

9 ART
Myths

TOTALLY BUSTED

10 ARTISTS

Can Be

FREE

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So Artists Can Be Free

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Foreword

My mother was a frustrated artist.

I watched her take a lot of art lessons over the years. Her experiences greatly influenced the way I went about teaching art, and why I started an art school.

Mom wanted to go to art school, but my grandfather wouldn't let her. Instead, she had to get a more "practical" degree.

But she was always an artist at heart. We had her paintings up all over our house, and they were really beautiful. There were paintings of forest streams in the fall, and snow-clad cabins in the winter.

However, there was one really big problem with them. None of her paintings were *her* paintings. Each one was a copy of her teacher's step-by-step demonstrations, where all the students followed along. They were all her teacher's style and choice of subject.

I remember her telling me all the cool techniques she had learned, like how to make snow on a rooftop, or how to add some fall foliage to a tree branch. I really enjoyed hearing about these. We discussed art a lot, and my mom always encouraged me. But as time passed, and she struggled with her work, it became clear to my mom that she hadn't really learned how to do those things on her own. She couldn't make a painting look like she wanted to, as she had in class, following along emulating the teacher. She tried over and over. Years later she finally made one really large work that my dad loved and hung over the fireplace, but she was never satisfied with it. It was just a larger, less awesome version of one of the snow-clad cabins, disguised as a barn.

The inability to create paintings on her own discouraged her, and began a fear that she wasn't a "*real artist*". She kept after it though, and eventually found a watercolor class that allowed her to create paintings she liked. She struggled with these paintings too, but she was happy with the final product, and that was the big difference.

By this time I had gone to art school and realized that her watercolor teacher wasn't really giving much instruction or even teaching watercolor techniques. The students were on their own most of the time while their teacher painted her own watercolors with them. She would show them what she did from time to time. Mom was satisfied for the first time in her life and did her best work by far.

Then one day, she was in an antique and collectibles shop in another state. She was so startled because she saw her own snow-clad cabin painting! But then she realized it was not her own. It was another student's painting. One that had taken the same lessons from the same teacher years before. The price of the painting was pretty low too. I didn't realize until much later, but this was devastating to her. The work had been on our walls for years, but now, to her, it was all fake. The fear that she wasn't a real artist now seemed true and she actually gave up painting for the rest of her life.

Some students can move past this kind of copycat instruction, and incorporate it into their own work, but most can't. Most art students need real training in technique and critical insights.

My mom was not taught how to find reference; how to compose a work; how to control color mixing; how to draw accurately; and many other critical things that make creating art much so much more rewarding. When she tried to do these things at home on her own, she just didn't know how.

When my kids needed art lessons, I decided that other kids did too, and began Firstlight Art Academy. My unique approach to teaching art does create a different problem

though, and that's with perception. Sometimes I have artists and parents who want to see the pretty snow-clad cabin paintings coming home on a regular basis. They misunderstand the process of learning - *knowing how to do things* is needed before you can consistently create good work. More about this later, in the chapter on copying great art.

Art is a complex subject. Parents and students can often be frustrated with the slow pace of learning all the media, insights, and techniques required.

I know without a doubt, that there are few shortcuts; no magic method to achieving competence in drawing and painting. Here's the good news though; there are fantastic methods that really do help artists learn and improve at a brisk pace. Anyone can discover how to create their own work at home — especially if they get past these persistent and damaging myths.

Myth 1: Talent Is Magical

I haven't read Harry Potter books, but I know it's about magicians who are born with magic abilities. Everyone who doesn't have the abilities cannot attain them, and are called "muggles". Art is thought of in the same way. There is the idea that you can only be *born* with the ability to be an artist... or you are forever doomed to be a mere muggle.

The Magic Birthright

This myth was applied to Vincent Van Gogh. During his lifetime, he was ridiculed as "not a real artist". He was stubborn, though, and he loved art so much, that he kept trying anyway. That struggle and perseverance led to some of the most amazing art the world will ever see. We should all be grateful that he didn't try to become an artist earlier in life, when he would have been more impressionable. He might have stopped trying.

Vincent made a lot of lousy art too. It's valuable mainly because it's a *Van Gogh*. Who wouldn't like to go back in time and snatch a small practice sketch out of Vincent's trash can? We are fortunate that Van Gogh didn't throw away all of his practice work so we can see his progress.

Most of what we call talent is the ability to do things naturally, without having to learn them first. There are many varying degrees of these gifts. But the reality is that *if you can figure out how the gifted artist's mind is doing things, you can also learn to do those very same things*.

That's what Vincent did.

The Magic Wand.

There is another way that the magic myth affects artists negatively. That is that the magical secrets of art can be imparted to the student instantly from the teacher in one session - as if the teacher could hand out artist magical wands to the students.

Sometimes a student or parent will come along and complain about the way the art class is conducted. It goes something like this: *“The teacher tells everyone what to do at the beginning of class, and then we’re on our own the rest of the time with no further instruction.”*

I had a new student say almost this very phrase once in front of her mom. I knew what she was going to say the minute she began, because I’ve heard this many times before. So I asked her 4 questions about the training during the beginning, the middle and even towards the end of the lesson. I also asked if she understood the concepts (most of which were entirely new to her); big shapes, negative space and the importance of thumbnails. *She smiled and nodded to all of them.*

She had learned tons of some of the most important foundational principles all in one lesson, but felt like it wasn’t good enough for some reason. As frustrating as this can be, I have learned that what’s going on is mostly about fear — and impatience.

There are both kinds of magical thinking going on here, and it can prevent a student from trusting the instructor or feeling accomplished even when they’re learning a lot, and getting great things done.

1. Magic Birthright - They’re worried about their progress, thinking it could be evidence of a lack of “it” (otherwise known as talent). Slow improvement makes an artist afraid, and they worry that, “maybe I’m just a muggle after all...”

2. Magic Results - They didn't have a nice finished work of art to show at the end of class. Artwork that you love and want to keep (Keepers), make people think they've made progress, but the progress only comes after we've made a lot of practice work (Learners).

