

Be creative

Instant creativity toolbox

Infinite Ideas

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Be creative

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Infinite Ideas

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Introduction

If you've just picked up this book, chances are the first thing you want to hear is that anyone can be creative. Well, you're right. We don't believe creativity is something you're born with, like blue eyes or blond hair – it's something we're ALL born with. We all began life with the ability to play, to experiment, to examine things until they break and then to throw tantrums when we weren't able to change the world around us. Trouble is, many of us forget that creativity has its roots in these childhood abilities and that growing out of them doesn't just stifle our inner child, it stifles our creativity.

The second thing you'd probably like us to say is that being creative is easy. It isn't. Creativity is hard work, or at least something you need to work hard at. Recognising that you need to apply the same discipline to your creative life as you do to what you normally think of as work is a big step to becoming more creative. Knowing what you want to do and then what you have to do to make it happen is one big difference between adult creativity and child's play. This realisation means that next time you get the urge to change the world around you, instead of just throwing a tantrum like a child, you'll have the means to do so.

But if this is all beginning to sound like too much hard work, we've also got some great suggestions about how to make work seem more like play. If there's one thing this book sets out to convince you of, it's this: you need to take your play time more seriously AND have more fun at work.

1. Start now

How to start being creative with the things around you, right here, right now; no excuses, no prevarication.

For many people, taking that first step is the most difficult aspect of any creative task. It is not always the best approach to start at the beginning. Quite often, you need to get to the point where you can see the whole of the project and understand the style of the piece before you can deliver an opening that really sets it all off.

Sometimes you tackle the most difficult and challenging problem first. Usually this is because you've already sussed out how to solve it, or you're so bursting with energy and excitement that you need something major to attack.

On the other hand, peripheral matters can often be good starting points, because they can be done easily and quickly. There's a lot to be said for getting something done, even if it's small.

So pause from reading for a moment and take stock of all the things that are lying around you right now. If you're an organised person, you may well have a whole heap of really useful research material and tools ready and waiting. If you're not organised, you probably still have a whole heap of really useful research material and tools ready and waiting, but you just don't know it yet.

This book is very much about looking at everyday things in a different light and putting them to use in unusual ways. So don't ever think that you have nothing to get started with. Just use what you can find.

Here's an idea for you…

If you need proof of how pregnant with creative possibility 'found' objects can be, take a look at foundmagazine.com. You're almost bound to find something there that can become your jumping off point for a new idea.

2. Do your research

You can develop the kind of instinct that will help you effectively sift and sort everything that comes your way.

Creative people are always curious, always on the lookout for new stimuli and therefore always researching in one way or another. Develop a sense of curiosity about everything that confronts you. Be vigilant. Ask ‘why?’ a lot. Don’t accept anything at face value.

One easy way to engage in this process of constant research is to take photos of things that catch your eye. Another is to squirrel away little bits of information (and intriguing bits of rubbish!) as you find them, building up a personal collection of seemingly useless and unrelated facts, newspaper cuttings, URL bookmarks, postcards, brochures, food packaging … anything you like. This process is known as ‘jackdawing’.

Now think about your prospecting/mining techniques. Do you sift through things in fine detail or blast away at big chunks of the research landscape with a stick of dynamite? Both approaches are valid. Sifting gives you a good chance of picking up even more nuggets that you weren’t expecting to find (and which may take you off on a tangent into a completely different area of research). Blasting may expose not just one seam, but many; thus encouraging you to keep digging and not curtail your research at the first sign of success.

In the end you’ll be able to synthesise your research materials in any number of ways, with magical results.

Here’s an idea for you…

Cross-referencing and linking your research – either deliberately or at random – is a fantastic way to get started with new ideas. Ask yourself: ‘What links the last three books I’ve read?’ Or pick three areas you’ve looked at quite separately – say, cooking, code and collage – jam them together and see what kind of relationship your imagination can forge between them.

3. Know your history

Repeat good tricks and you'll end up working faster and smarter.

When you start a new project try looking back over past work and picking key elements that reveal themselves as your standard working devices. Pick up, too, on key themes that keep coming back to haunt you. If you inspect your past work like this regularly, you'll always be starting a new piece of work from a position of self-knowledge. And decisions about what to accept or reject from your creative past will be that much more solid.

One benefit of cataloguing and coming to terms with your own strengths and weaknesses is that you'll learn to achieve simple effects much more quickly. And if some of the standard elements of what you're doing are easily repeatable, you'll have more time to concentrate on the new. In this way, ideas can be like software libraries.

Stand-up comedians build up libraries of jokes and stories so they've got access to a broad range of material that has been road-tested and works when reacting to a specific situation, audience or heckler.

Tomorrow, try to do exactly the same things as you did today at exactly the same time of day and for the same period of time. Note the similarities and differences in terms of how the day actually unfolds and the different feelings each day elicits. If you can, try repeating this for a whole week. By day seven, how do you think you'll feel? Terminally bored or creatively inspired? Probably a little bit of both.

Here's an idea for you…

Replay the same scenes with different consequences. Shakespeare did this with similar characters in different plays (ambitious usurpers, jealous lovers, foolish kings, parted lovers), and the different consequences led to very different drama. Could you take four or five generic elements of your creative work and keep replaying them in different configurations like this?

4. Be organised

A big part of being creative is not simply about being ‘inspired’, it’s about getting things done.

The world is infested with time-management devices, theories and techniques – but don’t fall for them! At the core of all this mumbo-jumbo lies just one essential device: the good old-fashioned things-to-do list.

You need to concentrate on three things:

1. realistic prioritisation of the tasks

2. breaking down big tasks into smaller achievable ones

3. making a new list every day

Remember Pareto’s ‘80/20 rule’: 80% of results come from 20% of efforts. Roughly one in five of the items on your list is truly essential. Everything else may be useful, but the world won’t end if they don’t get done.

If you have one big thing that needs to be done by the end of the day, be aware that a dozen smaller tasks may be hidden within it. Each one of these smaller tasks, necessary for completion of the big one, needs to be identified.

The end of each working day is an important time. It’s then that you should compile your lists for tomorrow. Quite often people use up the last half hour of their working day tidying up and ‘clearing the decks’ for the next day. Don’t. It’s much better to greet the new day with a messy desk and a clear head than the other way round.

Here’s an idea for you…

Write a list of impossible tasks. Put it away somewhere safe and only get it out at the end of a day when you’re completely overwhelmed, or you feel you haven’t really achieved what you set out to do. Looking at it might help you regain a sense of perspective and become re-energised for tomorrow.

5. Create the rules

Apply your own illogical constraints and you can discover creative ways of bending rules imposed on you by other people.

The simplest way to impose a constraint on your creativity is to give yourself a deadline. However, this isn't necessarily arbitrary, since there may be good reasons for finishing a piece of work within a fixed period of time – other people may be depending on you, and it's more than likely there's money riding on the job.

When starting with a blank sheet (literally or figuratively) give yourself just 30 minutes to work up some ideas and then force yourself to go with what you've got at that point. This is a great way of stopping yourself from over-developing or over-refining (or over-indulging) your ideas – or trying to pack too much into one activity or framework. Just because you have lots of great ideas doesn't mean you have to deal with them all at the same time. Keep some back for later. As well as rules for your outputs, think about regimes for best absorbing new material.

So this business of rule-making is really a very practical way of forcing yourself to think in cycles, to work with sequences, to record your own tendencies, to define behaviours and calculate probabilities – all key skills for the creative person. It's also teaching you to be at home with the rules of randomness and gambling.

Being arbitrary is a great way to kick-start processes generally. Quite often designers will choose the font for a new company's logo simply by taking the first letter of the company's name and then finding a font with a name that also starts with the same letter.

It can also be helpful to give yourself some kind of regular quirk or idiosyncratic rule that becomes your own trademark. For example, Alfred Hitchcock made cameo appearances in his films.

Here's an idea for you…

Try an arbitrary game of cards. Deal each other a random number of cards and then simply make up rules on the fly about when to discard, when to pick up, when to swap cards, what constitutes a winning hand, etc. Take it in turns to add one arbitrary rule at a time and see how long you can carry on playing without the whole thing collapsing. Call each other's bluff about seemingly invalid turns and transgressions. That way you'll have to explain the game to each other and – who knows – you may actually end up inventing something you can play again as a proper game!

6. Restrict choices

It’s perfectly possible to produce recipes for success based on just a few ingredients.

Every now and then, try to immerse yourself in creative exercises that use only one colour, palette, font or sound. In other books that celebrate personal creativity, you’ll probably read a lot of guff about how ‘anything’s possible’ and there are ‘no limits’ to what you can do. If you work without limits, however, it’s very easy to lose focus and for your projects to become sprawling, rambling efforts that require a huge amount of editing and refinement.

