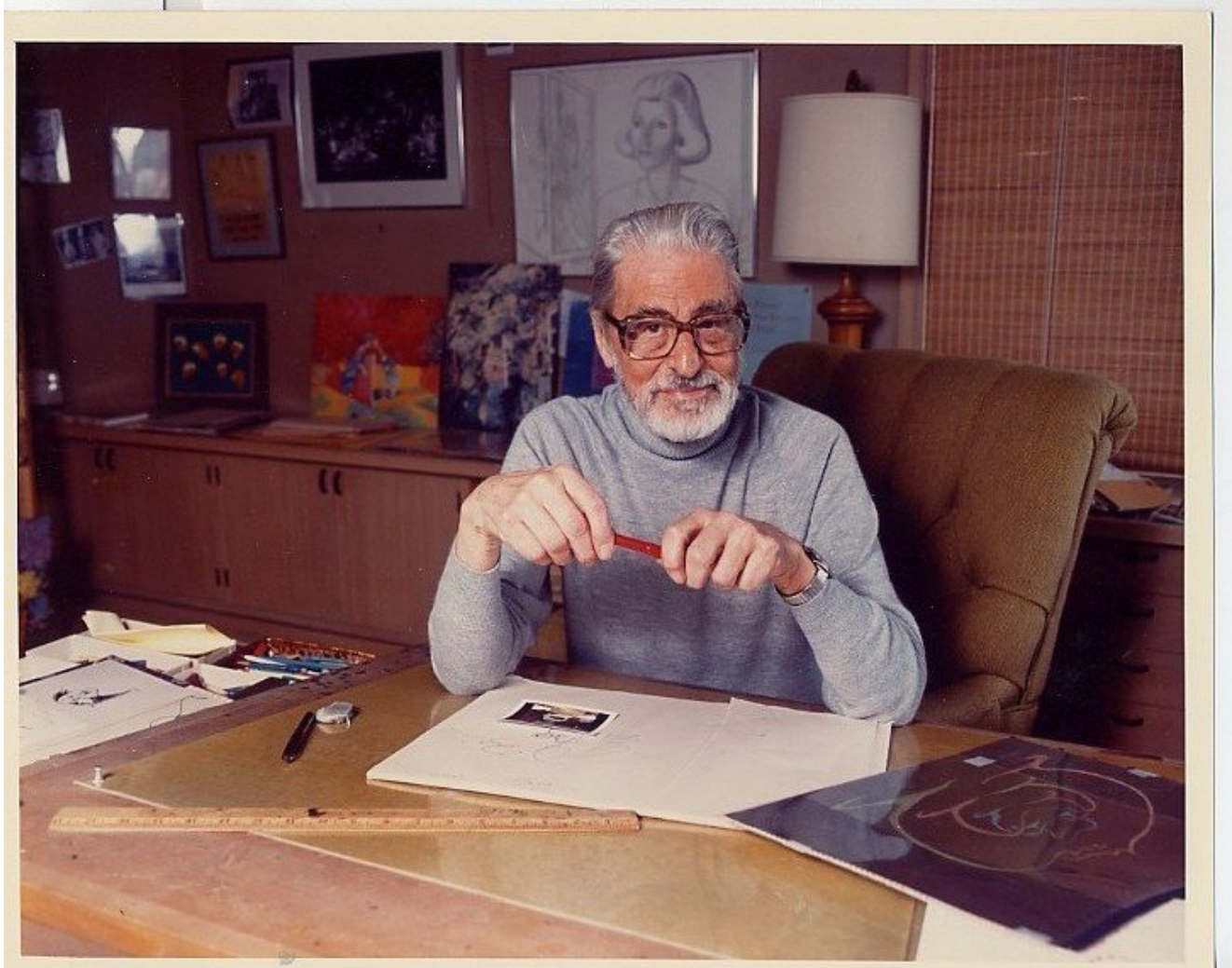


The Weird Strategy Dr. Seuss Used to Create His Greatest Work

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Theodor Geisel. Courtesy of Dr. Seuss Enterprises

In 1960, two men made a bet.

