mind wander a bit you'll often solve problems you were unable to solve by frontal attack and

again this has just been top of mind I've heard this a bunch but like Christoph I've been thinking about like Christopher Nolan and David ogy just because they' both been top of mine because I've made episodes about them both recently it sounds like them if you read about them like this is they think like this they use this you have to be working hard uh in a normal way to benefit from this phenomenon though you can't just walk around daydreaming the

daydreaming has to be interleaved with deliberate work that feeds its questions they would tell you that you need to give your mind time to think time to wander I think is the the term that Paul's about to use here which is fantastic when you let your mind wander it wanders to whatever you care about most at that moment so avoid the kind of distraction that pushes your work out of the top spot or you'll waste this

valuable type of thinking on the distraction instead there is one exception to this do not avoid love consciously cultivate your taste in the work done in your field until you know which is best and what makes it so you don't know what you're aiming for and then on the Very extreme end taste is actually a moat uh and that is what you're aiming for because if you don't don't try to be the best you won't even

be good so I need to back that up I'm going to read that together because I interrupted this he's going to tell us like you must aim to be the best consciously cultivate your taste and the work done in your field until you know which is the best and what makes it so you don't know what you're aiming for and that is what you're aiming for because if you don't try to be the best you won't even be good this observation

has been made by so many people in so many different fields that it might be worth thinking about why it is true don't try to work in a distinctive Style just try to do the best job you can you and if you do you won't be able to help doing it in a distinctive way style is doing things in a distinctive way without trying to trying to is affectation so let's define affectation because he's going to use this word a

couple times it is uh Behavior speech or writing that is artificial and designed to impress which is the opposite of what really he's saying it's like follow your natural drift let interest what you're most interested in be your guide and now he's saying some people do this and they're like putting on a show for other people people and none of this is going to work if it's inauthentic to you you adopt an impressive but fake persona and

while you're pleased with the impressiveness the fakeness is what shows in the work and I think all these ideas feed on each other follow your National interest it's authentic to you and therefore the work pulls you into it and then you do it for a long time so you get better at as a as a byproduct all these things work very well together so again you adopt an oppressive but fake persona and while you're pleased with the impressiveness the fakeness is

what shows in the work if you succeed at an ambitious project you're not a nobody you're the person who did it so just do the work and your identity will take care of itself and so as like a negative rule you could say hey avoid being fake whatever the case is but he's like well how do you actually Express this idea positively how would you say what to be instead of what not to be and he says

the best answer is earnest and so we're going to Define Earnest resulting from or showing sincere and intense conviction I love that definition intense conviction the core of Being Earnest is being intellectually honest you're trying to see more truth than others have seen so far the key to doing great work and how can you have a sharp eye for truth if you're intellectually dishonest another subtle component of earnestness is informality it means focusing on what matters instead of what

doesn't what formality and affectation have in common is that as well as doing the work you're trying to seem a certain way as you're doing it that's one reason nerds have an advantage in doing great work they expend little effort on seeming anything nerds have a kind of innocent boldness this is hilarious nerds have a kind of innocent boldness that's exactly what you need in doing great work it is not learned be the one who puts things out there rather than

the one who sits back and offers sophisticated sounding criticisms of them it's easy to criticize is true in the most literal sense and the route to Great work is never easy and another thing like who cares what the critics say the loudest boozers always come from the cheapest seats there's a theme that runs through a lot of the great Founders and it's the fact that they believe that their opinion on what they're working on their opinion is greater than every

other person's opinion around them regarding of what they're working on and they're too busy building their Empires and making great products and creating a fortune for themselves and their family to stick their head up and start talking [_] about what other people are doing Paul's other essay life is short which I think you can read in like 5 or 10 minutes it perfectly pairs with this essay because you'll realize outside of taking care of your health working on

your mission or being with your tribe Nothing Else Matters stop wasting your time focus on what you want to do it's so hard the route to work is never easy I doubt it would be possible to do great work without Being Earnest another sign of people that can do great work they are willing to redo things you may have to throw things away and redo them you have to be willing to when there's something you need to redo status quo

bias and laziness will combine to keep you in denial about it have the confidence to cut do not keep something that doesn't fit just because you're proud of it or because it costs you a lot of effort in some kinds of work it's good to strip whatever you're doing to its Essence the result will be more concentrated you understand it better I don't even know why but when I got to this section I was thinking about this

uh story I read in one of the biographies of Steve Jobs they had spent so much time on this concept for the Apple Stores this is before it was like open to the public and I forgot who the person was but the guy helping uh