Imposing just one silly rule about what you’re not allowed to do can have interesting results. For instance, setting yourself a challenge of, say, writing with all the letters of the alphabet except a key one:

‘You might think it silly to hamstring your output in such a way, and at first it looks jolly hard to do – but it’s worth it, if only to gain a bit of insight into how your writing might lazily follow tortuous paths as you try to avoid using a solitary non-consonant. Although now, as you look at this paragraph, you may think it’s not that hard at all.’

We write with restrictions all the time anyway without really noticing it. (By the way, it’s the letter ‘e’ that’s missing.) Every time you send someone a holiday postcard you’re writing in a strict frame with a limited word count – and your writing style changes accordingly. Even if you’re not on holiday, try using postcards for all your written communications rather than A4 stationery. If you’re feeling really keen, try using only the back of business cards.

Restriction can be just as effective in fields other than writing, such as painting. Consider Picasso’s famous blue period, or Turner’s concentrated globs of orange or red. Some artists simply fall in love with one colour. Yves Klein went as far as to patent the ultramarine colour known as International Klein Blue, or IKB.

Here’s an idea for you…

Consider radical ways of restricting yourself. For instance, kill off a bit of work you’re in love with – one that seems to be the real heart of your project but is actually throwing everything else out of balance.

Defining idea

‘I think people who are not artists often think artists are inspired. But if you

work at your art you don’t have time to be inspired. Out of the work comes the work.’

JOHN CAGE, composer

7. Capture thoughts

Ever come up with a great idea only to forget it moments later? Grab your strokes of inner genius before they disappear.

We're all occasionally prone to lose track of ideas and odd items of information (not to mention ideas) in these multi-tasking, information-overloaded, nanosecond noughties. Not that letting the odd flash of inspirational thought get away is just a twenty-first-century phenomenon. Back in 1798, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was staying in a cottage in Somerset and was hard at work on a new epic poem, to be called Kubla Khan, that had come to him in his sleep the night before. He was disturbed when somebody, later referred to by Coleridge as a 'person from Porlock', paid a call. By the time he left, Coleridge's creative muse had gone AWOL and he only ever managed to capture fifty-five lines of his unrealised masterpiece.

While we can't always legislate against unplanned interruptions, we can do more to capture those fleeting thoughts, insights and ideas before they evaporate. What, for instance, do you keep by the side of your bed? It's a well-observed phenomenon that the resting mind regularly throws up solutions to problems or questions that have been exercising us during the day. And have you ever woken up in the middle of the night with a moment of inspiration, turned over and gone back to sleep, only to find that the thought or idea has irretrievably disappeared when you wake in the morning? OK, so keeping a notebook and pencil by your bedside is not exactly rocket science, but very few of us do it. The gap between common sense and common practice is as wide as ever.

And what about when you're out? Bruce Chatwin, the travel writer, was renowned for regularly buying stocks of Moleskine notebooks from a Parisian stationery shop so that he could take a supply with him everywhere he went. Van Gogh and Matisse used Moleskines for making sketches.

Here's an idea for you…

Don't feel that you have to restrict yourself to notebooks as a means of capturing your experiences. Use your laptop, your PDA or your technological communication tool du jour. In a similar vein, use your mobile to take photos.

Defining idea

'When I try to remember, I always forget.'

A.A. MILNE's Winnie the Pooh

8. Spare a paradigm?

Bring your beliefs and assumptions about yourself and the world you live in to the surface and hold them up to scrutiny.

Mental models are those deeply ingrained assumptions we all hold that influence how we understand the world. They lie below the surface of our general awareness, and so we don't necessarily realise the impact they have on our behaviour. Nonetheless they govern absolutely how we interpret and respond to the external world.

Often our mental models serve a very useful and practical purpose by helping us to make very quick sense of our experiences and interactions. However, the danger for us is that our mental models do not always reflect the truth, i.e. the way things really are. Often they reflect what we believe to be true, and sometimes we get it wrong.

So how do we know which of our mental models are still to be valued and which are well past their sell-by date? The starting point is for us to turn the mirror on ourselves, and to bring our own assumptions to the surface. The more aware we are of our mental models, the more we can scrutinise them to the point where we can see beyond their scope. In doing so, we give ourselves an opportunity to redefine our mental landscape.

Particularly aim at challenging your subjective beliefs. Many of these are not about the way things truly are but rather how we choose to see the world around us. For example, many of us believe we have little or nothing to learn from anybody younger than we are. However, don't you think that you are far more likely to learn and grow if you choose to believe that you can learn something from everybody you meet, no matter what their age, nationality, hair colour, etc?

This is not just wishy-washy liberal nonsense about the merits of having a more enlightened perspective, it's about giving you and your brain the chance to get more out of your life experiences by broadening your outlook.

Here's an idea for you…

Spend the next 30 minutes writing down as many statements as possible that reflect what you believe and how you see the world. When you've finished, go through your list and ask yourself critically what the basis of each belief is.

Defining idea

'Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they're yours.'

RICHARD BACH

9. Free thinking

Here are some tips on how to create an environment in which you and others can think optimally.

Remember the final scene in the movie The Italian Job – a Herrington coach containing Michael Caine, his gang and $4 million of stolen gold is left dangling precariously over a cliff. At that perilous moment, Caine's character comes up with a line that goes something like: 'Hold on a minute lads, I've got an idea.'

Sometimes a good idea can come to us when we are right up against it. After all, as the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention. Most of the time, though, we don't lead think-or-die lives. In general, our thinking happens in relatively safe everyday environments. Sometimes we have a degree of control over those surroundings, and sometimes we just have to rub along as best we can in somebody else's idea of a good thinking environment.

Given that many of us now work in the knowledge economy and that we are being paid to think rather than to undertake repetitive manual work, it makes sense to ponder upon the ideal conditions that enable us to think to best effect.

In terms of physical environments, there is a touch of horses for courses about this. So what's your optimal thinking environment? You may know the answer to that question straight away or this may be the first time you've ever thought about it. If the latter is the case, then a useful starting point might be to reflect on what has worked best for you in the past.

Perhaps your best 'thinking environment' depends on the place. Maybe time is a more important factor. Is there a particular place or time of day when you tend to be at your most creative and capable? If so, what do you do to protect that space from unhelpful distractions?

Remember that sometimes what we think of as optimal for us is just what's most familiar. You might well find that the short-term pain of trying something new yields long-term gain when you find better ways of doing things.

Here's an idea for you…

Set aside the time to reflect on when and where you are at your mental best. Do you think best in company or on your own? Do you think better at the last minute, or does that feel like pressure you could happily do without? Do you think best when you have a specific question/problem/issue you want to address or do your best ideas come to you apparently unbidden out of the

ether?

Defining idea

‘People think better when they can arrive, look around, and notice that the place reflects their value – to the people there and to the event. It is a silent form of appreciation.’

NANCY KLINE

10. Smash it up

Want to try a new angle on being creative? Take a break from the digital world.

Have you noticed how much creativity these days has nothing at all to do with handling and manipulating physical objects? Instead we play with ideas and concepts; we build ‘creative economies’; we use computers to develop ‘virtual presences’. Yet a lot of the language of digital creativity refers to quite violent physical processes: we rip and burn music; we hit websites; we trash files. So, just for a change, get physical and spend some time enjoying the tactile quality of exploring physical objects.

Some artists perform acts of violence on everyday things. (Consider Damien Hirst’s treatment of cows!) This is more to do with breaking down barriers with their past than breaking new ground. Consider the play of young children, or young animals in the zoo: it involves an inordinate amount of smashing and bashing. Out of this physical exertion, creative thought processes emerge.

To divorce creativity from the business of making and manipulating is bogus. If nothing else, keeping your hands busy will allow your brain to wander fruitfully. Concentrating on the physical properties of the world around you is also a traditional way of connecting with your spiritual side. It’s no coincidence that most religions adopt a series of physical rituals as part of the act of worship.

Pick up something within easy reach right now – a coffee cup, a phone, whatever – and spend a few minutes manipulating it with your hands. Explore its surface with your fingers, feel its texture, and enjoy its weight as you raise and lower it. Start getting under its skin. Scratch it. Knock it about a bit. Perhaps drop it from a height onto a hard surface – and if your once-cherished item is now in bits, are there sharp fragments with a different texture? Do the dents and bumps reflect light in an interesting way?

Begin to see how smashing things up can change the way you perceive things and nurture your creative train of thought.

Here’s an idea for you…

If you really don’t like the idea of screwing around with real objects, check out a great website (sodaplay.com/creators/soda/items/constructor) which allows you to construct and play with a mind-boggling array of virtual objects that can adopt amazing physical behaviours.

Defining idea

‘Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction.’

PABLO PICASSO

11. Take a new view

Changing your point of view rearranges your physical relationship with everything around you.

