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VISION, IDEAS, AND PLANS

# But why Sneaky?

Writings from the Substack Grow  
Fellowship

By Nishant Jain

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# **But why Sneaky?**

Writings from the Substack Grow Fellowship.

*By* Nishant Jain

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*To all the readers of the SneakyArt Post, and the SneakyArt  
Insiders who support my efforts to be an independent creative.*

# Prologue

**This e-book is a collection of posts written during the Substack Grow Fellowship, in response to prompts by the Substack team.**

The Grow Fellowship emerged from the Substack Grow program of September 2021, where I was one of nearly 200 participants. It was my first time speaking with the people at Substack, and interacting with fellow writers. It led to joining the Substack Writers Discord server, hosted by Elle Griffin, and making friends with a lot of people in the community.

Later in the year Substack announced the Fellowship program and invited applications from all Grow participants. I was one of the 11 writers picked for this Fellowship.

**Advice to writers:** Apply for everything. Statistically, you will be rejected more often than you are accepted. This is a good thing. Rejections can be useful. Writing an application makes us see our work from a neutral perspective and construct arguments in its favour. Rejection makes us re-evaluate those arguments and make amends. Repeated iterations make you a better writer, and also generate fresh ideas.

# 1: I make SneakyArt

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*“What brought you to writing? What brought you to Substack? Your top three goals - how you’d like to grow, change, or experiment with your publication in the first half of 2022. The thing you’re most interested in gaining from this fellowship experience.”*

**M**y name is Nishant and I make SneakyArt. SneakyArt is secret art of the world drawn while sitting in public places. It is made inside a sketchbook with a fountain pen.

On the SneakyArt Post, I share my drawings, the best ideas from conversations on my podcast, and invite readers to join my journey of self-education to become an artist.

I always wanted to be a writer but I never thought I would be an artist. It happened by accident. I was only trying to learn how to draw. I needed to learn how to draw because I wanted to tell better stories. I wanted to tell better stories because ... well, that’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.

## ✪ What made me a Writer

I have loved stories since I was very young. Instead of being told stories at bedtime, I would recite, to my grandparents, all the stories I had learned during the day. Sometimes they would fall asleep before me. One of my earliest memories is of them falling asleep and me lying between them, staring up at the ceiling fan, feeling slightly peeved because I hadn't finished telling the story.

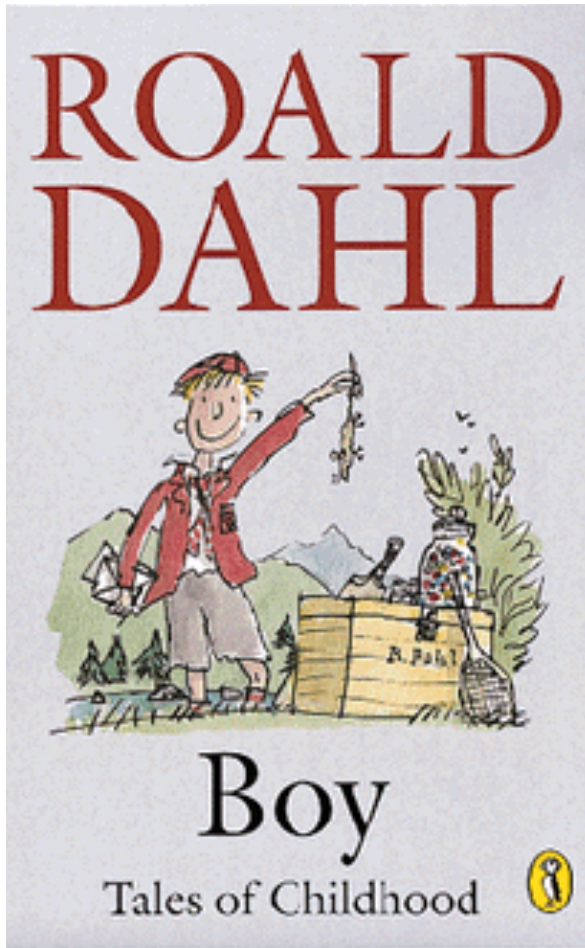
But for a long time I did not know that one could simply *become* a writer. To become a writer, I needed to take permission from various forces in my life, both seen and unseen. The concept of permission has played a big part in my life. You would think you don't (or shouldn't) need permission to write. But I did, and I think we all do in subtle ways.

