HOW TO STOP PROCRASTINATION

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Why Stop Procrastination?  

This is part 1 of my 5-part series on how to stop procrastination.

Is there something you are procrastinating on in your life right now? What is it? Is it related to your work? Your relationships? Your family? Your health? What is one thing you should be working on in your life, but you are putting off for one reason or other?
Why Stop Procrastination?

Some may not see procrastination as a real problem, because they feel that they benefit from procrastination. For example, when you successfully avoid something you have been procrastinating on. Or you procrastinate on something and you're somehow able to finish it in time, hence cutting down the time spent on it.

But while you may think that procrastination puts you in a better place, it doesn't. **It is just an illusion.**

Say it is Monday now and you have an important report to finish by Friday (a **high-impact task**). This report is one of the most important tasks on your to-do list, but you put it off due to the large amount of research needed. Rather than work on it, you spend the next 3 days working on less important tasks.

Then, Thursday arrives and you are trapped — you have to work on the report. You find yourself in hot soup, because there are so many things to do! After all, that's the reason you put it off initially — because there's too much to do! To meet the deadline, you pull an all-nighter. After painfully sloughing through the night, you manage to finish it at 4am and meet the Friday deadline.

So in the end, the task gets done, the report is submitted on time, and everything turns out fine.

Did you realize what just happened there? The fact that everything turned out fine made you think that procrastinating did not bring about any negative effects. In fact, to you, it has a few **supposed benefits:**
1. Leaving the task to the last minute creates a sense of urgency which appears to boost your productivity, giving you a higher output per unit time spent working.
2. You experience short-term relief from not having to deal with the report on Mon-Wed.
3. Procrastinating didn't jeopardize anything in the end, because you met your deadline.

But when you look at it holistically, procrastination has created downsides that were not immediately noticeable:

1. Your time from Mon to Wed was not effectively spent. Ideally, you want to allocate time to a task based on its importance. The more important a task, the more time you should allot to it. Spending more time on less important work doesn't give you a big increase in value, because the work is already less important. A ratio I use is 80:20, where I spend 80% of my time on high-value tasks and 20% on low-value tasks (read Day 8 of Live a Better Life in 30 Days Program on creating your 80/20 to-do list).
2. Unnecessary anguish (whether consciously or subconsciously) from trying to avoid the task. The more you prolong the task, the more anxiety you get, compared to if you had dealt with the task head on. This anxiety is unnecessary. Not only that, but your continuous avoidance forms a distorted image of how intimidating the task is in your mind, compared to what it really is. In the end you have an exaggerated but baseless fear of the task you're supposed to do.
3. More often than not, the final output is short of what you are really capable of, as leaving it to the last minute leaves you with insufficient time to create your best output.

These 3 downsides are counterpoints to the 3 illusionary benefits.
When you compare them, the cons far outweigh the supposed benefits of procrastination. Not only are you less productive, but you experience unnecessary anxiety and deliver an output that's short of what you can do. Procrastination puts you in a worse position vs. if you don't procrastinate. As I've written before in What Are You Running Away From? (Dealing with Escapism), avoidance does not bring you closer to what you want. Procrastination is a form of avoidance.

Thus, if you sometimes procrastinate on your goals and tasks, it's time to resolve this and stop wasting your life away. As long as you keep putting off what you should be doing, you are putting off living. This is no better than being a sleepwalker.

Continue on to part 2, where I share why mainstream ways of dealing with procrastination don't work and the two root causes of procrastination.

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Is it Possible To Stop Procrastination?

My answer is Yes. While some may think that procrastination is part and parcel of everyday living and it will be experienced in everything we do, this belief comes from not truly understanding what causes procrastination. Life is not about procrastinating and putting off things. By fully understanding what causes procrastination, you can then tackle it effectively.

It is important to note that procrastination is often a multi-faceted problem. I run a course called Anti-Procrastination Program to help participants overcome procrastination, and there are often many possible reasons and causes for procrastination — all of which take time to uncover and address. But what I'm going to share in the next 4 parts of this series will help you get started in addressing this problem.

So how can you address procrastination?
Procrastination: Symptom of the Issue

To overcome procrastination, you must first realize that procrastination isn't the real issue.