You've probably already been told several times to 'consider the bigger picture'. But how do you get yourself into a position to do it? The next time you want to get a better handle on a situation, try and inspect it from on high, either literally, by standing on a chair or climbing a ladder, or metaphorically, by imagining yourself looking from very far away at all the things that are currently up close and personal. This will help you gain some mental and emotional distance from the things and people you work with, and help you to think more clearly about the possibilities open to you.

Taking different viewpoints can also force conceptual changes – like thinking about a door as a 'portal' instead of just a door. Here's an exercise you can try in the privacy of your own desk. Take a relatively small object, such as a cup, stapler or bulldog clip. Now subject your object to a series of experiments that will force you to look at things in a different way. Keep a notebook handy and write down all the thoughts that occur to you.

Turn your object upside down. How has its shape changed? Does it look like something else? How has its function been impaired by being upside down? How might it become useful as something other than what it is? Draw it roughly with your non-drawing hand so that you have a deliberately naïve and scruffy sketch. What does it look like now?

The important thing is always to challenge yourself about how you perceive the object, how you use and abuse it, and what it could potentially become given your changed perspective.

Here's an idea for you…

Changing your point of view needn't always be about looking – you can use your other senses too. Instead of concentrating on what things look like, make a note about how they feel (rough, smooth, warm, cold, soft, hard) or smell.

Defining idea

'Cinema, radio, television, magazines are a school of inattention: people look without seeing, listen in without hearing.'

ROBERT BRESSON, French film director

12. Take risks

What would you put on the line to be more creative? Risk taking can radically change the way you live.

We all have very different ideas about what risk actually is. For some, the potential embarrassment of singing in public is just too risky. For others, climbing a mountain comes under the heading ‘fun’ despite the dangers. In the field of creativity, some people are willing to risk social exclusion, imprisonment, serious injury or even death for their work

How conservative or radical you want to be with your ideas is very much a personal decision, but you do need to understand the scale by which you can measure those ideas. For example, think back carefully to moments in your life when you have felt at risk or exposed in public. How did you react to each situation? Analysing these events honestly should give you a closer reading of what your personal fears and inhibitions are. You might have been very creative in ignoring or suppressing them but you should also think of developing creative ideas that confront and expose those fears.

Another important question regarding your ‘risk assessment’ is: what have you got to lose? List all of the things in your life that you value; that define who you are; that make you happy. Score the importance of each out of ten. Now, take the most important things and think of an action or a situation that would put each one in jeopardy. Make each the subject matter for your next creative project and consider how you would cope with losing them – or at least exposing your own dependency on them in public. Follow through the consequences of some of these – what kind of creative work would lead to such losses or exposure?

Even if you don’t take this line of thinking any further, you should now be more aware of what kind of creative risks you really are prepared to take, and what risks you’re actively choosing to avoid.

Here’s an idea for you…

Draw a square grid. Mark the left-hand side as ‘Safe’, the right as ‘Dangerous’, the bottom as ‘Serious’ and the top as ‘Silly’. Now position your creative ideas on the grid by marking a dot with your pencil. Serious and safe ideas live somewhere in the bottom left corner. What would you have to do to them to push them into other areas?

Defining idea

‘It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do

not dare that they are difficult.’

SENECA

13. Creatively swipe

Most innovations lift ideas from existing elements. Improve your personal creativity by mixing from other sources.

Author Douglas Adams wrote of ‘the fundamental interconnectedness of all things’ – namely, it is possible to forge a meaningful connection between all sorts of seemingly disparate items. Most creative ideas are just that: two or more existing elements are ‘borrowed’ and connected in a new and novel fashion. Very rarely, if ever, do ideas emerge totally without ancestry.

We can use this idea if we have a specific problem that we want to address. For example, we may want to raise £1000 for charity. To get the creative juices going about how to raise the cash, we decide to try free association to get some ideas. Begin by picking a word at random. Whatever you come up with has the potential to spark your thinking.

Say we come up with the word ‘Apollo’. What else does it bring to mind, and what might those things have to do with our goal of raising money? Associations could go: ‘Greek god’, ‘moon missions’ and ‘theatre’. That might lead us to the movie *Apollo 13* … which starred Tom Hanks … who did the voice-over for the character Woody in the movie *Toy Story*, etc. This might then lead us to the idea of raising money by getting people to donate old toys, or perhaps asking a local cinema to help out with a charity screening of a film.

Granted, neither of those ideas is irresistible. However, you can keep the process going for longer on the basis that the more options you have, the more likely it is that something will spark a flash of inspiration.

Here’s an idea for you…

Try ‘The Metaphor Game’ as a way to open up new insights about something. Ask: if X (the thing you want to understand better) were a Y, what sort of Y would it be? (For example, if X was a singer, what sort of singer would it be? With a few possibilities, you can start exploring their significance.

Defining idea

‘Only connect.’

E. M. FORSTER

14. What chance?

Ever been amazed to bump into somebody you haven't seen for years? Here's why it might not be all that amazing.

No, it can't be. It is. Your old school chum Piggy Malone, and he's getting onto the same plane as you! 'Well', says Piggy, 'what are the chances of this happening?' You ask Piggy where he's sitting; it turns out that he's sitting in the same row as you. Staggering!

Scenarios like this are played out every minute of the day. Whether we call these events coincidences, synchronicities or fate, the reality is that these occurrences are actually a lot more common than we might imagine.

Take the aeroplane seat coincidence, for example. Let's say that there were 180 seats on the plane, set out in 30 rows of 6. On the face of it, the chances of you sitting in row 7 are 6 chances out of 180 (a 1-in-30 chance). The same goes for Piggy. So, the chances of you both sitting in the same row are 1 in 30 or 1 in 900, depending on who you ask.

Actually, here's how it works. You've already been allocated a place in row 7 and Piggy checks in after you. He could be allocated any one of the 179 remaining seats. There are five remaining seats in your row, so Piggy's chances of being in the same row are 5 in 179, or 1 in just under 36. However, that presumes that check-in staff allocate flight seats on a totally random basis. What if it's airline policy to cluster similar types of passenger together? You and Piggy went to school together so you are of a similar age and you are both travelling on your own and carrying briefcases. Hence, you both appear to airline staff to be business people – i.e. "similar". So, in reality, there might only be about 12 seats in two rows on the plane that you were both likely to be assigned, and so the chances of you being in the same row are 50:50. All of a sudden, sharing a row with an old schoolmate isn't quite the jaw-dropping coincidence you both thought.

Here's an idea for you…

Get to grips with the laws of probability to think incisively about the true causes of events we might normally consider random and better grasp how the world truly works. Take a college class or at least buy a book on the subject – Innumeracy by John Allen Paulos is worth a read.

Defining idea

'Most people use statistics the way a drunk uses a lamp post. More for support than illumination.'

MARK TWAIN

15. Bin your best work

The key parts of a creative product may not be obvious. Sometimes it pays to take out the best bits, and see what's left.

Yes, you heard right. Leave the bathwater, throw out the baby – and let the one underneath come up for air.

You've probably spent hours going through a piece of creative work that doesn't quite hang together, wondering what the weak element is so that you can expunge it. But quite often it's the ideas and sequences that you love – the bits that seem to 'work' for you – that are throwing everything else out of balance. So, be brave, take a deep breath and rub out the absolutely best thing about your work: then see how everything else stands up. You might be surprised by how even and harmonious the resulting elements are.

Curiously, you might even find that when you take something seemingly significant out, the ideas and themes that were represented in those best bits are in fact still present in the work – you just hadn't noticed them. Script editors have a brutal way of talking about this process, referring to it as 'killing your babies'; that is, accepting that some of the great ideas on which the project seemed to depend at first will now have to die in order to rescue the piece as a whole.

In films, it's not uncommon for a 'big scene' to end up on a cutting room floor – a scene where some key action takes place or a revelation is made, such as a character finally getting to say something that had been suppressed until that point. These moments very often appear overblown in the context of the movie as a whole. Take them out and the rest of the movie all of a sudden becomes more subtle, with its references to something never seen or said.

Here's an idea for you…

Edit your photo collection by taking out all the best photos. Now organise everything that's left into one single sequence. You should find that your collection has a much more homogeneous look and feel. It may even represent a slightly more powerful pictorial record of your life, since you are now seeing it in a clearer version.

Defining idea

'Try any goddam thing you like, no matter how boringly normal or outrageous. If it works, fine. If it doesn't, toss it. Toss it even if you love it.'

STEPHEN KING

16. Seek out criticism

How do you get people to criticise you and your work – without it being too humiliating or hurtful?

One of the main problems about criticism is that it's all too often seen as a negative thing. But constructive criticism isn't just about picking holes in other people's buildings. It's perfectly possible – nay, essential – for your chosen critics to find the positive aspects of your work and to tell you what you're good at. In fact, we insist that you always ask people first to tell you what they actually like about what you do before allowing them to put the boot in.