Here are three instances that come to mind -

**One.** I happened to read an autobiography unlike anything I had read before. There was no chronological list of remarkable incidents, or glorious achievements. Instead, it dwelled upon the little moments of life that don't last very long, but remain stuck forever inside your mind. Like a bit of candy stuck between your teeth, slowly dissolving.

It was full of roughly drawn illustrations of adolescent life - school friends, chocolate bars, angry teachers. At the time I did not realize the illustrator was a different person. I thought it was all the work of the name on the cover page - Roald Dahl.

I wanted to be this Roald Dahl.



Illustrated by Quentin Blake

**Two.** I was maybe 15 when I read this word in the morning newspaper - blogging. It was all the rage, said the columnist. Anyone, they said, could be a writer. *Anyone*, I read, *could be a writer*. I started blogging. I would write stories and poems, and generally vent my teenage angst. I learned how to say things that felt good - to me and to others.



**Three.** I was in the middle of a PhD program in Chicago, running experiments on stroke patients during the day, doing stand-up at open-mic events at night. One evening at the Comedy Bar, I saw a familiar comic take the stage. He wasn't very good but he had energy. Every time I showed up at any club, he was also there. So I watched him go through a familiar routine, tweaked and polished a bit, to get a few more laughs than the last time and some polite applause.

I clapped harder than anyone else. Something had clicked inside me. This person had suddenly given me a permission I didn't have before - to really go after what I wanted, to put everything on the line every night for the things I wanted to do. Two weeks later, I quit my PhD program to become a full-time writer.



## What made me a SneakyArtist

I became an artist by accident. I was only trying to do better comics.

Because I didn't know how to draw, I figured I could learn by carrying around a sketchbook while exploring the city and drawing whatever caught my eye.

I was new to America, and the strange New World both confused and fascinated me. Making SneakyArt gave me a reason to spend time and become comfortable in unfamiliar surroundings.

The idea was to illustrate better comics. So the first time someone wanted to buy my drawing, I was absolutely baffled. What could they see in just the drawing? More requests came after the first one, and as time passed I

found that I was not a writer who also drew, but an artist who apparently also wrote.

At the same time, Instagram and Facebook became platforms for eye-catching, trending visuals. The words mattered less and less.

I came to Substack because I wanted to rediscover the writer in me, and also rediscover an audience for the written word. Both of them exist, but have been neglected by the demands of social media. I came to Substack because they both deserve better.



## How Substack works for me

I see the Internet as two kinds of places - **networks** and **destinations**. Networks are places to find an audience (FB, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok). Once I have someone's attention on a network, I try to direct them towards a destination of choice (website, Substack, podcast).

Here are two crucial differences between networks and destinations -

- Networks are rentals, destinations are your own property.
- People use networks for short attention span activity, but visit destinations to give deep attention over longer periods of time.

A problem most creators make is that they confuse networks with destinations.

This explains how I use my Substack. It is a space where I take the time to make a case for SneakyArt - what it is, why it exists, and why it should matter. I believe this is my responsibility as an artist in the creator economy.



Chicago, 2020.

## 2022 Goals

I use two platforms to accept audience support - BuyMeACoffee and Substack. The former lets me accept tips and one-off instances of support. The latter is helping me cultivate a long-term relationship with true fans.

On the free edition of my newsletter, I share my latest work, ideas from the SneakyArt Podcast, and various things I learn in trying to become a better creative.

I started the paid edition 4 months ago, in the middle of Substack Grow, with two immediate goals -

1. To see if people genuinely liked my writing enough to support me and ask for more.
2. To see if I could build a positive feedback loop to better inform my ideas and spur more frequent, better writing.

Having succeeded in these two goals, my goals for 2022 are -

- To acquire 5000 free readers
- To reach 200 paying subscribers
- To use my paid subscribers as a focus group for my next (to be self-published) book - SneakyArt of Vancouver.

I hope that this Fellowship program will help me understand how to effectively channel my efforts along different directions. Like every writer in the world, I am always thinking about how to improve my writing. But the creator economy also requires me to consciously grow my network, tap into a larger audience, and grow a strong community around my work. As a solo act, I find it incredibly difficult to allocate time and energy to these diverse responsibilities.



## Some Collected Thoughts

- I wrote about the phenomenon that we mischaracterize as a short attention span. My choice of phrase: short consideration span.
- My (successful) experiments using Reddit as a writer and artist.