Steve on this they working on this you know for maybe I don't know like a year more than that and they're going they had built like this prototype of an Apple store in like this Warehouse somewhere

and they're uh Steve like picks him up to go like take a look at it and the guy had realized the day before he like oh my God we have have this set up the incorrect way like we should have it set up by like what the devices do or whatever the case was the important part was Steve's reaction so the guy was like [_] we put all this this time and effort into it we need to like destroy

everything we did and start over because this other way is a better idea and Steve flipped his lid started getting upset like yelling then he gets silent right because he's just he has cancer he's like like very sick when this is happening and he's just like you know I don't know if I have the energy to do this like from scratch again and so then it's like complete quiet they're riding in the car in complete silence they get

to the Prototype or all the rest of the people uh the other employees at Apple are waiting for them and then Steve quietly says he's right do what he says start from scratch we're doing it all over again you have to throw things away and redo them you have to be willing to another sign of somebody that's doing great work it looks easy they make it look easy some of the best work will seem like it took comparatively little

effort because it was in a sense already there it didn't have to be built just seen it's a very good sign when it's hard to say whether you're creating something or discovering it when you're doing work that could be seen as either creation or Discovery air on the side of Discovery try thinking of yourself as a mere conduit to which the ideas take their natural shape strangely enough one exception is the problem of choosing a problem to work on this is usually seen

as a search but in the best case it's more like creating something in the best case you create create the field in the process of exploring it and I love what he says here next cuz I feel the same way I never like the term creative process it seems misleading originality isn't a process but a habit of Mind original thinkers throw off new ideas about whatever they focus on and then he ties that idea to the idea he said earlier it's like don't

sit there passively man you got to work like you're going to learn what field you should be working on and how to do great work by doing it you're much more likely to have original ideas when you're working on something original ideas don't come from trying to have original ideas they come from trying to build or understand something slightly too difficult you'll have more new ideas if you explore lots of different topics do not divide your attention evenly

between many topics though it sounds almost like a contradiction but it's not cuz he's going to explain that you'll have more new ideas right if you explore a lot of different topics but do not divide your attention evenly between many topics though or you'll spread yourself too thin you want to distribute it according to something more like a power law be oh my goodness all this like I love how he ties everything together be professionally curious about

a few topics and idly curious about many more curiosity and originality are closely related having new ideas is a strange game because it usually consists of seeing things that were right under your nose once you've seen a new idea it tends to seem obvious when an idea seems simultaneously novel and obvious it's probably a good one and then he gets into like why is this such a strange game and another way to say is like why

is this like such present at such a small percentage of humanity seeing the new idea usually requires you to change the way you look at the world it's admitting to yourself that you have a broken model of the world right broken models of the world leave a trail of Clues where they bash against reality most people do not want to see these Clues it would be an understatement to say that they're attached to their current model and I think underneath all

this like the the main cause is because people are terrified of change which is strange because we're living in a world that where the only constant thing is change in fact I was reading this essay and then going through a bunch of other um quotes that Paul collects on his website that I think are excellent and there's a line that that came to mind when I got to this section I said change breaks the brittle back to the essay the

other thing you need is a willingness to break rules if you want to fix your model of the world it helps to be the sort of person who's comfortable breaking rules few understand the degree of rule breaking required because new ideas seem much more conservative once they succeed that ties to what he said at the beginning of the section the fact that it's fascinating that once we discover a new idea it tends to seem obvious after the fact they seem