Sadly, the plain truth is that it's always much easier to get bad criticism than good, which is particularly irksome if you don't really know what is good yourself. People just have a natural tendency to be negative about new ideas.

Remember: the aim with all good criticism is not to kill off creativity, just to kill off bad technique. So, don't accept an 'it's very nice, dear' (i.e. never get your mum to be your critic). Shun the knee-jerk 'I love it' you can get from friends who are trying to be supportive. Get specific. Ask them: 'What do you think of this bit?' Without waiting to be asked, explain the thinking behind your work so they have something to think about and react to.

Try to retain your self-belief. Do not accept wholesale assassination of your ideas from anyone. This is a particularly sensitive issue when your project is at an early stage of development and very fragile. Too much tough love or insensitive comments can be fatal.

Also, you need different kinds of critics at different stages of your creative development. For example, people with no understanding of your process probably aren't that useful to you until you have completed your project and you have an end product that requires evaluation.

Here's an idea for you…

To defend yourself against people's natural negativity, don't ask neutral questions like: 'So, what do you think?' Encourage your chosen critics to be positive and give them direction with something like: 'What bits did you enjoy?' or 'What did I get right, then?'

Defining idea

'Can you tell what it is yet?'

ROLF HARRIS

17. Don’t do lunch

Drink too much, stay up late, take the morning off – do all the wrong things and THEN start being creative…

In the middle of the day you should either be working obsessively or recovering from a night on the tiles. By avoiding all the usual times for eating and sleeping, you can learn to step outside the normal social timetable. One of Bruce Mau’s statements in his inspiring Incomplete Manifesto for Growth is: ‘Stay up late. Strange things happen when you’ve gone too far, been up too long, worked too hard, and you’re separated from the rest of the world.’

Certainly it’s important to be persistent when attacking a creative problem and to keep working even when you feel like giving up. If you push yourself – don’t bother having that break, going to lunch or heading for bed – eventually something will happen.

Disrupted work patterns like working alone at night can have strange effects. The combination of silence, the dark and a sense that the rest of the world is asleep can give rise to thoughts and feelings that you might not have access to during the day. Charles Dickens was a notorious night owl, but instead of just sitting in his room working, he’d actually go out in the wee small hours and walk for miles. Many of the characters inhabiting his fiction are drawn from his encounters with strange folk miles from home in the middle of the night.

Obviously, with wandering around at night there’s the fear that you might be mugged or find yourself in a difficult situation with a complete stranger. However, that’s part of the creative exercise. You can use that fear to take you to places you wouldn’t otherwise go. And working your way through a strange and difficult situation is always going to give rise to creative material and memories that you can draw on later.

Staying up late, drinking too much and then sleeping in is, of course, another great way of missing lunch.

Here’s an idea for you…

Try drinking all day instead of slaving at your desk. Stay up until four in the morning and behave quite badly and you’ll inevitably start looking at the world in a different way. You’ll also have to deal with the hangovers and feeling less than good, but strange things will spring to mind when you’re in that tired, fuzzy state.

Defining idea

‘Always make the effort to take things one step beyond.’
MICHAEL IAN KAYE, designer

18. Learn optimism

If you believe that there's always a creative solution to be found, you'll find you're right.

Yes, life events – the death of a parent, partner or child; suffering clinical depression; extended periods of illness; getting divorced; and so on – can significantly affect our outlook. But for the vast majority of those who are inclined towards pessimism, it is still possible to build a more positive view of oneself and the way the world is. As Abraham Lincoln once put it: 'Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be'.

You might be thinking that the world needs its fair sprinkling of optimists and pessimists and so *vive la différence*. That may be true, but the fact is that optimists enjoy themselves more, tend to be more successful in their careers and are better at coming up with solutions to problems. Certainly, in the context of being extraordinarily creative, having a positive outlook on life reaps many rewards.

In his book Learned Optimism, Martin Seligman – a Professor of Psychology – offers a way forward for those with a less cheery outlook on life. He suggests that we have control over our emotional reaction to adversity. When it strikes, how we think and what we believe determines how we feel and what we do – it's our choice. We need to understand that: (1) every failure is an opportunity to learn; (2) we can change; and (3) success depends on effort.

Be prepared to challenge any self-defeating pessimistic thoughts by asking yourself key questions – 'Am I really helpless in this tough situation?' 'What are the real chances of a catastrophe?' 'Is there another way to explain this event?' 'Did they sack me because I truly am rubbish at my job?' Find as many answers as you can but then focus on the positives – 'Maybe now's the time to retrain to do something I'd really enjoy' – and you'll start to be able to look on the bright side of life.

Here's an idea for you…

Look at something you've written recently. What's your ratio of positive to negative words? Intentionally use more optimistic words in your writing and you can start to become more optimistic in your thinking, which in turn could lead to achieving better results.

Defining idea

'No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new heaven to the human spirit.'

HELEN KELLER

19. Make your own tools

Avoid using the same tools of your trade as everyone else and you'll be that little bit different.

Despite using a pen or pencil every day of your life, you've probably never thought of making one – have you?! As kids, we experiment with different types of writing – chalk on the pavement, sticks in the sand, crayons on the living room wall. And as we get a bit older we often get a bit choosier about our writing implements, cherishing a special 'exam' pen, using different coloured inks in our fountain pens, using calligraphic pens, etc. If this is not exactly 'making' our own pens, it's certainly a form of customisation and personalisation. Somewhere along the line, most of us lose this passion for pens, though, and just use the first biro we can find.

Our basic writing tools as adults are often foisted upon us, via the office stationery cupboard, or picked up at conferences, found in hotels or handed out by charities. Perhaps it's time, therefore, you went back to having a special pen – one you have actually bought yourself and which 'suits' your style of writing and you consciously enjoy using. You could even go out of your way to have a pen specially made.

Alternatively, consider the 'fitness for purpose' of each implement you use. What is the right one to write with outside in the rain, or in the dark at the cinema or on a rattly train?

How a creative tool gets made often defines how it is used. This is easy to ignore when you're faced with something as complex as a computer. Technology is often sold to us because of its supposed ability to 'set us free'. But sometimes, what we're buying is creative constraint. You should never forget that your word processing software package has been 'made' for you – and the way it's been made will affect the way you process words.

Here's an idea for you…

Try using another software application to write a letter – your spreadsheet software, for example – and see how different your output turns out to be.

Defining ideas

'Tools amplify our capacities so even a small tool can make a big difference.'

BRUCE MAU, designer

'Men have become the tools of their tools.'

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

20. Use the wrong tools

When is a screwdriver not a screwdriver? (You might have to think about this one…)

We've all done it. You have an urgent need for a hammer and can't find one. So you pick up a a heavy book or an old shoe and bash away with that. Sometimes it does the job. Often it doesn't, and you may well go through several household items – damaging or destroying some of them – before you give in and dedicate your time to finding the hammer instead.

Either way, you've learned something about 'hammerness' – what it takes to be a good or a bad hammer – and maybe also you've developed some thoughts about why hammers aren't considered to be 'a good read' and don't necessarily make great footwear.

Really creative people can use this kind of activity as the jumping-off point for making all kinds of creative connections between hammers and shoes. Consider the marching hammers that Gerald Scarfe created for the movie The Wall – tools made for walking. He instinctively made a series of creative connections – from thematic concept to hammer, from hammer to hammer-as-marching-boot.

It's good not to take an object for granted. Try considering it not just as a single-purpose device, but as something that you can use in many different ways – and also seeing it as a symbol.

It's actually a test of your ingenuity to pick up the wrong tool and still manage to do something creative with it. For example, one of the finest traditions in slapstick comedy survives thanks to the insistence of funnymen throughout the ages not to use frying pans only for frying. 'Ha-ha! Bonk!'

Here's an idea for you

Choosing the 'wrong' tool might just mean choosing a new tool, or adapting something so it becomes the 'right' tool. Physicist Nicholas Kurti used early microwave technology to create the 'Inverted Baked Alaska' (frozen meringue filled with piping hot apricot purée). What new tools can you find new uses for?

Defining idea…

'A bell is a cup until it is struck.'

WIRED

21. Little means a lot

Cultivate everyday ingenuity – don't obsess over that one big idea. There's value in having lots of little ideas and insights.

Kaizen is a Japanese term for a management philosophy that focuses on achieving continuous, incremental improvement in all aspects of the work being carried out. It's a philosophy that has been at the heart of Japanese working practices since the wide-scale adoption of total quality management methods in the years of reconstruction following the Second World War.

The great thing about kaizen is that it recognises the cumulative benefit of a lot of small improvements. The spirit of kaizen is likely to be found in the workers who share their idea for shaving a second or two off the manufacturing process by slightly repositioning where a particular tool is kept.