- [SneakyArt Post #51](#) - But Why Sneaky?
- [SneakyArt Post #53](#) - The Existentialism of TinyPeople
- [SneakyArt Post #65](#) - Outside my Comfort Zone

## 2: Who cares about SneakyArt?

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*“Who is your ideal reader? What role does your Substack play in their life?”*

I do not see my newsletter as fulfilling a niche in any market. Instead, I see my job as *creating* a niche, building the demand for it, and then supplying to that demand.

This makes my job easier in some respects and harder in others. It is easy that I do not need to think about competition, because I only talk about my own work. As long as people like my work, they care about the newsletter too. But it is harder in that I have to constantly ‘keep up the hype’ for this niche subject. No outside trends aid my discovery or boost my relevance.

With that in mind, here is my understanding of my readers, and the roles I fulfil in their lives.

I believe the readership of my newsletter comes from three points of interest, articulated in the description of the SneakyArt Post -

... a newsletter about SneakyArt, ideas from the podcast, and notes from my journey of self-education to be an artist.

I believe my Ideal Reader intersects with at least 2 of the three categories below:

**1. Fans** of SneakyArt

This part of my readership comes from Instagram, as direct fans of my work. The newsletter is an opportunity to engage more deeply with my art and hear what I have to say about it.

**2. Listeners** of the SneakyArt Podcast

On the podcast, I speak with artists who also draw their worlds from observation, representing a global community of ‘Urban Sketchers’. Urban Sketchers is an organization that promotes drawing from observation, and counts hundreds of thousands of members around the world. I am a prominent member of this community, and my podcast includes conversations with all the big names in it.

Listeners follow me to the newsletter because I share after-thoughts and ideas from these conversations in both text and audio form. A majority of my paid subscribers (whom I call *Insiders*) also come to me from the podcast. I spend a lot of time thinking about what to offer my Insiders, but am pleased to discover that a lot of them don’t actually want *more* content. I emphasize on the show that my work is 100% independent and that I seek listener-support (through Substack and BuyMeACoffee) to keep it going. It appears many Insiders are satisfied with simply supporting me in this way.

**3. Learners** on a self-education journey

A number of readers and Insiders, especially the ones who engage and comment, are artists on their own journeys of self-education. Some are full-time while others pursue art as a hobby. The newsletter for them is a source of inspiration and validation.

In the headspace of this Ideal Reader, my newsletter should play the following roles -

1. **Friend** - to echo their struggles and offer companionship.
2. **Philosopher** - to present thoughts and ideas that they are themselves unable to articulate.
3. **Guide** - to offer solutions, and suitable paths to follow.



## 3: Somehow I Manage

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*“What obstacles have you faced while maintaining a publication rhythm? What tips do you have to break through & keep going?”*

I get by with a disparate set of ideas and working principles. They intersect in some ways, but not in others. I tried to weave them into a rich narrative, but that proved impossible, so now I am simply throwing them at you. I hope they help.



### Constraints will set you free

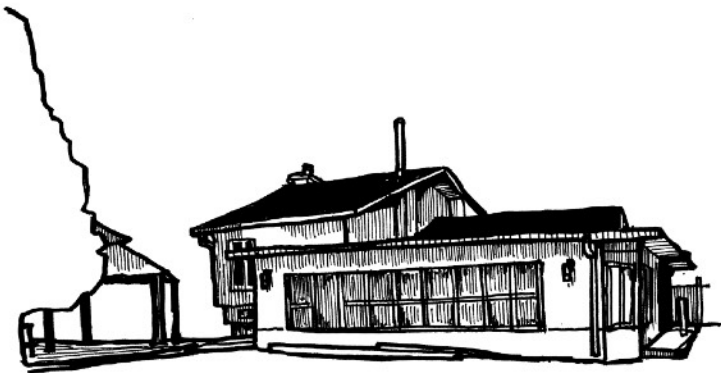
This idea emerged during conversations with other artists on the SneakyArt Podcast. The first time I voiced it, it was in the context of using limited art supplies (I make SneakyArt with one fountain pen and a fineliner).

It is a popular idea that we all want to be free from all chains, unbounded and unrestrained, a condition in which we can all do our greatest work. But I push against that notion. **Constraints create boundaries. Boundaries**

**encircle fields. Inside bounded fields, we can focus on the work at hand, instead of being distracted by infinite possibilities.**

Coming back to art... when I use only a single fountain pen, I am made free of the stress of thinking about other tools and what they can do. I can focus on what I am able to do with this single tool, and dig deeper to express more with less. An abundance of choices might paralyze me into inaction, or decision fatigue may wear me out completely.