The student didn't want to learn a concept and slowly see improvement by practicing it and developing skills. Instead, the student expected an epiphany moment; some bit of training that would open her eyes to a magical technique, and bring about instant improvement in her work. This is akin to wanting to know how to play the piano after only a few weeks, without learning scales or chords.

Because art is mysteriously shrouded by myths, this is believable, especially in a world that constantly tells you magical knowledge exists.

This leads to the crippling belief that if you don't make beauty on your paper every time you draw, then you don't have the birthright - the gift of art. Everyone seems to believe that if you don't have "it", then you should avoid art the rest of your life as a result. Yet we all know that highly "talented" people have to work hard to develop their gifts.

This myth that art is magical is the worst of all. It makes trying to create any kind of art an overwhelming risk, since not achieving a certain expected greatness in a short time frame leads to self-derision and despair.

SIDEBAR

THE INVISIBLE TEACHER - Hiding instructions in fun lessons is great for artists of any age.

Instructions can be dull and boring. "Ok class, give me your attention. Stop enjoying yourselves and concentrate. I want you to look at this area here on this picture of a bowl

of fruit. Look at the empty space in between the two fruits right over here. You see how it looks? The area here is called negative space.”

That is how I was taught in art school.

But what if we didn't do all that, and instead we played a game where you fit several “Air Shapes” into the spaces around a chicken head like a puzzle? Now that's a lot of fun. Art is supposed to be enjoyed. It's really great if you have a teacher or curriculum that brings that sense of play into it.

We sent home flags the other week with our 6 and 7 year olds. Students have them attached to a dowel stick and are waving them around. Parents sometimes think we're doing crafts, but we're actually teaching first and second graders about 1) color schemes, 2) emphasis in design, and 3) setting them up for understanding the importance of thumbnail sketches. They never hear the phrases above because they don't need to.

It's all very fun and engaging, yet they learn so much. You should always try to find ways to make learning as much fun as possible. A good curriculum should do this.

Da Vinci had to look at stuff too.

I hear this all the time. An artist laments, “I always have to look at something to draw it!” And they worry that this proves they're not a “real” artist.

It's very frustrating to hear this. These artists have somehow come to believe that a “real” artist can pull accuracy out of their head like a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat. Parents often accidentally mirror this idea and make matters even worse.

It's not magic. No one can draw anything without seeing it first; no one!

In fact, you can find the reference photos of many artists, and the same subjects show in the artists work. Leonardo Da Vinci is known for drawing the anatomy of both animals and men. We know he looked at them *because* they're so accurate. However, women's anatomy by Leonardo was often highly inaccurate. This is because the cadavers that he could get access to for observing were almost always men.

Think about how artists are shown in history. They've always been known to hang out with their easels, *looking* at the things they were drawing and painting. It's kind of ridiculous when you think about not using reference. *The idea that artists can draw without looking at something implies that 3-dimensional knowledge of the entire world was placed magically in their heads upon birth.*

"Hey, Dennis, you're wrong. I've seen artists draw without reference all the time."

Yes, often an artist will draw something without looking at it. This is because they've drawn it before, and memorized the reference. Even if they have a photographic memory, that means they're looking at it in their head, just like you or I would look at a photo.

So it's ok to be an artist that looks at reference, because *all artists must observe* the world in order to accurately depict it. There is no magic.

Myth 2: “Real” Artists are full of angst

When I was young, the department store, Sears, started selling paintings; real paintings; made by real artists. Well, sort of. Ok, not at all.

Yes, the paintings were hand-painted, but they were obviously made in an assembly line. The art was very basic. They had no personal vision and no self expression. It was mostly flowers painted with a fast and furious technique. A lot of people thought they could never afford original art, and this seemed like something they could enhance their homes with and be proud of.

I once had a student who was around 11 or 12, and had been in our program long enough to have gone through all of our Foundations lessons. When she began, Ellie showed great interest, and a little bit of the various combination of natural tendencies and gifts we commonly refer to as talent. After finishing our lessons and moving up to our coaching class, she began copying other paintings. I don't have my students copy even the old masters very often, because it can become a crutch.

When Ellie first started copying paintings, well, you guessed it. They looked like paintings from Sears. She had found the same kind of simple uninspired artwork online. It bothered me to see all that effort go into copying something. My first reaction was to shout, "No! Don't do that. You have so much potential."

But she loved them so much that I held my tongue. These bland paintings of 3 or 5 flowers on a streaky background looked wonderful to her 12-year old aesthetic. She worked hard on them and was very proud. I looked closely at what she was doing, and you could see that these were amazing for someone her age. You could see the hints of greatness. After a few paintings, she was easily producing better work than the originals she was trying to copy.

So I waited.

I was encouraging; finding things I truly liked in her work to remark on.

And I waited some more.

Two years later the paintings were suddenly replaced by original work. Ellie began to improve by leaps and bounds. It seems like artists would improve like a plant grows, but I've seen many students make a sudden shift like this *on their own*. It still surprises me.

So one day, we were getting ready for our art show and Ellie brought in two works, one was a stunning oil pastel and the other was an incredible portrait in colored pencils. Her work, at only age 14, was fantastic. Since then, Ellie has graduated and gone off to art school.

We provided the foundations to a young artist; important insights and techniques, as well as freedom to express herself in her own way. We also gave her encouragement. Not just to say, "That looks good," but to help her find her own way. The hardest thing though, was to make sure we did not throw a roadblock in her path by telling her what we were sure was "wrong or right" about her work.

Joy was what led this young artist to keep making art. Many artists are robbed of joy by their teachers or other adults, who want to force them to do things a certain way. Art is not football. There are very few rules. You don't get ahead by being pushed. You improve by expressing yourself. This must come from within, which means you can't push or pull it out. Parents and teachers must allow freedom of choice and expression as much as possible.

This leads right into the next myth...