What this means for us in our day-to-day lives is that there is real value and benefit in being alert to those opportunities to do things just slightly better and to make lots of small improvements by implementing lots of small ideas.

Let's take an example. Your highly talented daughter wants to start taking singing lessons but they will set you back around a thousand pounds – and your bank balance tells you the money's not available. However, think of the small fortune that many of us fritter away each year and you'll find there are numerous ways to achieve decent savings. Reduce your intake of wine by four bottles a week (that alone could save you the money in a year); or cut out the early morning cake and latte on the way to work. You're sorted!

That's just one example. You can apply the same principle of making lots of little changes to just about any aspect of life. The keys you can never find – start storing them consistently in the same place. The porch light you've been meaning to fix once you get a bulb – buy a few spares so that you're never caught short again. Start walking to work. Sell the CDs you no longer play.

Here's an idea for you…

Encourage your family or your work colleagues to share their ideas for making little improvements about the place. One company runs a 'Best little idea of the month' competition that actively seeks employees' ideas, and the smaller the better. It's a great success because it makes a virtue of the smallness of the idea and encourages a level of playfulness.

Defining idea…

‘A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.’

Chinese proverb

22. It’s playtime

If it’s daytime, it must be playtime. Work out how every interaction of the day can be ‘played’.

People who turn everything into a game are often portrayed as wily operators, or mavericks who don’t really take anything seriously. But nearly every interaction you have in the world is something of a game – in most cases, you just haven’t worked the rules out yet.

Gameplayers have a lot to teach us about exposing the basic working parts of any experience and identifying its creative value. If you can learn to master the ‘rules’ of any given situation, often it means that you can ‘play’ that situation more creatively each time it occurs. Not only are you staying alert to the potential of the moment, you’re also becoming hyper-sensitive to your surroundings.

In a way, many people are already playing their lives as games by not only adding a soundtrack to the day, with portable music players, but also using mobile text messaging to communicate with ‘players’, setting themselves ‘missions’ throughout the day, acquiring ‘kit’ and winning ‘powers’ or ‘rewards’. All the basic ingredients of a PlayStation game.

Try to map out a typical day of yours as if it were a console game. You may well reveal patterns that you hadn’t seen before. Perhaps a new soundtrack will emerge. You may also find that you achieve more distance from events in which you’re usually immersed.

By seeing it all as a game, you can stay above it all and therefore learn to be more dispassionate about assessing the value of various experiences. Ultimately you’ll gain an instinctive understanding of such high-falutin’ concepts as ‘flow’ and ‘immersion’ – those moments in both games and real life when you feel completely at ease in terms of your concentration, your awareness, your appreciation, your instincts, physical ability and skill level; in fact, exactly the kind of feeling you want others to have when they’re immersed in something you’ve created.

Here’s an idea for you…

Start analysing your actions. When you poured your coffee this morning, did you do it ‘better’ than yesterday – less spillage? How could you do it better? This analysis will make you more self-aware and open your eyes to better ways of doing even the most mundane things.

Defining idea…

‘Life must be lived as play.’

PLATO

23. Play your part

Using role-play in your daily life can help you discover things about yourself and other people.

Most of us at some time of our life have wondered what it might be like to be someone else. It may be a character from history or a best friend you admire. Whoever it is, it's entirely natural to try and emulate that person.

By acting like other people, we are trying to discover a little more about ourselves. It starts at an early age, imitating mum and dad: the obvious way to learn what it might be like to be an adult. Even when we think we've done all our growing up, we still use role-play to develop our skills and build up our experience. For example, most business managers don't receive much formal training about how to manage. Instead, they learn from their own bosses. They 'act out the part' of being a business manager until they've gained enough experience to actually become the part.

Human beings love to copy each other. Yet, pretending to be someone else is pretty much frowned upon in conventional society. Thus, when we tell you it's good to indulge in a bit of role-play, we're assuming it's something you'll do surreptitiously. The play-acting we're suggesting isn't wigs and make-up; it's more internalised – a form of creative projection whereby you consider how situations might play out differently if you were actually somebody else.

For example, in a particularly stressful meeting, where someone accuses you of screwing-up, you might usually become defensive and touchy. But if today you've decided to be a more silent and laid-back person, you'll almost certainly end up in a different place by the end of the meeting – both in terms of how you reacted to events and how you moved past them. Such exercises, then, are very much about not being your normal self – and thus hopefully becoming clearer about who your normal self is.

Here's an idea for you…

Put yourself into other people's shoes – it's a must when developing new work. Imagine you're designing a chicken hutch. Obviously, you'd make it appeal to the chicken owner, who's paying for it. But a really good hutch designer will also consider other people with some stake – partners, children, neighbours. The very best hutch designer will also think like a chicken – and a fox!

Defining idea…

'Play is the exultation of the possible.'

MARTIN BUBER, existentialist philosopher

24. Laugh a lot

Develop strategies for having a giggle without becoming the class clown.

If you don't look like you're enjoying your creative work, it's unlikely that anyone else will take much pleasure in it either.

Whenever you're gathering people together around a creative project, you should always try to inject a touch of party atmosphere. We humans love to laugh. While it's possible to laugh by yourself when reading a funny book or watching a funny film, research suggests that people are about thirty times more likely to laugh when they're in a group situation than when alone. Laughter is contagious.

Encouraging laughter is a good tactic. Most successful presentations and 'pitches', be it communicating ideas or selling stuff, are those where everyone in the room is having a good time: those that include both humorous episodes that produce shared laughter as well as the serious, thought-provoking core message.

Humour is also a great way to generate relief in a difficult situation. Film-makers, for example, often build up the tension or suspense only to break it with a side comment or comic incident (think of James Bond's silly quips after some fight scenes). This device allows the viewer to relieve pent-up emotions and get ready for the next build-up.

All stories or situations create tension to a greater or lesser degree. Laughter is nature's way of cleansing our system – a healthy built-in stress buster. It can also be a powerful tool for spreading disorder (as among corpsing media presenters) and undermining authority (as with satire). If you feel your creative life is being stifled by working in an environment that's too well ordered and secure, acting the clown can break things up very effectively.

Here's an idea for you…

Many people find circus clowns very threatening because they behave anarchically. They are the only acts allowed to perform outside the main ring, in among the audience. Do you have a 'main ring' in which everyone you know performs? Try stepping out of it and see what happens.

Defining idea…

'As soon as you have made a thought, laugh at it.'

LAO TZU

25. Be childlike

Spot the difference between adult fun and child fun (and they say that size doesn't matter …).

You used to be one, you know – a kid, that is. And you should never forget it. In fact, you should do your best to remember not just that you were once a child, but also how it felt and how you behaved. If this is difficult, find yourself a small child and watch them closely (with the parents' permission, naturally). In particular, watch them at play and try to relate this to the game techniques and forms of play that you used to enjoy as a child.

Part of what's interesting about this process should be the growing realisation that a lot of your adult creative work is actually replaying a lot of the things you liked doing as a kid in some form or other. Not only are you still drawing from the same sources of inspiration (subconsciously, maybe), but you're probably still drawn to the same creative spaces and the same situations. What you should be noting is both what has remained the same and what's changed now that you're a grown-up.

There are certainly also some aspects of childlike behaviour you may have forsaken as an adult – both the good bits and the bad bits. For example, you may have lost some powers of concentration that it would be good to get back – the ability to get obsessed. You may also have learnt how to modulate your personality so that you don't have so many tantrums! This is generally a good thing. But then again – perhaps you aren't having enough tantrums as an adult to ensure that you get the space you need to be creative.

Certainly you should have broadened your vocabulary, which should be useful to you as a creative person. Don't confuse this, however, with being a more effective communicator. Listen to kids talking and you'll quickly realise that their limited vocabulary doesn't stop them tackling very complex concepts. In fact, their use of simple words, slang, gesture, repetitions and the music of their voices should be a challenge to your adult ideas of what effective communication is.

Here's an idea for you…

Try to explain your creative ideas in simple language to a small child. This is a great way of getting a new perspective on your work.

Defining idea…

'Look at life with the eyes of a child.'

HENRI MATISSE

26. Festina lente

No, not a coffee, but some paradoxical advice in Latin meaning ‘hurry slowly’. Extol the tortoise mind; shackle the hare brain.

Ever found yourself rushing around trying to get something done in double-quick time, only to have some wag chirp up with the advice ‘More haste, less speed’? Tempting though it is to visit unimaginable violence on the head of this time-rich jerk, the little pest may actually have a point.

According to Guy Claxton, Visiting Professor of Learning Science at the University of Bristol, the human mind can come up with any number of unusual, interesting and important insights if it is given the time. What Claxton terms the Tortoise Mind will often deliver intuitive and insightful answers to questions and problems while its opposite number, the Hare Brain, dashes around frenetically, and fruitlessly.