I add other tight constraints to this environment - limited time at any single location, being sneaky around my subjects of choice, and completing the piece at one go. These constraints are chosen by me, thus being reflective of my tastes and personality, and they organically shape my work towards what gets called my *style*. My pieces are strong on intuition, reflective of mood, and fully immersed in the moment. This makes the brand of SneakyArt much



-Nickent.

Constraints of linework

stronger than if I worked out of photos, or used a dozen tools, or sat right in front of my subjects to take my sweet time.

## The Ideas Funnel

I always thinking of things I want to say. I play with words in my mind all day. To say the best thing in the best way to the right people, I have organically chanced upon what I call an ideas funnel.

- The first draft goes on **Twitter**, as a standalone tweet or a thread.
- Based on reactions and reception (or lack of them), the second draft links with a drawing and goes to my **Instagram**, as a post or a story.
- By the end of the week, either from feedback or simply from having expressed it twice, I polish a third draft of the idea as a **Substack** post.

## I'm Lazy / I'm Always Optimizing

As a former mechanical engineer, my education was all about one goal - increasing efficiency, i.e. *less work for more returns*. This is a line of thinking that pervades my creative work today.

I make SneakyArt, write the newsletter, produce a podcast, and do dozens of private commissions every year. It can be a lot of work. But I optimize my way through this by creating multiple products from one-time efforts.

Going outside to draw is a one-time effort. I would not be able to do it often if this single effort did not yield multiple

products. Drawing SneakyArt produces a piece of art, an Instagram story, a Tiktok video, and a newsletter post.

The time I spend drawing is meditative, and I do a lot of deep thinking about the things that I care about. These thoughts become good questions that I ask on the podcast.

The art I make again diversifies into multiple products - the original piece, the scanned jpeg that sells as fine art prints, and the various collections I will make out of the scans as books, zines and pamphlets.

 “Once, is a mistake. Twice, is an idea. Three times, is style.”

This quote by Miles Davis is very significant to my life. Until I was about 27, I could only draw stick figures. This is no idle statement, I actually had a semi-popular stick-figure webcomic for several years. But I was convinced that it was too late for me to learn to draw *properly* or develop a style of my own.

My distinct style today is a function of the many ‘mistakes’ in my drawings, determined equally by the constraints I impose upon myself. Using a fountain pen, I had to give up the idea of erasing, or taking any backward steps. Instead, I leaned on my mistakes, and that gave me ideas for how to complete my imperfect drawings, how to represent my world faithfully, and how to suggest more than I had the time or patience to accurately depict. These ideas, executed over and over, became style.

 Obstacles and Breakdowns

I can't say that I'm short on time. I am a full-time creative. This is my day-job. We do not have kids yet. I live in a wonderful part of the world. I face none of the typical obstacles.

Still, problems have a way of coming up out of nothing.

- One big obstacle is my **reluctance to be vulnerable**. I fight against what I should say, and how much I should *expose myself*, with every post.
- I have difficulty **splitting my efforts between free and paid posts**. Over the last year, I have focused more on my free posts, and the paid posts would become an after-thought. It is possible that this has kept my conversion ratio low (~4%).
- **I write week to week**. Every week I think about what the next post should be, rifling through many ideas over and over. I think this is a mentally strenuous, unsustainable practice. I need to make better plans.
- I am addicted to **short term gratification**. This keeps me from achieving long-term goals like finishing the book I am currently working on, and the novel I've been writing on/off for 6 years.

## 4: A Positive Feedback Loop

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*“How are you engaging with your readers, and what role do they play in your writing process? And - how does writing on Substack impact who, how, and what you read?”*

**I**n one word, my readers give me something very particular, which I didn't think I needed from anyone - *permission*.

Let me explain how that works.

When I started the newsletter, my impression was that it needed to come from a place of authority. I needed to look like I was in charge, even if of just my self-education journey. A kind of formal address to a crowd from a pedestal, you can imagine.

For the first few months, I had few likes and fewer comments. But the subscriber count rose steadily. So, I didn't know quite what to make of it. I concluded that perhaps my base was simply content to (silently) accept what I was offering.

But interaction matters because it deepens engagement. Interaction also matters because it sets up a positive feedback loop towards me. I need that as a solo creator.

In my opinion, people disengage with anything they cannot move - like an institution, or an authority, or any opinion dug deep into the ground. Readers want to feel like their words make a difference.

