

conversation with your teacher whenever possible. One of my students consistently asked for what he liked to call a “Crit with Clara” session after every group critique. The extra input allowed him to follow up on what was discussed during the critique and brainstorm strategies on how to improve for the following week. Some of the best conversations I’ve had with students were because they came to me privately seeking additional help.

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See every assignment as an opportunity



“The biggest failure is that I am approaching weekly assignments as assignments.”

If you treat your homework as only homework, that’s all it will be. When you’re not interested in your efforts, it’s always glaringly obvious to everyone else. Beware of apathy. Your work should be an opportunity, not an obligation. There’s nothing more discouraging than seeing someone who is clearly not invested.

Ideas will always prevail over technique.

If you treat your homework as a chance to push yourself and/or to create something new, ambitious, and distinctive, that's exactly what you will do. One of my favorite stories involves an assignment I gave a few years ago on the topic of "layers." I walked into the classroom on the morning of the group critique and saw that one student had drawn chickens and eggs. I thought to myself, What the hell is he thinking?!

When it came time for the student to present his drawing, he said, "Well, Clara, the assignment was on 'layers' so I looked up the definition in the dictionary and it said that a 'layer' is a chicken that lays eggs. So I drew 'layers.'" He had an air-tight premise and I couldn't nail him on a thing.

Many students view the parameters of an assignment as a set of difficult rules that strangles their creativity. Instead, think of the parameters as a departure point with the final destination in your hands. In this case, the "layers" assignment was interpreted in the most unexpected manner and yet still was perfectly within the boundaries. The student used the requirements to fuel an innovative concept.



“The first good idea is almost never the best idea, and now I try to churn out ideas constantly, one after another, through the good and bad, and record them all.”

I went to art school with loads of people who could run circles around me with their technical skills. I think there are hundreds of thousands of people and probably more in the world whose technical skills put mine to shame. If that's the case, what possible chance do I have to distinguish myself?

My ideas make the difference. Good technique will only take you so far. At the end of the day, it's the ideas that matter. Make your work an op-ed piece: Express an opinion or point of view that can only come from you. Don't create a book report that only regurgitates sterile facts.

Collect all of your ideas. Have a sketchbook or journal with you all the time so that you can record anything that comes up. Think about your sketchbook as primordial soup in which anything is possible and as visual documentation of the inner workings of your mind. Always be on the hunt for ideas and images. Your sketchbook should brim with raw concepts, random thoughts, and unfiltered content. After all, you never know when something will surface that could become valuable in the future.

Exorcise yourself of the most obvious solutions and your work will become more original. The first idea is never the best one. When I get started, I purposefully sketch out on paper my most cliché attempt so I can get rid of it and move on to something more distinctive and innovative. Then I make sure to exhaust every possibility. Sometimes you can figure out what to do by simply knowing what you don't want to do. A process of elimination can be very effective and bring you closer to where you want to be.

20 Have humility



*“It's really time for me to let go of my ego
and try failing.”*

Don't lose yourself in your ego. If you've achieved success in the past, sometimes it's too easy to rest on your laurels, convinced that you don't need to know more. You will limit yourself and your capacity to grow by refusing to absorb the teaching and advice being offered.

Listen intently to your teachers and peers. You'll learn