perfectly reasonable once you're using the new model of the world they brought with them the ideas bring the models not the other way around that's fascinating but they didn't at the time it took the greater part of a century for the heliocentric model to be generally accepted even among astronomers because it felt so wrong if you think about it a good new idea has to seem bad to most people or someone would have already explored it back to Breaking rules there

are two ways to be comfortable breaking rules to enjoy breaking them or to be indifferent to them I call these two cases being aggressively and passively independent-minded the aggressively independent-minded are the naughty ones rules don't merely fail to stop them breaking rules gives these people additional energy for this sort of person delight at the sheer audacity of a project sometimes supplies them enough activation energy to get it started the other way to break rules is to not care

about them or perhaps not even know they exist this is why novices and Outsiders often make new discoveries their ignorance of a field assumptions or field rules right acts as a source of temporary passive independent mindedness and so he goes back to his original point that deciding what to work on is so important that a lot of people are getting distracted because they like working on fashionable problems so Paul Graham puts this in an even better way

like the actual value is going to AC to things that are not top of mind he says unfashionable problems are

undervalued working on an unfashionable problem can be very pleasing there's no hype or hurry opportunists and critics are both occupied elsewhere and that's not the same as like doing the opposite of what everybody else wants to do right it's the most common type of Overlook problem is not explicitly unfashionable in the sense of being out of fashion it just

doesn't seem to matter as much as it actually does and the only way to find this is you following your natural interest again everything ties together how do you find these by being self-indulgent by letting your curiosity have its way and tuning out at least temporarily the little voice in your head that sh that says you should only be working on important problems and so it's important to note that the word important in that sentence has quotation marks it's just like the

really it's the opinion of other people right by being self-indulgent by letting your curiosity have its way and tuning out that little voice in your head that says you should only be working on quote unquote important problems and so I want to pause there because I think this is so important so in addition to reading this essay I thought I saw that um Paul's wife and his partner on y combinator Jessica said that she's going to reread every year I

think she said every year she wants to reread this essay how to do a great work and she also RADS life Paul's essay life is short every year and so when you read them back toback you realize oh wow that's like really good they go well together and what was fascinating is there's this line in the life is short episod or essay where he says the things that matter aren't necessarily the ones people would call quote unquote

important he uses important in quotation marks again so this ability to literally like not care to to live an authentic life ask yourself am I following my own interest is this what I want to work on and if the answer is yes it everybody else's opinion is irrelevant and I think as you get older and you actually know yourself that becomes like easier to do but it's obviously something that is not common right the ability to do is not

common because it comes up in these essays over and over again so much so that Paul has to explicitly tell the reader give advice hey that even if you hear that in like the back of your mind that's fine like shut it up because it's it's taking you off the path that you're meant to be off that little voice in your head that should you that says you should only be working on quote unquote important problems ignore it why because

most people that work on important prod problems and do great work those problems were not seen as important to the external world at the time they started working on them and you only know that if you go back and you study the creation of all these new Industries and read all these other biographies it pops up over and over again the example I use over and over again is the fact that Henry Ford is sitting in Detroit in

1900 working on an internal combustion engine in his [_] kitchen and everybody around him saying what are you doing you're wasting time cars are obviously going to be electric or they're going to be steam powered his boss tells him because he's he's working at the electric company as an engineer if you keep up your experimentations with your internal combustion engine you either have to choose between the engine or your

job and Henry Ford's like cool

I'm choosing the engine he followed his natural interest with the entire outside world was telling him this isn't important enough this little stupid thing that you're doing focus on the big thing obviously electricity is the biggest invention obviously all the cars are going to be electric fast forward 19 years from when they're having that conversation Henry Ford owns 100% of the Ford motor company has created and manufactured a car that made over 15 million people's lives better after the