Myth 3: Artists Are In Constant Danger Of Starving

There is a dark side to the story in the last section but it doesn't involve a lack of food. All of the adults who come to us for lessons invariably have the same basic story, where their dreams were smashed by a truckload of misplaced "evaluation". Every single adult I've taught was told when they were a student, often by an art teacher, that they, "just didn't have what it takes," to be an artist. Many were actually told outright to never touch art again. It's pretty devastating.

What makes a teacher tell someone they're not an artist? Why do so many art schools and teachers feel such a keen responsibility to remove all the "weak" artists from the field? To destroy their love of creativity?

I think one of the biggest reasons for the discouragement of anyone with a perceived "lack of talent," is that we have a belief that only those who are exceptional can ever make it in the tough world of art. We're all afraid of allowing a young person to become the classic "starving artist". (All the artists I know are well fed, just so you know.) The idea is that if someone appears to fall short in any way, then they must be told, so that they don't become damaged later by the cruelty of discovering that they don't "have what it takes". But what irony! They have created the very damage they think they're trying to prevent. They crush young people in order to prevent them from being upset later.

I like to dance and have taken several classes. It's not a stretch to say that my dancing ability is similar to a painting from Sears. It's safe to say I'm not proud of it. I will continue to dance though, because I *like* to. We don't tell kids to stop swimming, dancing, playing ball, or playing an instrument, because we are afraid that they "don't have what it takes" to be a professional. If a teenager enjoys something we encourage it. Not so with art. We demand that they be great as well.

For some, making art is simply fun, and lifts their soul. For others, it's more: a lifelong pursuit for something that transcends the ordinary and attempts to lift the soul of others. Either way, art is a great endeavor. Who are we to make the judgment call as to what lies in the future of any young person who wants to pursue art?

Three things I've learned: 1) An artist will always improve, and take their work as far as they can, if encouraged properly. 2) Artists know when their work needs improvement. 3) A dedicated young artist can really surprise you.

Myth 4: Artists Need Freedom Not Instruction

I hear some teachers and students, and even artists who were self-taught, say that no artist should ever have any training at all because it will stifle their personal creativity.

Some people do work things out on their own, but only if they can create what they see in their mind without any help. But for the vast majority of creative people, that's unrealistic. Understanding how to mix color, make compositions look better, draw more accurately, and other insights, is the main way artists begin to realize their personal vision. They want to create what they see in their mind, and that takes knowledge as well as practice.

There are also teachers who use this myth as a cop-out. Turns out, teaching art is really hard. Allowing for creativity and self-expression, while imparting insights and techniques, while not laying the teacher's preferences and style upon students...; it takes a lot of deliberate planning and hard work. You need a good curriculum.

Time Travel Is Impossible

Students often want to be better than they are, and compare themselves to others. If they see work by another artist that they like, but can't yet do work at that level, they can become discouraged. I tell them that's like trying to get to time travel; trying to jump ahead to your own future, skipping over the present. Artists must have training and practice, and it just cannot be skipped.

Oh Wait, Time Travel Is Possible After All

While you can't jump ahead to the end of your education, what if you could travel just a little bit forward in time, and see how your current painting will turn out?

Every artist at some point gets to the end of a painting or drawing and says, “Well that wasn’t what I wanted to do.” Young artists don’t always believe it, but this is a normal experience.

When you look at your work and it isn’t what you expected, what do you do about it?

Well, if you are in art school, you must subject yourself to the dreaded critique; set your work on an easel and allow others to tear it to shreds. While they say this is *constructive* criticism, — it can actually be extremely destructive. The goal is to find out what you did wrong and incorporate that knowledge into your skill set. That sounds like a worthy goal, but I believe the method of critique is a bad way to go about it. Artists criticize themselves so much, they don’t really need anyone else to contribute. When others do criticize, it tends to be taken personally and amplifies all the artist’s insecurities tied up in the myths we’re discussing.

A Better Way

It’s true that artists struggle to view their own work objectively; another reason to support the critique. There is, however, only a short time right after a work is finished, when this problem is an issue. This creative fever wears off. Artists can be trained to analyze and correct problems, and they’ll always view their work a day or two later when the fever drops. Most young artists will tell you that they don’t like their own work nearly as much a week later.

This is where *insights*, such as the *6 Principles of Design*, *3 Steps to Accuracy*, and *Color Theory*, can be used to solve problems. If you know what the goals are for good work, and what methods achieve those goals, then you can analyze your work and know what needs to change. You can discard the “learner” works, and use the information gained to make the next work better. That’s how you improve. That is the artist’s journey; to use knowledge to improve your experience.

Good instruction doesn't stifle creativity. It supports creativity.

Ok, so back to time travel. Here is a great example of training that brings significant results and it's really easy to learn. What if I could tell you how to move yourself in time and not have to discard a work and start over? What if you could jump to the end of the work and get the critique and analyzation *before* you actually do it, and then jump back to the beginning with that knowledge?

That would be quite the trick.

And here's exactly how to do it. You just need to have a little patience and take a few minutes to travel virtually forward in time, and then back again. It's called thumbnail sketching. It's like magic. It's very much like time travel.

Thumbnail sketches

Almost every artist will complain about thumbnail sketching. It seems like you're delaying your creativity; doing the bookkeeping instead of the painting. It's like eating your vegetables when you were six.

But a painting is so much more rewarding when you are sure of your composition. It's so much better when you've already seen the potential problems and fixed them, than to get to the end and feel like you failed. At the beginning of a painting, your excitement over the new project, and the *creative fever* artists often get, right after a first drawing, conspire to convince us that our first drawing is super-fantastic and we really don't need to go through all those dreadful little sketches — this time.

Did you know that most accredited art schools require thumbnail sketches for every single project? It's that important. I tell my students that the one most important thing in any painting, is the thumbnail stage. Sometimes I do thirty or forty of them. Usually though, it's about 5 or 6 sketches that only take 10 minutes. By experimenting with

these simple drawings, I can quickly work out the principles of design and improve my accuracy, and be more confident that the work will look good at the end.