Procrastination is just the symptom of the issue. The same goes for laziness, poor time management, and lack of self-discipline. Many people are quick to pinpoint these as the root causes of their problems because they are the most accessible answers. The real reason is deeper than that.

A useful analogy is mosquito bites. What happens when you get a mosquito bite? Most people will scratch it. Some will put ointment or apply an antiseptic cream. The itch from the bite is alleviated, and soon it heals.

However, is the problem really solved? It's not — the mosquito bite came from a mosquito. Until the mosquito is out of the picture, you will continue to get new bites. Repeatedly putting ointment or cream is just a temporary fix. Putting a mosquito net may be a more effective solution, but it still doesn't deal with the problem at its root.

Even if you get rid of the mosquito, it's still not addressing the real problem. Getting rid of one mosquito doesn't mean more mosquitoes won't be coming your way. After all, the mosquitoes must be coming from somewhere, right? Where are they coming from? If you trace their origins, you may find mosquito breeding spots in the potted plants in your house.

But wait, it doesn't end here. How did these breeding ground come about to begin with? If you look deeper, you will find that the real problem is negligence and poor house maintenance. Trying to tackle
the issue through any of the intermediate steps (ointment, killing the mosquito, removing the breeding ground) will only lead to a temporary relief but not long-term resolution. Only by practicing due diligence in house cleaning will this problem be permanently resolved.

So coming back to procrastination. Think of laziness, lack of discipline, and procrastination as mosquito bites — the symptom of your problem. Time management and self-discipline are your ointment or antiseptic cream that patches the symptom. They are lower-tier solutions. The same applies for life hack tools or tips from article lists such as XX ways to overcome procrastination, including things like use a timer or use a site blocker. While they do alleviate the problem in a certain manner, they are not holistic solutions. You can use them every day but doing this will never solve your problem of procrastination. I could have easily written a post like "20 ways to deal with procrastination" which would take far less time and thought, but that's not going to move you forward with your problem.

On the other hand, if you get to the root(s) of the issue — first killing the mosquito, then identifying the breeding ground, and ultimately changing bad habits that led to the mosquito breeding grounds — you are leaps ahead in overcoming procrastination. This is what the rest of this series is about — understanding what causes procrastination, and then resolving these factors at the root level.

One important thing to note is that the size of one's issue can be gauged by how chronic one's procrastination is. Using the mosquito example again, the more bites you have and the more severe each bite is, the bigger the root problem (such as a large breeding ground, multiple breeding grounds, and deadliness of the mosquito species). Similarly, the more severe and chronic your procrastination, the
What Causes Procrastination Then?

What’s the definition of procrastination again? It means to put off doing something; to avoid. So, what leads people to avoid something? After working with thousands of clients with different procrastination problems, I have found that all causes of procrastination can always invariably be linked to two factors, which are — Desire and Fear. More specifically, (1) a lack of desire and (2) a fear of something.

Two Drivers: Desire and Fear

Desire and Fear are the two main forces involved when it comes to action or inaction. Desire is the fuel that moves you forward. Without desire, you have no driving force for action. Fear is like a fog that surrounds you and paralyzes you from moving forward.

- When desire is less than fear, procrastination will happen.
- Consequently, when desire is more than fear, action will take place.

If there is a lack of desire combined with a feeling of fear, procrastination will always take place. Take for example, students in school. Most students study for the sake of studying — they feel empty about what they are studying. In addition, the stiff competition in school and intensity of coursework create a fear toward their studies, because there is an never-ending pressure and pain linked to studying. As a result, you often see students procrastinating on their studies and dreading exams.
In part three, I dive deeper into the driver of desire.

This is part 2 of my 5-part series on how to stop procrastination.
1st Root Cause of Procrastination: Lack of Desire

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Lack of Desire, 1st Root Cause of Procrastination

Procrastination happens because there is a lack of desire. For example, someone who procrastinates on his work because he lacks passion for it. Someone who procrastinates going to a networking event because he is not interested in networking.

What should you do to get a never-ending flow of desire? In Anti-Procrastination Program, I teach my participants 3 steps to do this:

- **Uncover your WHY.** Ask yourself, "Why do I want to achieve this goal?" The most powerful WHY is not a logical reason, but an emotional one.
- **Recognize implications of non-action.** Imagine if you made 0 progress in this goal for next 10 years. What would your life be like? How would you feel?
• **Create your ideal vision.** Think about your ideal vision. What is your ideal vision that inspires you from within?