The answer, I realized, was that I needed to be vulnerable. I stepped off my pedestal, and started to share my insecurities, fears, and hesitations. Since the SneakyArt Post is really about how I see the world, the content needed to become personal. *Authentically me.*

This means mistakes. As an artist, I understand mistakes to be a good thing. But as a writer, I seem to have other ideas about the concept. This dichotomy needed reconciliation in my mind.

*“Once, is a mistake. Twice, is an idea. Three times, is style.” - Miles Davis.*

I cringe a little every time I re-read what I have written. Not because it is bad, but a part of me is so insecure about putting himself out there. *About being seen.* But comments have risen steadily over the past few months. Every week I take a small step forward, wondering if I’ve finally stepped over the edge. But every week, I receive words of encouragement and solidarity. I take strength from that. *My readers give me the permission to keep going forward.*

John (Animation Obsessive) spoke about the engagement levels on a recent post I made. This one was particularly difficult for me to hit Publish on. I didn’t edit it at all, because I knew that if I started to edit I’d end up

eliminating everything that *exposed me*. I hesitated all day before hitting the Publish button.

Vulnerability, or sincerity, or earnestness - is one aspect of how I engage. A more practical other aspect is to speak about the things that are universal.

This isn't easy, considering my audience belongs to no single demographic, does not share any geographical proximity, or follow similar professions.

*“I want to work in revelations, not just spin silly tales for money. I want to fish as deep down as possible into my own subconscious in the belief that once that far down, everyone will understand because they are the same that far down.” - Jack Kerouac.*

It is interesting, in this context, to read a comment left to the post above.



**Linda Powell** Jan 14 Liked by Nishant Jain

Your writing and your art are simplistic and yet say all the things we think ourselves in a way that makes it seem possible for us to do it too. You make us feel that we could do that...we could record our lives, our thoughts, our feelings. You are an inspiration to everyone. And your recordings of your life in words and pictures will be a treasured keepsake for your family and an extraordinary memory for you, so much more than just a posted phone photo on social media. Very special...very touching...very beautiful...



## *How does writing on Substack impact who, how, and what you read?*

The SneakyArt Post is about my journey of self-education to be an artist. So the business of writing every week has made me serious about the business of self-education. My substack gives me the mandate to pursue with diligence the things that interest me.

Those things include art, philosophy, history, and the impending future.

- I read essays and books on art and artists that I admire. Most recently I have read about Vincent van Gogh, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and MC Escher.
- Philosophy resonates with me because I like to understand how people and societies function. I follow the *Philosophize This* podcast, and recently read *At the Existentialist Cafe* by Sarah Bakewell and *The Power of Ideas* by Isaiah Berlin. Sarah Bakewell's fantastic book sparked a lot of ideas, which led to [this popular post](#).
- History interests me because it shows me patterns of human activity and behaviour. I've recently enjoyed Tom Holland's *Dynasty*, a book on Hadrian, and William Dalrymple's works on the East India Company and British colonialism in India.
- The future is fascinating, scary, and exciting. While I have read non-fiction about the future, I think it is fiction that really sets the template for human ambition and great endeavours. My favorite recent reads are *Exhalations* by Ted Chiang and *Seveneves* by Neal Stephenson.

But how do these reading habits connect to my writing?

Art is not just in the lines we draw, or the paints we put down on canvas. The output of an artist is a non-verbal expression of the ideas and thoughts that run through their mind. I am deeply vested in humanity, at both the micro and macroscopic levels, and I hope that my art will *say that* in unspoken ways.



Tiny People

And writing works the same way. If I am lucky, I will be able to communicate a tenth of the things I feel. So in order to communicate deeply, I must feel ten times as deeply.

*“I write to know what I think.” - Joan Didion.*

Reading too much, and thinking too much, as I am wont to do, leads to a mad chaos inside my head. The only way out is to write. Every week on Substack, I put my house in order.

I hope that makes sense.

## 5: I'll take this Fellowship to go, please.

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*“Describe what the next few months look like for you, and the #1 takeaway from this experience that you think other writers should know about.”*

**I**n the city that I grew up, there is no word for goodbye. The phrase we use translates to - *“I’ll be right back.”*

So the Fellowship has come to an end. But maybe we can think of it as the start of a franchise. Maybe we can imagine sequels, prequels, spin-offs, and even gritty reboots. Let’s move forward with the calm assurance that, no matter what happens, everything ends up on Disney+ anyway.

### Ideas going forward

I plan to do a lot of scary things this year. Because of how much they scare me, I think they’re the right things to do.



**YouTube + TikTok**

This is the year I make big moves on video platforms. I loathe being in front of a camera, but cannot deny that it's *got to be done*. TikTok is an easy first step, because editing is not a hassle. So I'm getting a GoPro to make a bunch of videos of myself drawing this month.