The essence of tapping into our Tortoise Mind, then, is to recognise and accept that answers to some problems cannot be engineered, controlled or rushed in any way. Unfortunately, in the work and life culture of the nanosecond noughties, all too often the Tortoise Mind is starved of the time that it needs, and consequently its abilities are neglected. So, what can we do to give ‘slow and leisurely’ a fighting chance against ‘fast and furious’?

For a start, we can decide to work to real rather than artificial deadlines. We’ve all been subjected to having to complete work for an organisational bigwig, which ‘absolutely must be on my desk first thing on Tuesday’, only to discover that it then languishes unread for days, maybe even weeks. So we should learn to challenge the deadlines that people give us, and in turn make sure that we don’t inflict unnecessarily tight deadlines on others.

We can also try to build more ‘quiet reflection time’ into our busy lives – go for a stroll at lunchtime, listen to a calming piece of music, meditate and so on. The key to success is for us to acknowledge and recognise that different problems require different approaches and are likely to need the Tortoise Mind to mull things over.

Here’s an idea for you…

Whenever you can, aim to become less timebound. For example, don’t wear a watch unless you have to; don’t answer the phone if you want to be left alone; eat more slowly and savour your food; walk as often as possible.

Defining idea…

‘A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action.’
RALPH ELLISON

27. Inside the box

Find out where to store all those ideas and sparks of inspiration you haven't got round to dealing with yet.

The most obvious way to sort your ideas into categories and box them up is to institute a filing system. Problem is, filing – as we all know – is one of the most boring activities known to man.

A huge proportion of the stuff we put into filing cabinets never sees the light of day again. The main reason for this is we don't bother making notes about 'why' we're filing anything. And there's never an action point assigned to the things we squirrel away. We actively decide in most cases to do absolutely nothing about the things we thought were worth saving from the bin. If you're not careful, all you'll have to show for keeping a whole load of newspaper cuttings is a pile of newspaper cuttings and no new ideas.

The way out of this is to make the filing cabinet your playground. Crucially, your thinking about all the things you store up in little boxes needs to be associative – you need to develop tools and techniques for mixing and matching your clippings, organising them into thematic clusters or charting them on a map in some way.

To make this kind of ongoing filing and retrieval system work really well, you have to get into the discipline of annotating and 'tagging' everything you come into contact with as you go along. A simple way to understand how this might work is to sign up to the Amazon online store (www.amazon.co.uk) and start adding items to your Wishlist section. You don't have to buy anything. You just log your interest and, as you do it, your Wishlist grows. You can annotate this with reasons 'why' you want this item.

Very quickly you will have created a list of things that interest you, all sat alongside each other. Connections and themes might grow as you sift back through this list. And since your Wishlist is 'free to air', all your friends can quickly discover what to buy you for your birthday.

Here's an idea for you…

If digital displays are not your thing, revert back to old-fashioned cabinets. Consider creating your own display cabinet, containing whatever you consider to be interesting, beautiful or talismanic.

Defining idea…

'Shadow boxes become poetic theaters or settings wherein are

metamorphosed the element of a childhood pastime.’

JOSEPH CORNELL

28. Drift

Learning the gentle art of going nowhere in particular and bumping into things can help to spark your creativity.

This is the easiest creative exercise you're ever going get: just stumble around in any direction and make it look like you really don't know what you're doing. There's a fine tradition of this stumbling and bumbling within all forms of art, but this key idea of 'drift' or dérive has probably been best employed and explained by Guy Debord, the French intellectual. Dérive for Debord usually involved bouncing around Paris drunk, following some deliberately vague rules, the main one being 'drop your usual motives for movement and action, relations, work and leisure activities'.

By deliberately not having any specific creative aim or output in mind from the outset, Debord and others were attempting to remove themselves from the 'made-ness' of modern life, the capitalistic urge to always turn creativity into product and experience life only as consumption (or shopping). By avoiding the manufactured elements of your experience (your schooling, your class, your job) you can perceive something more authentic and 'real'.

Within this, there are two basic concepts that you might like to experiment with. The first is the idea of spurning the straight and narrow for the playful and lateral. Learn to love the free associative wander. The second is to play with the idea of useless maps and dabble in a bit of psychogeography: 'the study of specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals'. Debord's example of a psychogeographic excursion was to use a map of London as his means for navigating a region of Germany. By doing so, his route would be random and his response to the geography of the German towns would be spontaneous.

The British artist and musician Bill Drummond also likes to play with these ideas (you can check his work out at www.penkiln-burn.com). He once planned a tour for the band Echo & the Bunnymen based on the idea that their route would draw out a giant pair of bunny ears across the map of the UK.

Here's an idea for you…

Go for a walk online. Use an arbitrary system of clicks and links to lose yourself entirely in the Web, and confront yourself with loads of thought-provoking online material along the way.

Defining idea…

‘So you see, imagination needs noodling – long, inefficient, happy idling, dawdling and puttering.’

BRENDA UELAND, writer

29. Make decisions

Debating the ‘best’ decision can lead to actually deciding nothing. Good decision making is often a ‘teams and timing’ thing.

Like good comedy, the key to good decision making is… timing. Give yourself time to think, but don’t procrastinate. Before we get going, let’s knock on the head the notion that ‘being decisive’ and ‘making good decisions’ are necessarily the same thing. Let’s remember that Margaret Thatcher, the model of a decisive Prime Minister, introduced the disastrous poll tax.

Being indecisive can be equally bad. Unnecessary procrastination often leads to results every bit as dismal as those achieved by the obsessively decisive. Think of all the appeasers in history who were just that bit too inclined to do nothing.

Good decision makers seem to have three key abilities, namely to: gather the appropriate evidence (and ignore irrelevances); weigh up the evidence correctly; make the decision at just the right time (neither too early nor too late).

Sometimes decision making is a solo activity – say, when you are the only person with all the information necessary to make that decision. On other occasions, we can reach a better quality decision by involving others. In his book The Wisdom of Crowds, columnist James Surowiecki explores how large groups of people can consistently deploy their pooled wisdom to outstrip individuals – no matter how brilliant the individual – in solving problems, fostering innovation and coming to wise decisions.

When it comes to making the decision at the right time, there is obviously no ‘one-size-fits-all’ moment. Every decision has to be assessed in its own context. Generally speaking, you’ll find it’s more important to make the right decision than the ‘best’ decision. Every decision involves a level of risk, and some decisions are more critical than others to get absolutely right.

If there are a number of ways of doing something, and it looks like most of them would work well enough, there’s little value to be gained – and much time to be lost – in agonising over finding the best possible solution. On those occasions, just be pragmatic: implement a perfectly satisfactory solution – even if it’s not absolutely optimal.

Here’s an idea for you…

Practice making some ‘just-in-time’ decisions – neither premature, and thus

risking not having all the necessary evidence, nor too late and thus missing the boat. Do this by making your decision the moment before you need to take action.

Defining idea…

‘A good plan implemented today is better than a perfect plan implemented tomorrow.’

GEORGE S. PATTON

30. Genius on the go

God is creating all the time, everywhere. Do likewise: use the back of a cab or the bus stop as your studio.

The famous arts curator Hans Ulrich Obrist once organised a conference with all of the usual infrastructure – the informal chats, the lunches – but no actual conference. It was hugely successful and spawned many ongoing collaborations. This shows that there are spaces beyond and between our traditional workplaces where it is still possible to get work done.

By setting up shop, as it were, in unfamiliar places you are far more likely to meet new, unfamiliar people and pick up on the kind of creative stimuli you couldn't hope to find in your normal studio or office. The easiest way to start feeding off this idea is to identify and spend time in the places you normally just pass through. Similarly, you should strive to be productive in the places where you usually just wait and 'kill time'.

Of course, advances in mobile technology mean that we can get a lot more done on the move these days. It's clear, though, that in many cases we use this technology to do extra layers of quite meaningless communication, such as telling our loved ones that 'we're on the train' or drafting an email that we otherwise wouldn't have bothered writing at all.

Be careful you don't use your mobile phone as the means for actually avoiding any real sense of belonging with the space you have chosen to occupy. The most creative communication you can have in the back of a cab, for example, is usually with the cab driver, not with anyone on the phone. And part of the point of occupying transitory and 'interstitial' spaces is precisely to put yourself in the way of a new and unusual interactions, not to simply replicate the processes that go on at home or in the office.

Here's an idea for you…

Go to the airport when you don't have a flight to catch, and just hang out. Airports have an amazing ambience, and the big ones never actually sleep. Think of yourself as a citizen of the airport, settle in for a few hours and start doing some creative work.

Defining idea…

'When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer – say, travelling in a carriage or walking after a good meal – it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly.'