If you're unfamiliar with thumbnail sketches, here is a quick guide.

1. They are not artwork. You should not draw any details.
2. Thumbnails are super fast, taking only a minute or so each.
3. They should be very small, at 1 and 1/2 inches on the longest side or less.
4. They should be proportional. If you figure out a great design that is in a different shaped rectangle than your canvas, then you have to get a different shaped canvas to do it on.

We do an exercise in one of our lessons where the students create 3 objects separately. They cut the objects out and arrange them on the canvas. Then they take a photo of it and try a new arrangement. Five or six ideas must be tried and recorded before choosing one to go with.

This is the essence of a thumbnail. You don't want to draw your picture, you want to *arrange* your picture. You're doing design experiments, not drawing. It's not artwork.

By drawing only the four to six biggest shapes, very simply and very small, you can quickly try a lot of different ideas. It can make you much more creative and much more successful.

But only if it's quick.

Brain Speed

You must draw thumbnails quickly, because the brain works on design extremely fast. Your pencil has to keep up or you lose this design mode. Once you begin to shade something or work on any detail at all, your design brain stops. It won't wait; it just

retreats, and you're stuck in your details mode until you notice, and consciously make an effort to bring yourself back to design mode. If you don't, then everything is left to chance in your composition.

A thumbnail sketch, made in about 30 seconds by drawing a box (the frame shape), and the 4 or 5 biggest shapes, allows you to mentally move things around at the same speed as your brain is working. You change your elements to experiment with different solutions using the principles of design.

Look at the sketch and analyze whether or not the *goals* of your design are strong. If not, then move on to your next thumbnail. If it looks good to you, well, move on to the next thumbnail anyway, because you don't know how strong you can make it until you have a lot of choices.

How to time travel in your own studio

For your next work and going forward, make a habit of drawing 8 to 10 small boxes all on one page that are proportionate to your canvas. Then fill as many of them as you can with thumbnail sketches. Take some time to analyze them and make a few more small variations if needed.

Sometimes it's good to simplify your shapes to see how they balance and where the emphasis is. Shading in some blocks for value can really help you visualize the final painting more. If it's really complex, a color thumbnail can also be done using paint or pastels to resolve harmony.

The best thing is that thumbnails only take a few minutes, and then you can get into the fun stuff. I guarantee that it will be *more* fun, if you do your thumbnails first.

It's just like time traveling.

Myth 5: Great Artists Are Always Great

Guess what? We don't have any childhood work by the old masters - because they didn't create master work when they were 10 years old. I'm sure that even the greatest masters made a few works along the way that they threw out. We don't see these because they didn't survive. No artist keeps that sketch that looks weird. We tear it out of our book and do another one. A better one. The weird one gets thrown in the trash and no one sees it.

All great artists create some amount of work that is less than great. These are sometimes even finished works, but more often are a few anomalous practice sketches along the way, that lead up to the final work.

Everyone knows that certain paintings by the masters are more desirable than other ones. Why? Because they are more great. That means that some of their work is less great. It's pretty simple.

Because we only see the best of their work, and because even their "less than great" work is super valuable, we think all "real artists" should do nothing less than great. This myth has devastating consequences.

So this is the worst of art myths, that almost everyone believes; that doing any bad work means you're a bad artist. Some artists, especially young ones, believe doing bad art means you are not really an artist at all, and they will quit.

What makes this myth even worse, is when an art teacher believes it, and then tells a student they're not good enough to be an artist at all.

There is no circumstance where you should ever say that to anyone.

What I tell my students, is that simply knowing that your art needs improvement is the very proof that you really *are* an artist. How would you know that you needed to improve

if you couldn't even see that your work has problems? How does any artist become great? By improving — and knowing that improvement is needed.

Ok, I'm sure that someone is now thinking they want to add a comment to the effect of, "Hey Dennas, what about the dismal work consistently produced by my young student who thinks he is somehow going to make a fabulous career out of art?"

I respond with, "What would you have told Vincent Van Gogh?" He consistently created horribly dismal work for quite some time, before trying new things, and developing his amazing and well-loved style. He created bad work later in life too, but we would still gladly pay millions to have one. Not because it's good to look at, but because Vincent painted it. The value is created by supply and demand. This painting is Vincent's learner. He made both good and bad art.

I feel a need to defend my use of the word "bad" when referring to a Van Gogh painting. "Look at all that expressive vigor in the baby's face! The potato eaters are so expressive and amazing. Look at the genius!"





Come on admit it. You think that baby is a mess. You would worry about this young man's ability to make it as an artist. And he didn't. Vincent was an utter failure at the business of art. No one saw value in his efforts at the time.

But should he have quit?

The fact is, that it's not an art teacher's responsibility to decide who can make it as an artist. You can talk to students about their work, and suggest that they try new things.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE!

Always speak what you believe, and seek permission before making any suggestions. Never contradict a student if they are unhappy with their work. Doing so invalidates their judgement and/or makes them suspect yours. Find out what is making them unhappy by asking questions.

What You're Saying	ENCOURAGING	DISCOURAGING
<p>Negative critique without permission Coming up and pointing out a "mistake" you see</p>		<p>No one likes unasked for advice, even if they claim they do. Even a formal critique session is forced. Critique is damaging and hard to recover from.</p>
<p>Negative critique after getting permission You ask if they want any help</p>	<p>This can work, but only if you have previously developed trust. Ask genuinely, and if you get a "no", keep your mouth shut and stay positive.</p>	<p>If you ask for permission in a way that clearly communicates you see something you think is "wrong", this will backfire.</p>
<p>Negative critique when a student asks you for help</p>	<p>This works well, because of established trust. Be careful, and ask questions to see if they can discover the problems and find any solutions.</p>	<p>Do not draw or paint on their work unless they ask you to. Use another piece of paper to demonstrate, leaving it with them to keep.</p>
<p>Fake praise Saying you like their work when you don't think it's good</p>		<p>This will either be perceived as a lie and you'll lose trust, or you've set someone up for emotional trauma later when their "good" skills are criticized by others.</p>
<p>True praise. You point out at least one thing you believe is good.</p>	<p>This is very motivating even if the student knows you're cherry-picking the good stuff. You become an advocate and are trustworthy.</p>	

You can treat people with respect, and still gently help them think about their work and what they are good at.