15th million Model T rolled off the assembly line did that guy's opinion about what Henry Ford should be doing matter no it didn't matter at number 15 and it didn't matter when he said it and Paul describes this perfectly he says try asking yourself if you were going to take a break from quote unquote serious work to work on something just because it would be really interesting what would you do the answer is probably more important than it seems what might seem

to be merely the initial step deciding what to work on is in a sense the key to the whole game I don't even know how far we are into this essay but I think it's obvious why so many people that listen to this podcast sent this to me this is perfect few grasp this the fact that picking what to work on is the key to the whole game right few grasp this people think Big Ideas are the answers

but often the real insight was in the question sometimes you carry a question for a long time great work often comes from returning to a question you first noticed years before and you could not stop thinking about it is a great thing to be rich in unanswered questions and a way to know that if you have a good unanswered question he says the best questions grow in the answering you'll notice a thread and then try pulling on it and it just gets longer

and longer so don't require a question to be obviously big before you try answering it goes back to the Henry Ford just messing around following his own interest in his kitchen right you can rarely predict that it's hard enough to even notice the thread let alone to predict how much it will unravel if you pull on it it is just better to be promiscuous to put a little bit on a lot of threads and see what happens big

things start small the initial versions of big big things were often just experiments or side projects or talks which then grew into something bigger so start lots of small things being prolific is underrated the more different things you try the greater the chance of discovering something new understand though that trying lots of things will mean trying lots of things that do not work you cannot have a lot of good ideas without also having a lot of bad ones and so I love the fact that

Paul says being prolific is underrated a few days before I read this my friend Anil who's the founder of meter he actually sent me his post he on his personal website Anil collects examples like historical examples of people that he calls outlandishly prolific I'll leave the link Down Below in case you want to look at the list it's it's fantastic uh air on the side of starting which is easier when starting means starting small those two ideas fit

together like two puzzle pieces so air on the side of starting and then it's easier to start when it means starting small how do you get from starting small to doing something great by making successive versions great things are almost always made in successive versions you start with something small and evolve it and the final version is both cleverer and more ambitious than anything you could have planned see what it just did there we are deep into this

essay now and now he finds ways to take ideas that he referenced you know maybe I don't know 5,000 words ago this idea is like don't spend too much time planning get in you'll start to learn more and then he T he he ties everything together you're following your natural interest you're having a bias to action you're starting small you're evolving it over time and as a result the final version is both clever and more

ambitious in anything you could have planned Begin by trying the simplest thing that could possibly work surprisingly often it does do not try to cram too much new stuff into any one version evolve instead and so there's a few times in the essay where he'll talk about like the difference between like what would you do if you're young or or a little bit older I like how he describes this use the advantage of Youth when you have

them and the advantages of age once you have those the advantages of Youth are energy time optimism and Freedom the advantages of age are knowledge efficiency money and power the old also have the advantage of knowing which advantages they have I like that line the young often have them without realizing it the biggest is probably time the young have no idea how rich they are in time the best way to turn this time to Advantage is to use it in a

slightly frivolous way to learn about something you don't need to know about just out of curiosity or to try building something just because it would be cool or or to become frequently good at something so I need to repeat that because he's like listen I'm not going to tell you to waste your time but listen if you are young you have no idea how rich you are in time the best way to turn this time into an advantage is to

use it in a slightly frivolous way essentially saying like to experiment to like what are my true interests what are the things I want to work on how am I going to find a path that I can actually do uh like would turn into me being able to do great work and at the root core it's like well just follow your curiosity follow your interest which again is the main theme here right and so he's going to elaborate on this

though because I wanted to repeat repeat that because then he goes into what he means spend time lavishly when you're young but don't simply waste it there's a big difference between doing something you worry might be a waste of time and doing something you know for sure will be and so the ability to spend time lavishly is something that only the the young have right now he talks about if you're a little older you have another

