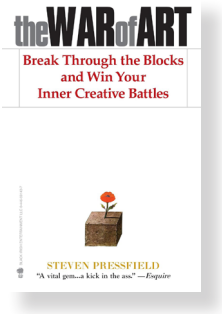

The War of Art

Steven Pressfield

Steven Pressfield's *The War of Art* (2002) is a powerful exploration of the invisible enemy that prevents us from actualizing our creative potential. He calls this enemy Resistance, and in this summary, we explore what Resistance is, how it limits our life, and how we can overcome it.

Resistance – The Self-Sabotage That Kills Our Creative Aspirations

Many of us have dreams of creating something great, and we know that our lives would be better if we devoted consistent time and energy to realizing this dream. But something holds us back, and we never make much progress. Pressfield calls this killer of dreams Resistance.

> **"Most of us have two lives. The life we live, and the unlived life within us. Between the two stands Resistance." (The War of Art)**

Resistance is a form of self-sabotage. It is a destructive inner force that prevents us from doing what is necessary to accomplish our goals. Resistance is the fear, laziness, doubt, self-criticism, and tendency to procrastinate that we do battle with in our attempts to grow as a person and pursue valuable goals.

If we succumb to Resistance for too long, we become plagued by restlessness, depression, and anxiety. Failure to defeat Resistance can also lead to addictions in the attempt to numb ourselves to the disappointment and pain that come with not pursuing our dreams.

> **"What does Resistance feel like?**
>
> **First, unhappiness. We feel like hell. A low-grade misery pervades everything. We're bored, we're restless. We can't get no satisfaction. There's guilt but we can't put our finger on the source. We want to go back to bed; we want to get up and party. We feel unloved and unlovable. We're disgusted. We hate our lives. We hate ourselves.**
>
> **Unalleviated, Resistance mounts to a pitch that becomes unendurable. At this point vice kick in. Dope, adultery, web surfing.**
>
> **Beyond that, Resistance becomes clinical. Depression, aggression, dysfunction." (The War of Art)**

Resistance – The Inner Compass That Points to Our Calling

The presence of Resistance is not a bad thing as it indicates that we have dreams that we wish to realize. Resistance only becomes destructive if we constantly give in to it. A man or woman who has no Resistance is a completely passive and apathetic individual who has given up on their dreams. Resistance indicates that we have an inner calling, and we can therefore use its presence to point us in the direction of this calling. Thomas Merton famously expressed this idea when he wrote: *"What you fear is an indication of what you seek."*

Or as Pressfield writes:

> **"Like a magnetized needle floating on a surface of oil, Resistance will unfailingly point to true North – meaning that calling or action it most wants to stop us from doing.**
>
> **We can use this. We can use it as a compass. We can navigate by Resistance, letting it guide us to that calling or action that we must follow before all others.**
>
> **Rule of thumb: The more important a call or action is to our soul's evolution, the more Resistance we will feel toward pursuing it." (The War of Art)**
>
> **"Resistance obstructs movement only from a lower sphere to a higher. It kicks in when we seek to pursue a calling in the arts, launch an innovative enterprise, or evolve to a higher station morally, ethically, or spiritually." (The War of Art)**

Defeat Resistance, or Resistance Will Defeat Us

Once we have used Resistance to point us in the direction of our inner calling, it has served its constructive purpose, and we need to defeat it. Defeating Resistance does not mean ridding ourselves of fear, laziness, or self-doubt, but learning to take constructive action even in their presence. If we fail to do this, guilt and regret will become ever-present in our life, and our Resistance will wreak havoc on our body and soul.

> **"Do we have to stare death in the face to make us stand up and confront Resistance? Does Resistance have to cripple and disfigure our lives before we wake up to its existence? How many of us have become drunks and drug addicts, developed tumors and neuroses, succumbed to painkillers, gossip, and compulsive cell-phone use, simply because we don't do that thing that our hearts, our inner genius, is calling us to? Resistance defeats us." (The War of Art)**

How Do We Defeat Resistance? Overcome the Amateur Mindset

The difference between those who defeat Resistance and those who don't is that the former cultivates the mindset of a pro, while the latter remain amateurs. Amateurs believe that defeating Resistance requires waiting for inspiration to strike. The pro realizes that inspiration is rare and waiting for it is just a form of procrastination. The pro sits down to do the work – day in and day out – no matter whether they feel inspired or not.

> **"Someone once asked Somerset Maugham if he wrote on a schedule or only when struck by inspiration. "I write only when inspiration strikes," he replied. "Fortunately it strikes every morning at nine o'clock sharp." That's a pro.**
>
> **Maugham reckoned another, deeper truth: that by performing the mundane physical act of sitting down and starting to work, he set in motion a mysterious but infallible sequence of events that could produce inspiration, as surely as if the goddess had synchronized her watch with his. He knew if he built it, she would come." (The War of Art)**

The Pro Mindset – Don't Seek Support from Others

Amateurs tend to seek out the support and encouragement of others to motivate them to face up to Resistance, and if it is not forthcoming, Resistance rules the day. But as Pressfield notes, relying on this support is a fool's errand.