How I Used to Procrastinate in School

For example, when I was 15-16, I was disinterested toward my studies. I was much more interested in working on my websites, which was my hobby then. In school, I barely paid attention nor touched my textbooks. I was never prepared for my exams. There was a point where I hated school and would avoid going to school by feigning illness! Needless to say, I underperformed vs. what I could have achieved.

My underperformance in my studies led me to be discriminated by peers and society, where people label you based on a number on your results slip. It was an eye-opening experience.

When I entered junior college, I continued to be disinterested in my studies. The junior college I went to was a new one, and because it had no national ranking yet, was considered one of the worst junior colleges in the country where "rejects" would go. Such focus on ranking, numbers, and results is a consistent issue where I live. They call this a "meritocratic" society, where people constantly judge others based on their results, which is only one aspect of a person's achievements.

Because I rejected how hung up people were over grades, and how zombified the students around me were — constantly studying, hating life — I resisted the notion of studying. My school environment was also very toxic, and I was surrounded by negative schoolmates and teachers. I continued to hate studying, and procrastinated doing so.
However, I eventually reached a point where I became sick of procrastination itself. I thought about what I wanted out of my life. I realized that if I hated studying so much, I could simply quit school. Sure, it would create immense stigma. Sure, my parents would probably hit the roof and be very disappointed. But there was always the option for me to quit if I really wanted to. And if I chose not to quit, then why not make the best out of this, rather than waste my time mucking around?

By discovering my WHY (getting clear on why I want to study, which is to make the best out of my life) and recognizing the implications of non-action (continuing to be a push-pull procrastination situation; wasting my life away), I became naturally motivated to study. I didn't force myself to love studying, but simply recognized its role in my life.

I later enrolled into the National University of Singapore, Business School, which is one of the top business schools in Asia. Because I was naturally motivated to study, I was proactive in my coursework. Procrastination was hardly an issue, except for certain modules I was not interested in (like Finance). There was hardly a moment when I wanted to avoid school work. I greatly enjoyed my varsity life. I was on the Dean's List every academic year, an honorary roll reserved for the top performers, and eventually graduated as the top student in Marketing. I share studying tips here: How to Get on the Dean's List (series)

**Working with My Clients**

Likewise, when working with my clients, one of the biggest reasons for their procrastination is because they have not figured out
their WHY. They may say that they want to achieve X in theory, but they can't articulate why exactly they want it. The most powerful WHY is never a logical reason, but an emotional one. One that reverberates deep in your heart, that stirs you up inside, that creates a deep resolve in you to charge forward. My coaching sessions with them involve digging into their deepest WHY, to uncover their true reasons for wanting that goal.

When you connect with your deepest WHY, procrastination becomes hardly an issue. That's because you have connected with your deepest self — your true fuel for your goal. The times when procrastination does come up, would be due to fear which is the second root cause of procrastination.

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Fear, 2nd Root Cause of Procrastination

Fear is the second root cause of procrastination. While you can have a desire to do something, if you have a fear that is stronger than your desire, you will still procrastinate. This fear can be any fear — fear of pain, fear of uncertainty, fear of hardship, fear of losing control, fear of being incapable, fear of rejection, or fear of being alone.

While this may sound bizarre, if you examine the areas of your life that you are procrastinating on today (even though you want to work on them), the reason is likely related to a certain fear. This is especially common for perfectionists, where they procrastinate as they fear doing something in a "less perfect" manner than they envisioned, thereby affecting their ideal images of themselves.

Take the example of Tim, a driven and competent individual who enjoys his job. He has a work deadline that he is procrastinating on.
If we ask Tim why he is avoiding the task, his first answer may be "because I don't want to do it." Upon probing, we find that Tim is procrastinating because he finds the task a dread. Why? After more probing, he reveals that the work is too much for him to handle.

While the answer is rearing its head, it's not the real reason. After all, many people face an overload of work, but not everyone reacts to work overload by procrastinating. Why does Tim procrastinate when there is too much work?

If we look deeper, we may find that this procrastination is due to the **loss of control** from being overwhelmed. He fears losing control because not being able to control makes him feel low in self-worth. Tim's procrastination is his attempt to avoid feeling worthless or incompetent.