Advantage one of the most valuable kinds of knowledge you get from experience is to know what you don't have to worry about the young know all the things that could matter but not their relative importance so they worry equally about everything when they should worry much more about a few things and hardly at all about the rest and a source of this confusion about okay well like they're worried about everything equally when it's

like just focus on the really

important things and ignore everything else the source of the confusion goes back to this is the problem with school is that it just fills your head with a bunch of nonsense so everybody almost by default will arrive at adulthood with a headful of nonsense and he says much of that nonsense left in your head is left there by schools schools induce passivity the sooner you overcome this the better schools also give you a misleading impression of what

work is like in school they tell you what the problems are and they're almost always solvable using no more than what you've been taught so far in real life you have to figure out what the problems are and you often don't know if they're solvable at all but perhaps the worst thing that schools do is they train you to win by hacking the test you cannot do great work by doing that so stop looking for that kind of shortcut do not skimp

on the work itself don't think of yourself as dependent on some gatekeeper giving you a big break even if this were true the best way to get it would be to focus on doing good work rather than chasing influential people it's that idea that you should try to be so good that people can't ignore you people new to a field will often copy exist work there's nothing inherently bad about that there's no better way to learn how

something works than trying to reproduce it nor does copying necessarily make your work on original originality is the presence of new ideas not the absence of old ones and then he goes into why you want to study all the great work that came before you not just to work in like your field your industry one of the most powerful kinds of copying is to copy something from one field into another history is so full of chance discoveries

of this type that it's probably worth giving chance a hand by deliberately learning about other kinds of work you can take ideas from quite distant Fields if you let them be metaphors that is so I'm going to I got to repeat that I love that one of the most powerful kinds of copying is to copy something from one field into another history is so full of chance discoveries of this type that is probably worth giving chance a hand by

deliberately learning about other kinds of work you can take ideas from quite distant Fields if you let them be metaphors and then he goes into into something that's repeated through history a lot especially at the beginning of Industries they all seem all the super talented people seem to be within close physical proximity to one another if a lot of the best people in your field are collected in one place it's usually a good idea to visit for a

while it will increase your ambition and also by showing you that these people are human increase your self-confidence if you are earnest you'll probably get a warmer welcome than you might expect most people this is so I love this idea most people who are very good at something are happy to talk about it with anyone who's genuinely interested if they're really good at their work then they probably have a hobbyist interest in it and hobbyists always want

to talk about their Hobbies seek out the best colleagues that is like the oneline maximum of this section right seek out the best colleagues if you listen to The Mark Twain episode I referenced earlier the best advice Mark Twain ever got uh that he followed for the the remaining 44 years of his life was this American Diplomat in Hawaii told him you have great ability I believe you have genius what you need now is refinement of

Association seek companionship among men of superior intellect and character ref this is the the like the punch line for me refine yourself and your work never affiliate with inferiors always climb Paul Graham's way of saying that is seek out the best colleagues colleagues don't just affect your work though they also affect you so work with people you want to become like because you will and he's going to go into why like great work happens in clusters we just see this

over and over again in fact it's not merely better but necessary judging from history the degree to which great work happens in clusters suggests that one colleagues often make the difference between doing great work and not woo we got to read that again the degree to which great work happens in clusters suggests that one's colleagues often make the difference between doing great work and not that's why you see so many of uh history's great Founders they put they

repeat over and over again the importance of recruiting and finding a way to attract the very best people whether it's Partners employees it doesn't matter like they they all repeat this over and over again and then Paul has this great way to tell if you've done this or not how do you know when you have sufficiently good colleagues in my experience when you do you know which means if you're unsure you probably don't and then the essay takes a

fascinating turn because he talks about like maintaining your own like inner monologue and your own morale husband your morale it is the basis of everything when you're working on ambitious projects you have to nurture and protect it I've done multiple episodes and read multiple books about Arnold Schwarzenegger and he says over and over again like it's very dangerous when you start doubting yourself he would very deliberately uh get away physically from people that Tred to like

uh either tell him oh Arnold don't do that it's impossible like you can't like how can you be an actor you can't like no one can even understand you or you can't get famous for lifting weights and becoming a bodybuilder like you can't become the governor of California like what are you talking about and so this idea it's like very dangerous you're going to get enough negative input from like the external world you can't have any coming from yourself it's very

dangerous when you start doubting yourself Paul's saying here it's like listen the basis of everything when you're working on ambitious projects he goes back to why managing your inner monologue your own morale is so important morale compounds via work High morale helps you do good work which increases your morale and helps you do even better work if you're not doing work that can demoralize you and make it even harder to do good work since it matters so much for this cycle to be