Steer the student, do not apply brakes. You cannot know what someone is capable of when they go after it with time and determination.

You could tell young Vincent, “Have you thought about adding more color to these potato eaters?”



You can tell a student who wants to be an animator, yet can't draw figures at all, “You'll need to study and work on anatomy to do what you want to do.”

“A lot”.

But don't tell her she is not “cut out to be an animator”.

A truly dedicated artist will find a way to make it work.

Do You Like to Encourage?

Speaking of encouragement...

Here are some useful ways to reconstruct your student feedback. Always speak what you truly believe and always have real permission before making a suggestion for change. Don't contradict a student if they aren't happy. Remember that building trust with a student takes time, and the best way to do that is to respectfully give them constructive encouragement.

See the chart on the next page...

Myth 6: Your Cheatin' Art

"There's No Such Thing As Cheating," I said. They all frowned back at me.

A few years ago, I was leading a session with a group of art teachers in one of my professional development workshops. Some of them got pretty worked up, because I was telling them something they clearly did not agree with. I said you should sometimes allow student artists to trace their reference. They didn't like this idea at all and thought it would be similar to allowing kids to cheat on a test.

By the end of the session, though, everyone in the room was nodding their head in agreement and a couple were wide-eyed with a new and profound revelation about how to teach. What did I say to bring about such change?

Well, I started with a story about myself that I often tell while teaching.

I have two very large pastel portraits in my dining room. One is of my son and the other is my daughter. Both of them are done in a loose style using oil and chalk pastels.

The first one took 3 full (painful) days to draw but the other only took about 2 hours, and that's because I cheated on the second one. I projected the photo onto the paper and drew some guideline points for the corners of the eyes, nose, mouth, and other critical size and proportion elements. It worked very well, and the resulting portrait is a perfect likeness. Did I cheat?

The first one is a perfect likeness too. They're indistinguishable in style, medium, and accuracy.

Point number one: Accuracy isn't expression.

People don't notice well-built foundations. They don't walk into a home and say, "Wow, your foundation is so fantastic! I love a house that is solid and level" But they sure would avoid a building that had an obviously bad foundation. Tracing a bit of the size and placement of the subject is like making a good foundation. It's not what everyone notices if it's done well, but it's always noticed if it's not accurate. This is always a stressor for artists.

There are two differences in my two portraits. One is that I saved myself over 20 hours of sweat. The other is that the traced portrait lacks a certain quirkiness that the first one has. The foundation is so perfect that it has a little bit less of "me"; an almost imperceptibly smaller amount of self expression.

It's not a noticeable difference though to everyone else. I'm the only one who sees it.

The accuracy of artwork isn't found only in the size and placements of elements. It's very apparent in the drawing around them as well — in the color, the shading, and the highlights. Moreover, the expression of the work has little to do with the accuracy. Style and technique are what people see, and what is often most appreciated in artwork.

I tell artists all the time that if you wanted perfectly accurate work, just use a camera or a copy machine. Creativity needs to show itself in a work of art, or it's just a copy. Spending hours doing what a camera could do is an amazing achievement, but not creative.

Point number two: Accuracy isn't always necessary.

Van Gogh was not a very accurate drawer — at all. Neither was Gauguin. He often covered the difficult parts of his still life with another object. Comparing the photo reference and final work of Gauguin and even Degas shows that they struggled with accuracy. Matisse once said it bothered him that he didn't draw like other artists.

These artists are some of the most revered artists of all time. Their genius was in the way they used color, paint, technique, and line.

Point number three: All is fair...

There are artists who direct their assistants to do some or all of their work for them. Is that cheating? Chihuly directs several glass blowers in his work. I'm not sure Jeff Koons has anything at all to do with the building and completion of any of his work. Are they cheating? But the art world accepts these artists as some of the greatest of our time. So if they're cheating, why isn't it making them illegitimate?

Some of the most powerful and well-known artists in recent decades are film directors, not sculptors or painters. They direct other people to make their creative expression. Not doing part of your artwork seems extremely common and fair practice.

There's even a good case for believing that Vermeer traced everything he did, including the lights and shadows. Does that ruin it? Watch the movie "Tim's Vermeer". It's a great film and also very illuminating.

Point number four: tracing builds confidence when nothing is working

Every now and then you get a student who can't draw worth a flip, but wants to do it anyway. I remember that I made a conscious decision early in my teaching career, to encourage these students anyway, and you know what? Some of them learned how to draw really well. Some did not, and they lost interest, sure — but the ones who persevered surprised me. This is one of the first experiences that made me question what I thought was true about talent. I would see a student suddenly progress to a higher level when I had not believed they were capable. I had one such student who went on to earn a full ride scholarship at SCAD.

My dirty secret was that I had let them trace when they struggled, believing that it couldn't hurt; believing that they wouldn't be able to draw otherwise. So what actually happened was, they gained confidence.

It became a wonderful tool that I added to my teaching methods. I soon found out that everyone, even more confident artists, benefits from tracing a subject every now and then when they're struggling and getting frustrated.

The student gets to bypass that one part of the process that is shutting them down, and move to the fun of self-expression. Instead of feeling like a cheater, they enjoy getting to the end of the project where all the good stuff is anyway. Who really cares about the foundation? Just let them get on with it — on occasion, that can break through a wall.

Students who have traced don't rely on it. They don't stop improving their drawing skills. In fact, they tend to work harder on them so they feel more adept. They like the feeling of having a good foundation, and they work to be able to create it.

I tell all my students that there's no such thing as cheating in art, as long as you are doing your own work. Any path to something expressive that people relate to in some way, is fair game. Anything a teacher can do to help move artists to their own goals is fair game too.

