

Ideas, like organisms, have a life cycle. They are born, they develop, they reach maturity and they die. So, we need to generate new ideas. Creative thinking requires an attitude or outlook which allows you to search for ideas and manipulate your knowledge and experience. You may use crazy, foolish and impractical ideas as stepping stones to practical ideas. You break the rules occasionally and hunt for ideas in unusual outside places. By adopting a creative outlook you open yourself up to new possibilities and to change. Discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everyone else and thinking something different.

Mental Locks

Most of us have certain attitudes which lock our thinking into the status quo and keep us thinking “more of the same”. These are called mental locks. Mental locks can be opened in one of two ways. The first technique is to become aware of them, and then to temporarily forget them when you are trying to generate ideas. If that doesn’t work, maybe you need a “whack on the side of the head.” That should dislodge the presupposition that holds the lock in place. Ideas or situations that cause you to move off your routine paths and think something different are “whacks.”

1. The Right Answer

Much of our educational system is geared toward teaching people the “one right answer.” The difficulty is that most of life is ambiguous; there are many right answers depending on what you are looking for. If you think there is only one right answer, you will stop looking as soon as you find one.

- Tip #1: A good way to be more creative is to look for the second right answer. There are many ways to pursue these answers, but the important thing is to do it. Often the really creative ideas are just around the corner.
- Tip #2: The answers you get depend on the questions you ask. Play with your wording to get different answers. One technique is to solicit plural answers. Another is asking questions that whack people’s thinking.

2. That’s Not Logical

Logic is an important creative thinking tool. Its use is especially appropriate in the practical phase of the creative process when you are evaluating ideas and preparing them for action. When you’re searching for ideas, however, excessive logical thinking can short-circuit your creative process.

- Tip #3: For better ideas, use more soft thinking during the creative phase and hard thinking during the more practical phase.
- Tip #4: The metaphor (a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance) is an excellent tool to help you “think something different”.
- Tip #5: Go on metaphor hunts. Pay attention to the metaphors people use to describe what they’re doing.
- Tip #6: Pay attention to the metaphors you use in your own thinking. As glorious a tool as metaphors are, they can easily imprison your thinking if you’re not aware how much they’re guiding your thoughts.

3. Following the Rules

Creative thinking involves playing with what you don’t know, and this may mean breaking out of one pattern in order to create a new one, so be responsive to change and be flexible with the rules. Remember, breaking the rules will not necessarily lead to creative ideas, but it’s one avenue, and staying on the same road may eventually lead to a dead end.

- Tip #7: Play the revolutionary and challenge the rules - especially the ones you use to govern your day-to-day activities.
- Tip #8: Remember that playing the revolutionary also has its dangers. From a practical standpoint, in order to survive in society, we have to follow all kinds of rules.
- Tip #9: Periodically inspect your ideas to see if they are contributing to your thinking effectiveness. Ask yourself, “Why did this program, project, concept, or idea come to be? And then follow this question with, “Do these reasons still exist?” If the answer is “no,” eliminate the idea.
- Tip #10: Avoid falling in love with ideas. People fall in love with a certain approach or system and then they are unable to see the merits of alternative approaches. If you fall out of love with a cherished idea, you are free to look for new ones.
- Tip #11: Have rule inspecting and rule discarding sessions within your organization. You may even find some motivational side benefits to this activity-finding and eliminating outmoded rules can be a lot of fun.

4. Be Practical

This world was built by practical people who knew how to get into a creative frame of mind, listen to their imaginations, and build on the ideas they formed there.

- Tip #12: Each of you has an “artist” and a “judge” within you. The open-minded attitude of the artist typifies the kind of thinking you use in the creative phase when you’re generating ideas. The evaluation outlook of the judge represents the kind of thinking you use in the practical phase when preparing ideas for execution. Avoid bringing in your judge before your artist has had a chance to do his job. Premature evaluation can prevent conception.