Similarly, many cases of procrastination are driven by a fear or several fears.

**My Procrastination with Public Speaking**

A few months after starting my business, I started getting invited to give talks. I would be excited every time that happened, because it meant reaching out to a new audience base.

However, I noticed that I would delay the preparation work (making the slides, practising the delivery) till one day before the talk or even on the day itself, even though I really wanted to prepare a week ahead of time.

Even though I would always finish the preparation in time and deliver a great speech, my procrastination was a big issue for several
reasons:

1. While everything turned out fine, it could have been better if I had spent more time to prepare as I had originally intended.
2. My contact point with my audience is my one chance to share my message. Not putting my best foot forward means that I may miss out on a chance to move someone in their path of growth.
3. The whole process of procrastinating, stressing about the task, and delivering something less than what I'm capable of is wearisome.

The first time this happened, I thought that it was just poor time management. When it happened again, I suspected that may be something else going on. Then it occurred a third time, a fourth time, and an nth time. By then, it was clear that there was some pattern going on and I had to get to the root of it.

I dug within and asked myself why this was happening. Was I avoiding the task due to a lack of desire? Certainly not. I'm always enthusiastic about new speaking opportunities. It represents more exposure and the ability to touch others. It's part of my long-term vision to help others grow and uniting the world as one.

So I asked myself, "Why am I procrastinating on preparing for my upcoming speech?"

The immediate answer was "I don't feel like doing it." A natural first response with every self-questioning exercise.

I asked again, "Why don't I feel like doing it?"

New answers emerged. "So much work needs to be done", "It's such a dread", and "This is going to take a lot of time." In my mind, I
had subconsciously painted an elaborate preparation process. I envisioned being as good as top speakers like Les Brown and Barack Obama, but I was nowhere near that standard. Thus, I felt that I would need lots and lots of preparation.

My next question was, "Why do these matter? So what if there's so much work to be done — why procrastinate?"

A voice in my head spoke. "Because it makes me feel out of control."

This was interesting. I was surprised and pressed on further: "Why is being in control important?"

"Because if I'm not in control, it means that I'm not good enough. I'm incapable."

It hit me there and then what was going on. Because a) a part of me had linked my self-worth to my skill in public speaking, and b) I wasn't as good in public speaking compared to my ideal vision of myself, I had lowered my own self-worth. Thus, any situation that reminded me of my lack of expertise in public speaking would make me feel lousy. I would then procrastinate on my speech preparation.

In conclusion, my procrastination was due to my fear that I was unworthy.

This answer caught me off guard as I don't measure someone's worth by their skill in something. Just because someone is a beginner in something doesn't mean he/she is not worthy. Likewise, just because someone is an expert doesn't mean he/she is more worthy than others. Everyone's level of self-worth is the same,
regardless of who they are and how good their skills are.

Furthermore, I'm passionate about being a powerful speaker. I knew that in order to become better, I have to start somewhere, as with all experts. I certainly don't expect to become better by avoiding speaking. These are all things I understood on a conscious level.

Yet, a part of my subconsciousness had the flawed notion, probably conditioned from young. Realizing this was liberating. By uncovering my fear, I could immediately see how silly my thoughts were. When you uncover the real reasons causing your procrastination, you will find that it is usually the result of very silly, misconceived beliefs. Many of my participants experienced this when taking the Anti-Procrastination Program. Their procrastination is often due to 1-2 poorly formed beliefs when they were young, which then rippled out and caused negative impacts in their life.

After uncovering my hidden fear, I was able to immediately rectify the misconception and resolve the internal misalignment. My problem was that I didn't know I was thinking this way subconsciously, and by uncovering this subconscious fear, I could immediately address it from within.

In the last part, I share how to stop procrastination through an introspection exercise.

This is part 4 of my 5-part series on how to stop procrastination.
How to Stop Procrastination

This is the last part of my 5-part series on how to stop procrastination.

If you have read this far, I assume procrastination is a problem you face and want to address. In my course Anti-Procrastination Program, I share my complete set of framework and tools to overcome procrastination for life. In this post, I share a simplified 6-step exercise to get you started on tackling procrastination.