There's just no such thing as cheating in art.

Myth 7: Color Wheels Are Accurate

What would you say if I told you that one of the worst tools in art was the color wheel? It's actually true, but at the same time, it's also one of the best tools in art. That makes it pretty confusing.

The color wheel is an essential model that allows artists to understand how colors fit and work together. We need this model.

But the wheel is also a dirty rotten liar — and I don't say that flippantly. The commercial color wheels you can buy today mislead artists in several extremely problematic ways.

This is unhelpful, because it can frustrate artists and make them think they don't have "what it takes" to be doing art. When you can't understand how to make color work — because you've been given bad instructions from what you believe are experts, experts within color theory books and color wheels — you can feel like a failure.

Without some clarification, a lot of artists just become extremely frustrated with color, and then they abandon mixing, and sometimes even painting at all.

We need clarification. We need to understand the model's strengths — and weaknesses.

Electricity is dangerous, but great if you understand how to use it. The color wheel is a bit like that. We need to understand how to use it — and how *not* to use it. So let's look at how you can teach your students to avoid common color wheel problems and give them the confidence that comes from a more complete understanding of color theory.

5 ways color wheels fail artists

#1 - *Missing Colors* - *Color Wheels leave out some of the most critically important colors we need to know about.*

Surprisingly, most people don't realize that important reds and blues are missing from almost every color wheel. Most color wheels just ignore them, or put them in the wrong places.

This only works to make the color wheel models more *simplified*, not to help artists understand color better. The beauty of having 12 major colors in 3 tiers is hard to resist. It's pretty, but it's not the world we live in, and misleads artists.

#2 - *No Universal Model* - *Color wheels don't agree with each other. Every one gives different information from all others*

There are only 12 places in the simplified model. Different companies choose different 12 basic hues and then shoehorn them into this constrained system. No one can get it right since the system can't actually hold all our colors.

#3 - *Shades and Tints* - *Using black and gray to create shades and tints creates dirty, lifeless colors, but that's the formula according to color wheels.*

One of the first things they told me not to do back in art school was mix black with yellow because it makes such an awful color, but no one told me why. After becoming a professional artist, I realized that almost every color is diminished when mixing with black, and even worse with grays.

Color wheels tell you to mix black and gray into your colors to make shades and tones. It's logical, and it works to some degree, but it's not the best way to do it — by far.

#4 - *Mismatched Partners* - *Color Wheels don't match up true complementary colors that work as a team to complete each other.*

Most pigments have an opposite pigment that works best for mixing neutral colors. These pigment pairs will always dull each other when mixed, and will also darken each other. Some pigment pairs are perfect opposites. They Complement each other so well that when mixed in

the perfect balance the resulting mixed paint looks black. The impressionists used opposite colors to great effect!

Printed color wheels never mention opposites for mixing. What's worse, is that the colors that are positioned opposite of each other in the simple wheel models we see, are not even the true opposites. As a result, teachers will tell students that opposites make browns or grays but when student mixes what they see on a wheel, they'll get weird and ugly colors. Some teachers stop telling students about opposites, and most students stop trying to mix this way.

Since *true* pigment opposites work beautifully together, this is a tragic loss.

*#5 - **Mix or Match** - But not both. Color Wheels focus on color schemes; in other words, matching, but not mixing. They ignore pigments entirely, showing basic colors that aren't found in any tube of paint.*

You can use basic color groups for matching, but you need to use real pigments for mixing. This is the basis for all the failings of color wheels. They are only trying to convey how colors can be matched. The model of the color wheel is actually good for matching. The simplified 12 color system makes *color schemes* pretty easy to figure out.

All of the problems encountered with color wheels could be solved by simply admitting that they're only doing schemes, not trying to help us mix pigments.

Color wheels don't admit this though, and that's bad.

Two Super Easy Solutions

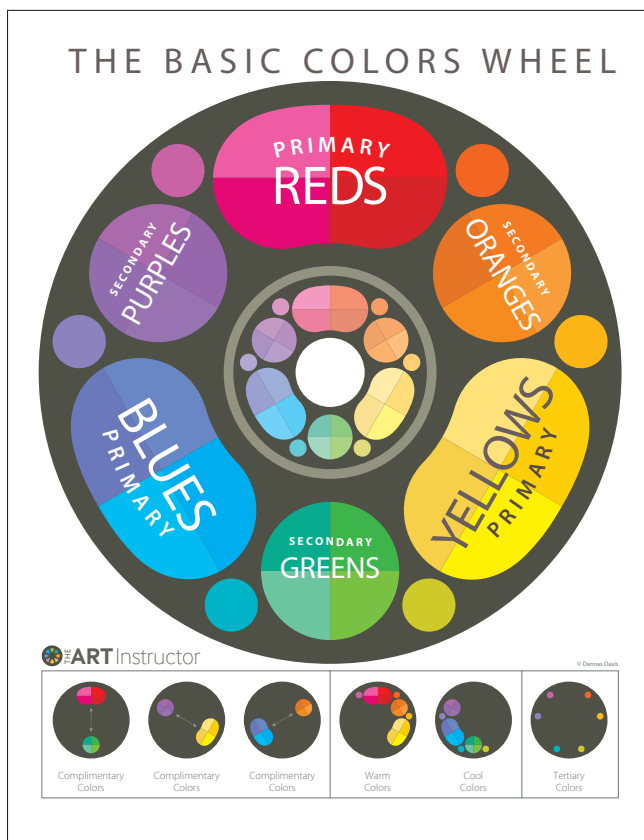
So what can we do about this? How do we fix a system that is so perfect for matching but so horrible for mixing? There are two parts to a fix, and the first part is so easy I can't understand why it hasn't been done before.

1) There are Many Colors

Just make color wheels use plurals instead of using single colors. Color wheels that are pluralized immediately stop lying to us.

2) Mixing Color Wheel

We also need a new kind of color wheel that is different from all the ones we currently have. One that is just for mixing pigments. Every artist should have a color wheel based on the pigments they are using.