- Tip#13: Be a magician: ask “what if” questions and use the provocative answers as stepping stones to new ideas.
- Tip#14: Cultivate your imagination. Set aside time every day to ask yourself “what if” questions. Although the likelihood that any given “what if” question will lead to a practical idea isn’t high, the more often you practice this activity, the more productive you’ll become.
- Tip#15: Encourage asking “what if” of others as a way of looking for potential problems and opportunities.

5. Avoid Ambiguity

Most of us have learned to “avoid ambiguity” because of the communication problems it can cause. In creative situations, however, there is the danger that too much specificity can stifle your imagination.

- Tip#16: Take advantage of the ambiguity in the world. Look at something and think what else it might be.
- Tip#17: If you’re giving someone a problem that has the potential of being solved in a creative way, you might try posing it in an ambiguous fashion so as not to restrict imaginative responses.
- Tip#18: Cultivate your own personal sources of ambiguity. These could be people, books, things, whatever forces you to look for more than one meaning in order to understand.
- Tip#19: Try using humor to put you in a creative state of mind.

6. To Err is Wrong

Errors are a sign that you are diverging from the well-traveled path. If you’re not failing every now and then, it’s a sign you’re not being innovative.

- Tip#20: If you make an error, use it as a stepping stone to a new idea you might not have otherwise discovered.
- Tip#21: Differentiate between errors of “commission” and those of “omission”. The latter can be more costly at times. If you’re not making many errors, you might ask yourself, “How many opportunities am I missing by not being more aggressive?”
- Tip#22: Strengthen your “risk muscle”. Everyone has one, but you have to exercise it or else it will atrophy. Make it a point to take at least one risk every twenty-four hours.
- Tip#23: Remember these two benefits of failure. First, if you do fail, you learn what doesn’t work; and second, the failure gives you an opportunity to try a new approach.

7. Play is Frivolous

If necessity is the mother of invention, play is the father. Use it to fertilize your thinking.

- Tip#24: The next time you have a problem, play with it.
- Tip#25: If you don’t have a problem, take the time to play anyway. You may find some new ideas.
- Tip#26: Make your work place a fun place to be. One of play’s products is fun-one of the most powerful motivators.

8. That’s Not My Area

To counteract the effects of specialization, we might heed the advice Edison gave to his colleagues: “Make it a habit to keep on the lookout for novel and interesting ideas that others have used successfully. Your idea has to be original only in its adaptation to the problem you are working on.” Here are some tips that will help you improve your hunting ability.

- Tip#27: Develop the hunter’s attitude, the outlook, that wherever you go there are ideas waiting to be discovered.
- Tip#28: Don’t get so busy that you lose the free time necessary for idea-hunting. Schedule hunting time into your day and week. Little side excursions can lead to new hunting grounds.
- Tip#29: Develop different kinds of hunting grounds. The wider and more diversified your knowledge, the more places you will have to draw from.
- Tip#30: Look for analogous situations. Often problems similar to yours have been solved in other areas.
- Tip#31: When you “capture” an idea, be sure to write it down.

9. Don’t be Foolish

Some people are so closely married to their ideas that they put them up on a pedestal. It’s difficult, however, to be objective if you have a lot of ego tied up in your idea.

- Tip#32: Occasionally, let your “stupid monitor” down, play the fool, and see what crazy ideas you can come up with.
- Tip#33: Recognize when you or others are conforming or putting down the fool. Otherwise, you may be setting up a “group think” situation. This is the phenomenon in which group members are more interested in retaining the approval of other members rather than trying to come up with creative solutions to the problems at hand.
- Tip#34: Playing the fool is a lot of fun. It is also a great way to generate ideas and examine your assumptions. While the ideas produced may not be immediately useful, it may happen that a foolish idea will lead to a practical, creative idea. If you come up empty, at least you’ll understand why the rule was there in the first place.

10. I’m Not Creative

A study showed “The creative people thought they were creative and the less creative people didn’t think they were.”

- Tip#35: Whack yourself into trying new things and building on what you find, especially the small ideas. The creative person has the faith that these ideas will lead somewhere. Good Luck!

Source: A Whack On the Side of the Head-How to Unlock Your Mind for Innovation by Roger von Oech, Ph. D.