Exercise To Uncover Why You Procrastinate

Grab a pen and paper or open your word processor. Set aside 20 minutes or so for this. We will be doing a fair bit of writing for this exercise.

Think of your mind as containing thousands of layers of information. Below these layers lies your subconsciousness. Every day, more layers get piled on as you face new situations. In order to get down to your subconsciousness, we need to clear off these layers (done through steps 2-4) and get down to the depths of your mind.

Ready? Here we go. :D
1) Identify something you are procrastinating on, even though you want to work on it

This should be an area where you have displayed a continuous pattern of procrastination. For illustration purposes, I’ll use the example of exercising to keep fit.

2) Ask yourself: “Why am I putting this off?”

Write down everything that comes up. You may have 1 answer, 2 answers, or even 5 answers – it doesn’t matter. Even if your mind responds with “I don’t know,” write that anyway, then ask the same question again. Chances are, you’re going to get a different answer each time. Just keep on writing until nothing else comes up. This process may take anywhere from 5 minutes to even over 30 minutes if there’s a lot of stuff to write. Everything you write in step 2 are your first level answers.

Possible first level answers for procrastinating on exercise are

- I don’t want to exercise
- I’m too lazy
- I have no discipline
- Exercising is boring
- The gym is too far away
- I don’t know
- I hate exercising
- I don’t have enough time

3) Pick out hotspot answers for probing

If you remember in part 2 of the series, I shared that laziness and
lack of discipline are rarely the real issues. Approaches involving
discipline and time management are like ointments and creams for
mosquito bites. They patch up the symptoms without dealing with
the root of the problem. Thus, ignore answers like “I’m too lazy,” “I
have no discipline,” and “I don’t have enough time.” Probing in those
areas will usually get you nowhere.

Referring to the other answers, pick out the **hot spots answers** for
probing. Hot spot answers refer to any answer that is more than
meets the eye. When probed, they reveal other layers underneath.
Hot spot answers are usually tied to:

- **Your feelings** (such as desire, fear, and feelings of discomfort).
  Examples are “I don’t feel like doing it,” “I’m scared,” “I feel tired,”
or “I hate doing this,”
- **Your ability**. Examples are “I don’t know how,” “It takes so much
time,” or “There’s so much to do.”

In the exercising example above, some hot spot answers are “I don’t
want to exercise” and “I hate exercising.”

4) **Probe into the hotspot answers from Step #3**

Dig into the answers to uncover what lies underneath. One of the
ways I share with my course participants is to question why this is
the case or why this matters. Some examples to dig into hotspot
answers:

- “I don’t want to [exercise]” → Ask yourself: “Why don’t I want to
  exercise?”
- “I hate [exercising]” → Ask yourself: “Why do I hate exercising?”
• “I don’t know how to do this” → Ask yourself: “So what if I don’t know how to do this?”, “What does it mean if I don’t know how to do this?”, “Why is this stopping me from doing the task?”

5) Repeat Step #4 until you reach an “aha” moment that cracks the issue wide open

Keep probing until you get an “aha” moment. My course participants often ask is, “How do I know if I’ve reached an aha moment?”

The short answer is this – you’ll know when it comes. You will feel a surge of resonance when you arrive at the answer, because everything suddenly clicks and makes sense. You finally realize why you’ve been avoiding this activity the whole time — not because of laziness, but because of something else.

For example, here are some revelations my past participants received:

• Someone who procrastinates losing weight (to be more attractive) → Because he/she hates himself/herself and wants to be unattractive so no one will like him/her
• Someone who procrastinates getting close to his/her parents → Because he/she is afraid of being alone when they pass away one day
• Someone who procrastinates finding a partner → Because he/she has low self-worth and is afraid of putting himself/herself out there
• Someone who procrastinates rehearsing for a performance → Because he/she is afraid that he/she is incapable and can use the excuse of lack of preparation if his/her performance is not the best
Someone who procrastinates **going to work** → Because he/she has **lost the passion for the job**

**The more connected you are with your higher self, the easier the exercise.** If you often take time to reflect, this exercise will be relatively easy. Chances are, the answers will affirm what you already know about yourself.