Find a full page version at the end of the book.

Myth 8: “Real” Artists Don’t Have To Practice

I walked into an artist’s studio one day and loved her work with portraits. I noticed that there were many sketches of each face, each one slightly different. I said to her, “All these practices really pay off when you create the final work! They’re beautiful.” She bristled and stated testily, “I never have need to practice”.

I wanted to ask her, “Then why don’t you sell all these sketches for the same as the final one,” or, “why do you make all these extra sketches at all?” but I did not. I left her to her fantasy.

Her thoughts about this shed light on another myth for me. After that encounter I began to notice the absence of the word practice from any kind of modern discussion about learning art. I realized that this was another art myth.

Everyone seems to want to be in some kind of elite group, and artists desperately crave uniqueness. After all, being truly unique is the most highly valued of all creative endeavors and has been for well over a century. The Avant Garde leads the way.

What better way to support the uniqueness of an artist than to say that our work just exudes from our genius? There is no practice involved. “That would be so below my level”.

Well, here’s the dirty little secret. All artists practice. Now you know.

And yes, this was the easiest myth to bust and is the shortest chapter in the book.

Myth 9: Famous Artists Are Better Than Everyone Else

The most famous artists of old really are famous because of true genius. Michelangelo, Monet, Van Gogh, Matisse, and many others were one-of-a-kind. But lately there are a lot of imposters. While there are still geniuses, they don't always rise to the top of the art world. The art that has been glorified in recent decades, is often so repellent to the general public that it creates confusion on a grand scale.

I try to tell students and parents that this confusion is a problem for artists. We no longer know why art is valued. As a result, if a student doesn't like their own work, others will try to change their mind, no matter how bad it might be. This further confuses an artist and invalidates their own assessment of themselves and their artwork.

People have come to the conclusion that all art must be good. Who can tell what is good or bad when the best of the art world seems so horrible to them?

Here are a few stories that show how absurd the high and mighty of the art world can be. Sometimes it's only about shock value, or something that only seems to be fresh and original.

Floor Show

Someone lost their gloves. But these gloves were accidentally dropped in a gallery at a prestigious museum during a modern art show. They fell from the hands of a patron near the wall, and not especially close to another work, and it was confusing to everyone passing by. Were the gloves part of the show or not? Because no one could say for sure, for the rest of the day, the crowds gave the gloves their attention, discussing the artist who had placed them there and what their significance was.

It's in a museum. It must be good.

Several years ago there was a local art exhibit at our city museum called, "Everyday Objects in 20th century Art". I took a group of students to the museum to tour this show, which included many famous artists. We went from gallery to gallery, starting with paintings of still life and progressing through decades of art movements. It got more and more absurd as we went on. I remember turning the entire tour into a discussion about how art lost its way towards the end of the 20th century. It was summed up at the end, where 4 old used vacuum cleaners were on display in a plexiglas box under a cheap fluorescent light. There were other simple plain objects without any context or even manipulation at all. They were just... placed.

Instagrab

I once read an article about a model who actually purchased her own instagram post that had been copied and printed on a large canvas by a well-known modern artist, Richard Prince. She didn't want others to have it, and spent \$10,000 on it. She could hardly believe it because, in her words, it was, "My photo, my crop, my filters, and, well... me."

That's all true, but the artist has an enormous reputation (as a re-photographer), and no one had glorified social media in this way before. The art world loved his "viewpoint". In reality, and especially in hindsight, his work was only pointing to other's work, and even then, relevant for only an instant. The sad thing is that he probably used that very flaw to promote his instagram series. I can create the line myself: "the fleeting instant that art takes hold in our collective psyche will fade by tomorrow".

Marketing Master

Jeff Koons became famous from doing grandiose things with an extremely cheap and kitsch modern object: a balloon. Long ago, he gilded an inflatable teddy bear with gold,