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

31. Innovate

In our unpredictable world, success goes to people who have a natural curiosity and who are willing to experiment.

Successful innovation – whether for a company or for us in our private lives – requires a conscious and explicit commitment, and inevitably involves risk. It is best achieved in a 'no blame' culture, which recognises that mistakes and failures are the natural and inevitable bedfellows of successful ideas. An innovative organisation is typically characterised by informality, the free flow of information, and little hierarchy or bureaucracy. Here are a few tips that will help to hone your capability in this area.

Continually challenge conventional wisdom: Question all the time. Don't be impressed by precedent. Regularly ask yourself how else you could do this, or what you would do differently if you could start again from scratch.

Listen to other people's views: Learn from the experience of others. Draw on their intuition and common sense. Encourage ideas from others. Benchmark other departments, other organisations.

Disagree constructively: Innovation depends on relentless self-questioning and the pursuit of continual improvement through constructive argument.

Network voraciously: Share your ideas, and see what reaction you get. Many problems are best solved by interdisciplinary thinking.

Fail often; capture accidents: Remember that, sometimes, getting the wrong answer is as enlightening as getting the right answer. Many of the greatest inventions were accidental – the Post-it note, for example.

Be willing to change your mind: Holding stubbornly to a point of view is not a sign of strength. The best innovators are prepared to admit that they are wrong sometimes.

…*and relax*: Take advantage of coffee breaks, cab rides and other opportunities for a few minutes' downtime. Innovative ideas often come in places and at times that can surprise us.

Here's an idea for you…

Ask naive questions that test people's assumptions. A simple yet explicit question like 'So why do we do it this way?' is a great way of revealing that, actually, the way things are done currently is often more a matter of habit than anything else.

Defining idea…

‘I can’t understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I’m frightened of the old ones.’

JOHN CAGE, composer

32. Questions galore

The key to quality thinking is asking quality questions. Give yourself a mental stretch by tackling some testing questions.

Unless you're a politician or a criminal (or possibly both), good incisive questions are to be cherished. Answered honestly, they can propel our thinking in new directions, generating fresh insights and understanding on the way, and shake us out of any mental complacency.

The following is a list of questions empirically shown to be productive. Voice them in the first person so that you can ask them initially of yourself, but they work equally well in the second person, asked of others.

The questions are in no particular sequence and it's recommended that you don't tackle them all in one go. Glance over the list and see what catches your eye.

What do I want to achieve with my life? – What should I want? – What matters to me at this time in my life? – Why do I want what I want? – Does it really matter? – What do I not question about myself? – What can I learn from this? – How ambitious am I these days? – Am I still learning and growing? – What am I afraid of losing, or gaining? – What would I like to overhear people saying about me? – What would I not like to hear said about me? – Why is my best friend my best friend? – Would winning the lottery be a blessing or a curse? – What would I do if I knew I couldn't fail? – How do I know this to be true? – In what way am I causing or reinforcing this behaviour? – If I had a year to live, what would I do with the time? – When have I felt most alive? – Does my reputation work for or against me? – What would I like to be able to do in one year's time that I can't currently do? – What action can I take rather than worrying? – What am I prepared to give up in order to …? – What do I need to find out before I go any further? – Why not?

So how did you get on? Of course, you asking yourself those questions might feel like a slightly stilted experience. For that reason, it can be worth while to get somebody else to put the questions to you. For one thing, that gets you to speak your answers aloud, and that in itself can be quite instructive. Sometimes it's only when we hear ourselves say something out loud that we realise how true it is for us (or occasionally how wrong we are!).

Here's an idea for you…

Sometimes, people's answers to your questions might not go deep enough. Use supplementary questions to get what you need: 'Can you be more

specific?’ or ‘Do you have anything else to say on this subject?’

Defining idea…

‘I refuse to answer that question on the grounds that I don’t know the answer.’

DOUGLAS ADAMS

33. Creative tourism

The alternative guide to being abroad – because being on holiday doesn't mean taking a break from creativity.

Most of us when we go on holiday achieve a huge amount of creative output in a very short space of time – often without even noticing it. You pass much of the time doing things an artist would do: taking photos, shooting video, writing (postcards), assembling items (souvenirs) and thinking about your audience (who will you write to and buy presents for?).

Since these times of your life are clearly fantastic opportunities to stretch your wings, we've got a few ideas about other ways you could be creative.

Postcards: As an interesting exercise, on your next holiday don't confine yourself to the postcards that you can buy in the shops, but dream up ones of your own. Challenge yourself, even, about what can be called a postcard and still be delivered.

Locations: Trendy guidebooks always tell you to get off the beaten track. But we say go to the popular places and think about ways to reinvigorate familiar sights. For example, how could you make a visit to the Eiffel Tower different from the norm?

Photos and videos: It's almost unthinkable to go on holiday without a camera these days but do you want the anticipation of celluloid or instant digital gratification? Instead of video footage of 'views' that would be better captured with a good camera, or meaningless sequences of people waving and kids running about, plan out what you're going to shoot as if it's a pseudo-documentary, an interview or a drama.

Sounds: Ambient sound is one of the most underrated sources of inspiration in our world. Travelling gives you the opportunity to collect an amazing array of exotic noises and unusual fragments of speech. Sometimes a tape recorder is a better thing to take on holiday than a camera.

Here's an idea for you…

Souvenir shops are full of seemingly useless stuff that you wouldn't dream of buying back home. Think, then: if you wanted to sell souvenirs to people who visited your home or your place of work, what would be in your shop?

Defining idea…

'The bandwidth of the world is greater than that of your TV set, or the Internet, or even a totally immersive, interactive, dynamically rendered,

object-oriented, real-time graphic-simulated computer experience.’

BRUCE MAU, designer

34. Remember

Here's how the memory works and some tips on what you can do to improve yours.

The past thirty years have seen tremendous advances in our understanding of how the brain works. However, as far as memory improvement is concerned, there's not a lot of new advice out there.

Back in 1956, psychologist George A. Miller's research revealed that the average human can hold only about seven items in mind at any one time. This natural limitation explains why we have developed techniques to help us extend our memory. The word 'mnemonics' is now commonly used to describe memory improvement systems. Here are some examples:

Spelling mnemonics: To remember how to spell tricky words, create memorable sentences with words whose first letters 'spell out' the word in question – RHYTHM: Rhythm Helps Your Two Hips Move.

Numeric mnemonics: To remember numbers, use sentences whose words have the number of letters corresponding to the number itself – a sentence to help us recall the value of pi (3.141592) might be 'How I wish I could calculate pi'.

Acrostics: Use the first letter of each word you are trying to remember to make a sentence – 'My Dear Aunt Sally' would help us recall the order of mathematical operations: Multiply and Divide before you Add and Subtract.

Rhyming mnemonics: 'Thirty days hath September, April, June and November.'

Chunking: To remember long numbers, break them down. So 04711998 might break down to 04 71 19 98. Combinations of numbers that are meaningful to you are even better: you might recast the number as 04 71 (the month and year I was born) and 1998 (the year our first child was born).

There are others you might find useful: number/rhyme, number/shape and the story method, to name just a few.

Here's an idea for you…

Try repeating the information as a good memory aid. Remember the children's game 'I'm going on a picnic and I'm bringing …' As each new item is added, the old items are repeated. People can often remember a large number of objects this way so try a similar concept: maybe 'I'm going to a very important meeting and I need to …'

Defining idea…

‘A memory is what is left when something happens and does not completely unhappen.’

EDWARD DE BONO

35. Ace storytelling

The everyday genius connects with people. When it comes to convincing an audience, lose the PowerPoint slides and tell a good tale.

The most powerful and appealing parts of any TV charity evening are the stories we hear of people who were in dire straits, but who – thanks to our past contributions – were able to recover and thrive. Not a PowerPoint presentation in sight. The message is simple: if you want to appeal to an audience's rational side, use logic and slides; if you want to connect with an audience at a deeper, more emotional level, tell them a story.

Given that stories have an extraordinary power to inform, educate and entertain us, it's not surprising that more and more people are turning to storytelling as a tool for consciously bringing about change in others.

In his book *The Springboard*, Stephen Denning offers us the following vital guidelines to effective storytelling:

Make your stories relevant: For a story to be effective, know as much about your audience's world as possible and try to keep the storyline recent (the fresher the better) and plausible (so it will resonate with them emotionally).

Have clear goals: It's easier to construct a story when you know in advance what you are trying to accomplish with it. Use unusual, true examples to illustrate your key points so you grip the audience (using fictitious examples to make a point weakens the impact of the story and can distract the audience).

Let the audience fill in the blanks: Provide enough detail to communicate the point, but give people some space to imagine how the story could play out. The aim is to make it as easy as possible for them to draw some personal meaning from the story.