On the other hand, if you frequently repress your thoughts/feelings and have low self-awareness, this exercise may take longer. You may find yourself blocked, where the same answers keep surfacing. This may also happen for self-aware people when they try to dig into a blind spot of their lives — this is where having a coach is really useful to help you uncover your blocks. Some of my course participants experience this when we dig into a deep-set pattern in their life, where the only answer that comes up is “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure.”

When that happens, don’t give up. Just because you don’t reach an “aha” the first time round doesn’t mean you’re not going to get the answer! Every time you communicate with your subconsciousness, you build a stronger connection with it. **As long as you press on, the answer will eventually surface.** Other things you can try are:

- **Ask the questions in different sittings.** You don't need to do the exercise at one go. You can do it in different sittings.
- **Use different angles.** If you reach a dead end, backtrack to the previous answer. Then, ask a different question or ask the same question in a different way. A question like “Why am I not doing this task?” can be phrased as “What is making me avoid this task?” or “What is it about this task that’s making me avoid it?” or “Why am I not working on this?”
While some of the underlying beliefs for procrastination may seem crazy (e.g., procrastinating on losing weight because you want to repel people), they are very real reasons for procrastination. My clients and course participants are often shocked when we do the digging exercise together and they uncover all the hidden, nasty beliefs formed from young. These are usually misconceived beliefs formed due to negative experiences or incidents when young, what I call childhood stories. As we are less self-aware at a young age, we form many beliefs based on what we observe, without knowing what is right or wrong. Over the years, these beliefs get embedded into our subconsciousness and guide our external actions — such as procrastinating on X even though we consciously want to do X.

6. Create an action plan to solve the root issue

Having uncovered the root, create your action plan to address that.

Realization of the root issue is often enough to trigger one into action. That’s because it becomes obvious that procrastination is the wrong solution to move forward. For example, if you have lost passion for your job, your immediate move should be to identify work you’re passionate about and pursue that. Procrastinating in your current job only prolongs the issue — it’s not going to help you in any way. Another example is procrastinating on finding your life partner because of low confidence. The logical step forward should be to work on your confidence, not to avoid relationships your whole life.

Once I had a client who was procrastinating on losing weight. After diving into the root cause, we found out that her procrastination was because of a lack of self-love. Deep down, she didn't want to
lose her excess weight because she didn't want to get unwanted attention from men. Another reason was because she didn't want to be beautiful (by her definition), because she didn't associate herself with beauty. Since young, she had thought of herself as an "ugly duckling." This was due to a lack of self-love — she didn't see herself as beautiful.

The solution here is to work on self-love while working on weight loss, rather than losing weight to love herself (do you see the difference?). Tackling the root cause, because this is what's stopping you from achieving your goal. Here, an action plan to improve self-love can include saying positive affirmations, addressing negative body image, removing critical and toxic relationships, and working on your personal goals.

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- **Part 1**: Why Stop Procrastination?
- **Part 2**: Procrastination – Symptom of An Issue
- **Part 3**: 1st Root Cause of Procrastination: Lack of Desire
- **Part 4**: 1st Root Cause of Procrastination: Fear
- **Part 5**: How to Stop Procrastination

**My Anti-Procrastination Program**

You have just read my article series to overcome procrastination, where I share the basic steps to tackle procrastination. I hope you have found it useful. If you're serious about overcoming procrastination for life, I've created the *Anti-Procrastination Program*, my one-stop course to stop procrastination for life. This course is created after thousands of coaching sessions,
and helping participants from all walks of life overcome procrastination in different life areas: from work to health to love to life. I share my complete toolkit to overcome procrastination, along with participant examples and case studies.

“For years, I’ve read books, tried hypnotherapy, and engaged a coach to overcome procrastination. I even went to see ‘expert Doctors and Professors.’ Each time, I would leave with more weight added to my shoulders. **Your Anti-Procrastination Program has made all the difference for me.”** — Craig Scott, Consultant, London

“Dear Celes, I attended your Anti-Procrastination Program and have used the skills to focus my attention and passion. **This week, I finished the manuscript for a children's picture book that had been sitting ‘on mothballs’ for over 15 years.** At the time I attended your course, I was working on a movie screenplay as well. I finished that, too! I added a credit to you and your course at the end of my blog post about this important benchmark in my project. I wanted to share it with you. Thanks, Celes!” — Diana Diehl, Author, United States

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