I would use the video post feature on Substack to offer previews.



## **SneakyArt of Vancouver**

I intend to complete writing/drawing for my next book, *SneakyArt of Vancouver*. I am writing it in parts and sharing passages with my paying subscribers. I get lovely feedback from them. By year-end, I want to sort out all the details and put in the final printing order.

The book will be self-published.



## **Paid ads**

Taking inspiration from Elle, part of my grant money is going into placing ads in useful places for the newsletter.

Please give me your best recommendations for where I should do this.



## **Self Education**

Another part of the grant money will be put into relevant online courses to help ease me into YouTube content creation, and creating the funnel from TikTok to the newsletter.

If you have any leads, please share!

# Takeaways

Here are some lessons I am retaining from the experience -



**Writing communities can be useful** - I tend to keep away from communities and any groups of people. But I find that it is necessary to tap into communities of like-minded people. Even if just to see that we all have similar obstacles in our path.



**The people at Substack** - It was absolutely great to interact with the people who run Substack and hear their vision of the product. It brings a measure of trust into the relationship I have with Substack, when I know the people behind it are moving in a specific direction with sincerity and earnestness.



**Validation** - It is good to hear new ideas. But what is truly impactful is hearing something you have already thought about, but never gave due consideration. I have received validation and reassurance from my other Fellows and the people of Substack. This gives me the mandate to trust my instincts and move forward with confidence!



**Grant** - The journey of a product from 85% to 100% needs just that final push. The grant money will help me overcome my lethargy at this last mile. I will be signing up to relevant online courses, some useful paid subscriptions, and professional services around my website and podcast.



**Mentorship** - When Kelsa told me my mentor would only be available in February, I was delighted. I am glad to have this extended run of the fellowship experience, and look forward to my first session next week!

It has been my delight being a fellow Fellow, and I think all of you do wonderful work. Thank you for sharing with me so much time and attention.

## 6: My Content Funnel

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*“How do you position your writing among all that you do as an independent creative or professional? As a researcher, consultant, artist, public person of interest, etc? Is your Substack a point of entry into the many things you offer, and how?”*

**M**ost of my readers come for my art, and some others for the podcast. But I was a writer before I was any of these things. The jobs of artist and podcaster are functions of the same inclinations that made me a writer. The essential job is to think aloud and say things.

For a long time, my thoughts were best expressed as short-stories and webcomics, of which I made hundreds each. Today they are expressed as ink drawings with some writing around them.

In a similar vein, the podcast is for ideas that are best expressed in conversation with another person. Some expressions reach their fullest potential when tossed back and forth between two minds.



So I keep this idea centred in my mind -  
I am doing a singular thing across different mediums.

## Why does an Artist need to Write at all?

I recently had a wonderful discussion on a related subject with Elle Griffin, about the need for every creator to be an entrepreneur. Underpinning the concept of entrepreneurship is the idea that every artist must *effectively communicate* with their audience.

Writing is a form of effective communication, necessary for a couple of reasons -

(1) **Attention is a Zero Sum Game** - Because everyone has a smartphone, everyone has seen everything and nothing is impressive anymore. What elevates one artist's work over everything else on the internet is not some form of objective superiority (i.e. *better art* or *better artist* etc), but the connection they have with their audience. Can their audience relate with that art? Can they find their own life and world reflected in a piece of music, or drawing, or writing, or even a TikTok video? The relationship builds out of engagement, and engagement derives from attention. Writing a newsletter is a way to request 5-10 minutes of attention per reader per week.

(2) **The Positive Feedback Loop** - If I write to know what I think, it is necessary to write out every important thought around my work. Paul Graham wrote about this last week.

I want to do great work *deliberately*, not by lucky accident. The positive feedback loop I build with my audience helps me constantly improve and evolve, and become more deliberate with the spells I am able to cast.

# My Content Funnel

Substack is not my point of entry. My publication is the final offering to an invested audience. The points of entry to my work are social media platforms - Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. A point of entry needs to work quickly, because it operates on platforms where attention spans are disincentivized. I wrote about the myth of short attention spans [here](#).

I am designing my content as a funnel that opens wide at social media and spirals down to the free readership on my Substack. A further subset of this become paying subscribers.

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Thank you, dear reader, for your time and attention. If you have any questions or thoughts, send an email to [nishant@sneakyartist.com](mailto:nishant@sneakyartist.com).