

Five-Year Plan:

This is an exercise I do with MFA students as I help them figure out what to do once they have their degree. Networking is part of it, but it goes beyond networking.

The idea is simple: Think about where you want to be in five years, and plan backwards. Sounds easy, right? Actually, it is; you can't predict everything, but you can work backwards to see what you need to do now, what kinds of things you need to put in place, to be on track for your five-year plan.

But while creating an action plan is valuable, the big payoff comes from using this five-year plan as a **lens** through which to make decisions. For instance, if your five-year plan is to be a writer/director, then it makes it easy to say yes to an opportunity to shadow a writer/director on set, even if that opportunity means flying to Canada and quarantining for two weeks on your own dime. You should also clearly be writing the kinds of things you want to direct. I know someone who wanted to write an Oscar-winning short, but had never actually watched any. Having that as her goal made it clear what the next step was.

It can also help you say no to projects that aren't right for you. If you want to be a literary novelist, you would say no to joining a group of lovely, smart writers who all wrote science fiction or romance. That is a big time commitment that does not align with your goal. This is **hard.** We want to say yes to everything in life. But there is only so much time. When we say yes to something that doesn't move us towards our goal, we say no to ourselves and the things we really want to do.

At heart, the 5-year vision is about both clarity and constraint. Visualizing where you want to be in five years can give you the energy and focus to do what it takes to get there. And being willing to commit to it keeps you on a path when shiny new ideas and opportunities come calling.

Exercise: Your Five-Year Vision

Sit someplace comfy and close your eyes. Imagine yourself five years into the future, and everything is going amazingly well. You have just finished a passion project; what is it? Your career success has allowed you the space to complete this amazing project; what does that look like? You are very excited because, as you look at your body of work, it's clear that you bring something special to the world; what is that?

On your bookshelf are five different things that all symbolize your success, including awards; which awards? For what projects? Included in this is a framed letter from a professional peer you greatly admire, telling you they are a fan of your work; who wrote it and what did they specifically say about what your work means to them? Imagine as many juicy details as possible.

As you enjoy your success and the amazing impact you have on the world, you remember your first project, four years earlier, that really launched you on the path you're on now. That project opened so many doors for you; it changed the course of your life. What was it? Why did it matter so much? What did you have to learn about yourself to make it a reality?

Open your eyes.

Take some time to really think about what the exercise revealed to you. What does that passion project look like? What changes would you have to make in your life to be in a position to pursue it? What difference will you have made in the world, in people's lives? Find something that symbolizes this to you, that reminds you of this perfect day five years hence. Keep it in your work space and allow it to take you back to that perfect day.

Now think about that first project. It was in your past in your vision, but it's in your future now. It is in fact a milestone for you; it's how we know you're on track for the five-year vision. How can you make that first project happen in the next year? What do you have to do? Who do you need to be? Who has advice? Who could you partner with? Who would want to invest in your success? Reach out to them. Do the work itself. Add in people who will keep you accountable. Start building your immediate plan of action today.