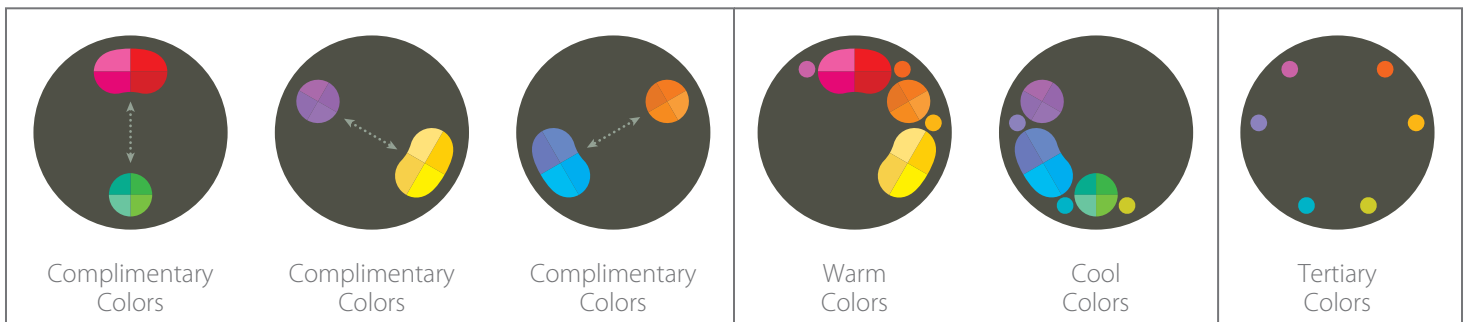
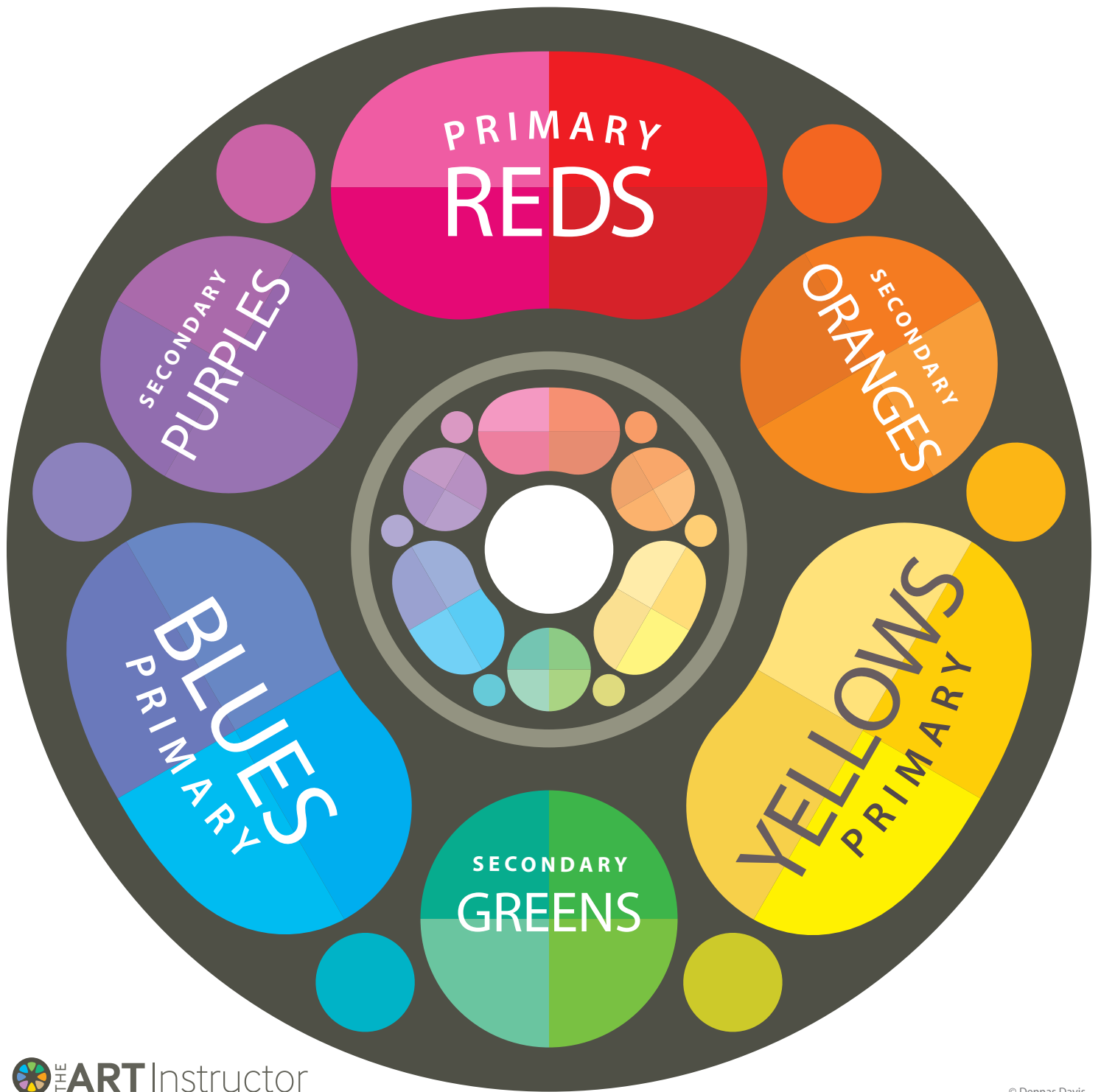
MY PRINTER IS
LIKE MY CAT,
IT'S ALWAYS
HUNGRY,
AND WHEN I
WANT ITS
ATTENTION
IT STARTS
CLEANING
ITSELF.

and it somehow resonated with high-end art critics who I guess just didn't know better. He rides the wave of that interesting idea even today. Since his art is actually the idea, he rarely crafts his own work; he directs others to do it for him. (There's nothing wrong with art directing, but he reportedly is not always involved in the production.)

If you haven't already picked up on it, I'm not a fan. Koons is my least favorite artist of any who has ever enjoyed popularity. One of the works he consistently produces is controversy. That said, he does influence the culture and people pay millions to acquire his work. I often use his most famous infringement copyright case, where he stole someone's work, when telling my students about what is, and is not, acceptable. Koons himself brought another lawsuit against someone selling small balloon-dog bookend statues. He lost both suits. The first one because he did in fact steal a photographer's work and called it his own. The second one because his work he thought was stolen, was in fact quite generic and based on a standard balloon dog that clowns have been making for years.

He is a great marketer, but his work is not genius, in my humble estimation. There are many who would agree with me, I'm sure.

THE BASIC COLORS WHEEL



Knowledge is Freedom

The ideas in this book are based on my observations – starting as a child and continuing through a my artistic career as a designer, illustrator, painter, and art teacher. You won't find many other sources that discuss these 9 myths, but if you ask art teachers and artists (who are not wrapped up in their elite-ness), you will certainly hear enthusiastic agreement.

There is no central authority in the world of art. Artists are such a creative group and so rebellious, that no one has ever agreed on anything or even made a universal set of principles. But the myths resonate with most artists' experience and I think we need to acknowledge them.

My hope is that by setting these debilitating myths to paper, more people can be free from the problems they cause. I firmly believe everyone who loves art should be able to create and produce – and that many who have never dared to think of themselves as artists, can learn to do a great deal more than they expect.

I hope you enjoy the process, and remember this:

The World Needs Happy Artists.

About the author.

Dennas Davis is the founder of the Homeschooling Art website and the Nashville-based Firstlight Art Academy. He is a painter and the illustrator of 24 children's books with over five million in print, including *Betty Crocker Kid's Cook*, *The Beginner's Bible*, and *The Days of Laura Ingall's Wilder*. He has done work for Forbes, Disney, Neiman Marcus, Nabisco, and more.

Dennas lives just south of Nashville with his wonderful wife of 35 years. They have way too many cats, all of whom become quite angry when they travel, which is as often as possible.

"Get off the keyboard, Boop. Please... get off the keyboardskljoui;ar8/l;[\]