> **"Seeking support from friends and family is like having your people gathered around at your deathbed. It's nice, but when the ship sails, all they can do is stand on the dock waving goodbye.**
>
> **Any support we get from persons of flesh and blood is like Monopoly money; it's not legal tender in that sphere where we have to do our work. In fact, the more energy we spend stoking up on support from colleagues and loved ones, the weaker we become and the less capable of handling our business." (The War of Art)**

The pro is different. The pro realizes that it doesn't matter what other people say about what we are doing and that we can still follow our calling absent the support of friends or family. In fact, the pro learns that the more Resistance is defeated, and the more that is accomplished in the process, the more likely it is that criticism will come our way. For great accomplishments and the ability to consistently defeat Resistance trigger envy in those who cannot overcome this form of self-sabotage.

> **"The professional cannot allow the actions of others to define his reality. Tomorrow morning the critic will be gone, but the writer will still be there facing the blank page. Nothing matters but that he keep working.**
>
> **Remember, Resistance wants us to cede sovereignty to others. It wants us to stake our self-worth, our identity, our reason-for-being, on the response of others to our work. Resistance knows we can't take this. No one can.**
>
> **The professional blows critics off. He doesn't even hear them. Critics, he reminds himself, are the unwitting mouthpieces of Resistance and as such can be truly cunning and pernicious. They can articulate in their reviews the same toxic venom that Resistance itself concocts inside our heads. That is their real evil.**
>
> **The professional learns to recognize envy-driven criticism and to take it for what it is: the supreme compliment. The critic hates most that which he would have done himself if he had the guts." (The War of Art)**

The Pro Mindset – Their Inner Calling Is Their Life Purpose

A third characteristic of the pro is that he or she doesn't look at their inner calling as a mere hobby or a part-time venture. It is their life's purpose, and they treat it with the seriousness and respect it deserves.

> **"The amateur plays for fun. The professional plays for keeps.**
>
> **To the amateur, the game is his avocation. To the pro, it's his vocation.**
>
> **The amateur plays part-time, the professional full-time.**
>
> **The amateur is a weekend warrior. The professional is there seven days a week.**
>
> **The word amateur comes from the Latin root meaning "to love." The conventional interpretation is that the amateur pursues his calling out of love, while the pro does it for money. Not the way I see it. In my view, the amateur does not love the game enough. If he did, he would not pursue it as a sideline, distinct from his "real" vocation." (The War of Art)**

Defeating Resistance Is a Daily Battle

> **"The warrior and the artist live by the same code of necessity, which dictates that the battle must be fought anew every day." (The War of Art)**

Defeating Resistance is not complicated. It doesn't require that we work through all our psychological problems. It doesn't require any special self-development protocols, and we don't need to wait for the perfect moment when we are in the right head space to do battle with the destructive force of Resistance. To defeat Resistance, we just need to sit down every day and do the necessary work. Those who do this become pros. Those who fail to do this, and make excuses for why it can't be done, remain amateurs and never accomplish meaningful goals.

> **"There's a secret that real writers know that wannabe writers don't, and the secret is this: It's not the writing part that's hard. What's hard is sitting down to write. What keeps us from sitting down is Resistance." (The War of Art)**

Pressfield offers the simple, but powerful, prescription to defeat Resistance: Go to the place where our work is done, put our tool in hand (i.e., a laptop if a writer, a paintbrush if a painter, a guitar if a musician), and begin. Stay there for a prescribed period of time. Do this each day, and Resistance is defeated.

> **"It's about ten-thirty now. I sit down and plunge in. When I start making typos, I know I'm getting tired. That's four hours or so. I've hit the point of diminishing returns. I wrap for the day… How many pages have I produced? I don't care. Are they any good? I don't even think about it. All that matters is I've put in my time and hit it with all I've got. All that counts is that, for this day, for this session, I have overcome Resistance." (The War of Art)**

Defeating Resistance – The Greatest Way to Serve Others

> **"If Resistance couldn't be beaten, there would be no Fifth Symphony, no Romeo and Juliet, no Golden Gate Bridge. Defeating Resistance is like giving birth. It seems absolutely impossible until you remember that women have been pulling it off successfully, with support and without, for fifty million years." (The War of Art)**

The few who defeat Resistance are the great benefactors of mankind. They are the creators of the good and the beautiful. They found the companies that serve mankind; they create the art and music that brings joy to our eyes and ears; and they write the novels that connect us to the timeless truths of human existence. For this reason, defeating Resistance is a moral responsibility. By overcoming it, we give the world the unique gift of our unfolding potential and create something meaningful that would not exist without us.

> **"Are you a born writer? Were you put on earth to be a painter, a scientist, an apostle of peace? In the end the question can only be answered by action. Do it or don't do it.**
>
> **It may help to think of it this way. If you were meant to cure cancer or write a symphony or crack cold fusion and you don't do it, you not only hurt yourself, even destroy yourself. You hurt your children. You hurt me. You hurt the planet.**
>
> **You shame the angels who watch over you and you spite the Almighty, who created you and only you with your unique gifts, for the sole purpose of nudging the human race one millimeter farther along its path back to God.**
>
> **Creative work is not a selfish act or a bid for attention on the part of the actor. It's a gift to the world and every being in it. Don't cheat us of your contribution." (The War of Art)**