There was only \$50 on the line, but millions of people would feel the impact of this little wager.

The first man, Bennett Cerf, was the founder of the publishing firm, Random House. The second man was named Theo Geisel, but you probably know him as Dr. Seuss. Cerf proposed the bet and challenged that Dr. Seuss would not be able to write an entertaining children's book using only 50 different words.

Dr. Seuss took the bet and won. The result was a little book called Green Eggs and Ham. Since publication, *Green Eggs and Ham* has sold more than 200 million copies, making it the most popular of Seuss's works and one of the best-selling children's books in history.¹

At first glance, you might think this was a lucky fluke. A talented author plays a fun game with 50 words and ends up producing a hit. But there is actually more to this story and the lessons in it can help us become more creative and stick to better habits over the long-run.

Here's what we can learn from Dr. Seuss...

The Power of Constraints

What Dr. Seuss discovered through this little bet was the power of setting constraints.

Setting limits for yourself — whether that involves the time you have to work out, the money you have to start a business, or the number of words you can use in a book — often delivers better results than “keeping your options open.”

In fact, Dr. Seuss found that setting some limits to work within was so useful that he employed this strategy for other books as well. For example, *The Cat in the Hat* was written using only a first-grade vocabulary list.

In my experience, I've seen that constraints can also provide benefits in health, business, and life in general. I've noticed two reasons why this occurs.

1. Constraints inspire your creativity.

If you're five foot five inches tall and you're playing basketball, you figure out more creative ways to score than the six foot five inch guy.

If you have a one-year-old child that takes up almost every minute of your day, you figure out more creative ways to get some exercise.

If you're a photographer and you show up to a shoot with just one lens, then you figure out more creative ways to capture the beauty of your subject than you would with all of your gear available.

Limitations drive you to figure out solutions. Your constraints inspire your creativity.

2. Constraints force you to get something done.

Time constraints have forced me to produce some of my best work. This is especially true with my writing. Every Monday and Thursday, I write a new article — even if it's inconvenient.

This constraint has led me to produce some of my most popular work in unlikely places. When I was sitting in the passenger seat on a road trip through West Virginia, I wrote an article. When I was visiting family for the 4th of July, I wrote an article. When I spent all day flying in and out of airports, I wrote an article.

Without my schedule (the constraint), I would have pushed those articles to a different day. Or never got around to them at all. Constraints force you to get something done and don't allow you to procrastinate. This is why I believe that professionals set a schedule for their production while amateurs wait until they feel motivated.

What constraints are you setting for yourself? What type of schedule do you have for your goals?

Related note: Sticking to your schedule doesn't have to be grand or impressive. Just commit to a process you can sustain. And if you have to, reduce the scope.

Constraints are Not the Enemy

So often we spend time complaining about the things that are withheld from us.

- "I don't have enough time to work out."
- "I don't have enough money to start a business."
- "I can't eat this food on my diet."

But constraints are not the enemy. Every artist has a limited set of tools to work with. Every athlete has a limited set of skills to train with. Every entrepreneur has a limited amount of resources to build with. Once you know your constraints, you can start figuring out how to work with them.

The Size of Your Canvas

Dr. Seuss was given 50 words. That was the size of his canvas. His job was to see what kind of picture he could paint with those words.

You and I are given similar constraints in our lives.

You only have 30 minutes to fit a workout into your day? So be it. That's the size of your canvas. Your job is to see if you can make those 30 minutes a work of art.

You can only spare 15 minutes each day to write? That's the size of your canvas. Your job is to make each paragraph a work of art.

You only have \$100 to start your business? Great. That's the size of your canvas. Your job is to make each sales call a work of art.

You can only eat whole foods on your diet? That's the size of your canvas. Your job is to take those ingredients and make each meal a work of art.

There are a lot of authors who would complain about writing a book with only 50 words. But there was one author who decided to take the tools he had available and make a work of art instead.

We all have constraints in our lives. The limitations just determine the size of the canvas you have to work with. What you paint on it is up to you.