running in the right direction it can be a good idea to switch to easier work when you're stuck just so you start getting something done one of the biggest mistakes ambitious people make is to allow setbacks to destroy the morale all at once like a balloon popping you can inoculate yourself against this by explicitly considering setbacks a part of your process solving hard problems will always involve some backtracking never let setbacks Panic you into backtracking more than you need to it is not

necessarily a bad sign if work is a struggle any more than it's a bad sign to be out of breath while running and so then he turns the essay and ties this all back into morale an audience is a iCal component of morale and so this will become obvious I think as you go through this but he's talking about like the people using whatever it is that you're making right what is a who is you're making great work it's not like

you're the only person it can't be great if you're the only person that sees it so somebody is using the tool or listening to what you're doing or whatever reading it whatever it is if you're just starting out a small but dedicated audience can be enough to sustain you if a handful of people genuinely love what you're doing that is enough avoid letting intermediaries come between you and your audience that point is actually very important avoid letting

intermediaries come between you and your audience when I first thought about that I thought about Taylor Swift like on Tumblr right talking directly to her fans to the people listening to her music there's nobody in between her and her audience also can be applied in like the more like traditional like business product sense where do you study the career of Edwin Lan he starts trying to make he's always making Innovations because he you know is creating new

technology new patents new science and he was he was trying to sell into like he wasn't connected to the end user so he's trying to make headlights automobile headlights uh safer but he's got to sell and convince people like a handful of people maybe in Detroit and when he did that for many years and failed that he's like I'm never letting anybody else get in between me and the customer so then he starts making consumer goods right that he can talk

directly to the customer which is his cameras and I think that's a really important observation like okay I failed when I couldn't communicate directly with the End customer because I was selling to car companies as opposed to to people driving the car but I succeeded wildly when I had a direct connection with the customers the one actually buying my cameras and so Paul says avoid letting intermediaries come between you and your audience it is so liberating to escape it that you might

be better off switching to an adjacent type of work if that work will let you go direct and then back to this idea get away from the naysayers flee the doubters like you don't need them the people you spend time with will also have a big effect big effect on your morale seek out the people who increase your energy and avoid those who decrease it do not marry someone who doesn't understand that you need to work or sees

your work as competition for your attention if you're ambitious you need to work it's almost like a medical

condition so someone who won't let you work either doesn't understand you or does and doesn't care and I think Paul answers the question I've been asked this question in the past like do I think the people I cover and studying the podcast are like happier than the average person and I like I don't know how to really answer that and like I

kind of waffle but this idea where it's like oh if you're ambitious you need to work it's almost like a medical condition uh he says people who do great work are not necessarily happier than everyone else but they're happier than they be if they didn't that is a better way to think about it than I've ever come up with in fact if you're smart and ambitious the D it's dangerous not to be productive people who are smart and

ambitious but don't achieve much tend to become bitter and then he goes back into this reoccurring theme do not be guided by Prestige it is okay to want to impress other people but choose the right people the opinion of people you respect is signal Fame which is the opinion of a much larger group you might or might not respect just adds noise The Prestige of a type of work is at best a trailing indicator if you do anything

well enough you will make it prestigious the question to ask about a type of work is not how much Prestige it has but how well it could be done and this might be the best line of the entire essay curiosity is the best guide your curiosity never lies and it knows more than you do about what's worth paying attention to if you asked an oracle the secret to doing great work and the Oracle replied with a single word my bet

would be Beyond curiosity this whole process is a dance with curiosity believe it or not I tried to make this essay as short as I could but its length at least means it acts as a filter if you made it this far you must be interested in doing great work and if so you're already further along than you might realize because the set of people willing to want to is small their discoveries are out there waiting to be

made why not by you and that is where I'll leave it I highly highly highly recommend reading the entire essay it'll be linked down below and I will also link to Paul's essay life is short which I think should be read directly after reading this one thanks for listening this far and I'll talk to you again soon