Naturally, the best way to improve your storytelling skills is through practice. However, watching others telling stories can be informative in terms of both good and bad practice. So, the next time a charity event airs on TV, watch and give, but also watch and learn.

Here's an idea for you…

When you tell a story, sound spontaneous, not as though you've told the tale hundreds of times before. To that end, don't memorise stories word for word – go for key words and phrases. That way, you can incorporate off-the-cuff material as well.

Defining idea…

‘There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.’

URSULA LE GUIN

36. Ask for help

Give your project a boost: get some talented people to work with you. Learn how to convince them to say yes…

One great way of fine-tuning your own creativity is to work alongside the talents of others. Paying people to work on your projects is the most obvious way to build a team. However, there are some people you'd like to work with who aren't really interested in the money: they would be interested in what they might learn rather than what they might earn.

Although some people are just out of your league, there's absolutely nothing to stop you asking someone famous to work with you if you genuinely think that the collaboration might be fruitful for you both. Remember that famous people are still creative individuals like you and will be attracted to good ideas. So you may as well ask. Even if the answer is 'no', the process of preparing materials for potential meetings will give your project extra impetus.

The real challenge is to know how to ask in the right way. Celebrities, for example, don't appreciate being approached via a home phone number or email address that you've picked up on a stalker's website.

Generally, if you're dealing with someone who is already successful you may well have to approach them via an agent, a PA, a production company or some form of business representative. Naturally this means that you're in danger of being fobbed off by flunkies and people who are actually paid to get rid of people like you. It will be your track record for getting good things done, allied to the quality of your current proposition and the supporting materials you show, that will get you a foot in the door.

In terms of the materials that you generate to spark interest, always bear in mind that anyone creative looking from the outside is going to be asking the question: 'What's in it for me?' The bottom line is, if you can't make it clear why you see value in working together, the other person won't see it either.

Here's an idea for you…

Research the person or people you're contacting, but avoid coming over as an obsessive fan. Explain your interest by using a piece of their creative work to demonstrate how it fits in with your vision.

Defining idea…

'The only dumb question is the question that you don't ask.'

PAUL MacCREADY, inventor

37. Lie back, listen

Remember that being passive can be part of the creative process too.

Just because you're not doing or saying something clever right now doesn't mean you're not helping. If you're working in a creative team, it's important that you take your turn at being the listener, because everybody likes to be listened to at some point. It's important, therefore, to support a 'culture of listening' that encourages people to work through problems without interruption and propose solutions out loud before everyone else piles in with their own views.

Frankly, if you do your fair share of listening, you're much more likely to be listened to yourself when the time comes. And other team members are more likely to buy into this process if they feel they're being listened to (particularly by their superiors). Listening is also about empathising with the talker – learning to see the world from his or her perspective. If you can develop this skill, you can get on with any of the people around you.

If you've got into a situation where you are required to listen more than you speak, there are some obvious pointers about how to be really effective. Always let the other person finish making their points before you jump in. Even if you just want to agree or encourage, what you're doing is putting your ego first. Watch your body language. Keep eye contact, nod, and don't give away your feelings with sighs or frowns.

If you must talk, confine yourself at first to open questions that require something more than a yes and no. This will encourage the other person to say everything that needs to be said. Don't bore them with stories of what you did or would have done in a similar situation.

Above all, try not to do anything else but listen – don't 'fiddle'. People will notice if you're not really paying attention and will be discouraged from speaking to you again. They'll also think you're bloody rude. For your part, you'll be in danger of hearing only part of what is said.

Here's an idea for you…

Note these top tips on how NOT to listen: 1) just keep talking; 2) when you're not talking, think about what you're going to say next; 3) interrupt frequently; 4) look away; and 5) never, ever, ask clarifying questions. Courtesy of www.businesslistening.com.

Defining idea…

‘We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.’

EPICTETUS

38. Consequences

Pass ideas along a chain of people and see how the ideas change and combine as they go.

You must have played this game. Somebody draws a head, folds the paper and passes it on. The next person draws a body, folds and passes. The third person draws the legs. A strange collaborative beast is born. There are in fact all manner of ways to allow for more of the unexpected, the random and the surreal in your work.

A version of this game, called ‘The Exquisite Corpse’, was used a lot by key personalities within the surrealist movement, such as André Breton and Marcel Duchamp. They developed it as a method for assembling words into sentences at first, rather than using it for drawing pictures.

The basic idea of this kind of exercise is to get a group of people to write in sequence, with each person only seeing at the end what the previous person wrote. Try it yourself with a group of friends and see what you come up with. Once – only once – we managed to create a rhyming poem this way: ‘David Gower, David Gower; do you believe in nuclear power?’ It’s not great, we know, but it demonstrates that something can emerge out of this process of working together partially in the dark.

Quite a lot of creative collaborations actually do work in this way. It’s interesting, then, to think of all the creative output that you send to other people as just one ‘turn’ in a game of consequences, rather than a complete and whole piece of work that others should tamper with at their peril. This approach also lets you off the hook from thinking that you have to do it all, straight off the bat. Instead you could concentrate on offering a starting point only, with some kind of ‘way in’ for the next person, allowing them to continue where you left off. Alternatively you could think of simply leaving a blank space somewhere in your work for someone else to fill in.

Here’s an idea for you…

If you don’t have a collaborator, try carrying out your own acts of blind chance. Write out a seemingly normal sequence of text, then cut it up into single words or phrases and reassemble the pieces in any order.

Defining idea…

‘I used to think anyone doing anything weird was weird. Now I know that it is the people that call others weird that are weird.’

PAUL McCARTNEY

39. The one-hand clap

A paradox nudges your mind away from routine. It helps you to disengage your rational mind and to free up your intuition.

Although embracing paradox – which we'll define here as an apparently self-contradictory or counter-intuitive statement or argument – has long been an integral part of Zen teachings, we have become accustomed in western society to view the world in very narrow open/shut, black/white, either/or terms. But the most capable thinkers amongst us have always looked beyond either/or to both/and. Instead of seeing just polarisation, they see beyond the contradictions that many people find limiting and restrictive.

As professor, consultant and author Charles Handy points out in his book The Age of Paradox, 'paradox does not have to be resolved, only managed'. Certainly if we look at the world of work, paradox is at the heart of many of the apparently contradictory messages from management gurus, academics and writers. Organisations are exhorted to stick to the knitting, yet reinvent themselves; establish community and kindle the human spirit but meet the expectations of shareholders. It is no wonder that many business and community leaders take management 'fads' with a pinch of salt.

Faced with these contradictions, it's not surprising that many of us working in organisations play it safe, with the result that nothing much seems to happen. Exhortations about the need for change fall on deaf ears, and the best-laid plans for change come to nothing.

Why is it that managing paradox is so challenging for many of us? It's partly because we are unused to confronting or reconciling contradiction, and partly because many of us see paradox as a conceptual challenge rather than something that has relevance to us in our real lives.

The point about paradoxes is that we need to be alert to them. Ignoring them doesn't make them go away. It's only by embracing paradox that we give ourselves our best chance to reconcile them in our favour.

Here's an idea for you…

Paradox is part of the fabric of all our lives so we had better get used to the idea. Build up your familiarity with the notion of paradox by investing in (and reading) a book about Zen. Alternatively, put something like 'Zen quotes' into Google and see where that takes you.

Defining idea…

‘Those who try to lead the people can only do so by following the mob.’
OSCAR WILDE

40. Think laterally

A sideways look at why we should use lateral thinking

Three switches outside a windowless room are connected to three light bulbs inside the room. Can you determine which switch is connected to which bulb if you are only allowed to enter the room once? (You'll have to wait for the answer.)

Solving this problem is an example of the art of 'lateral thinking', a term coined in 1967 by Edward de Bono, a leading authority in the field of creative and conceptual thinking. On his website, de Bono offers a number of ways of viewing lateral thinking.

Lateral thinking is for changing concepts and perceptions. To be a successful lateral thinker, we need to become alert to the assumptions we make when we assess a situation. The difficulty with assumptions is that a lot of the time they serve a very useful purpose by providing us with a mental shorthand for dealing with the world.

Peter Senge, populariser of the learning organisation concept, believes that we often limit our capacity to learn because we weave webs of assumptions within which we become our own prisoners. The box, outside of which we are often encouraged to think, is actually a box of assumptions. We should ask: What are we assuming to be true today, that is or might turn out to be a wrong assumption?

OK, here's the answer to the light bulb puzzle: switch on the first switch, leave it for a minute, and then switch it off again. Then switch on the second switch and enter the room. The second switch will be connected to the light that is on, the first switch will be connected to the light with the warm bulb, and the third switch will be connected to the light with the cold bulb.

Here's an idea for you…

Identify a challenge you face over the next few weeks – applying for a job, saving money for a holiday and so on. Ask yourself how most people might tackle that challenge and then commit yourself to coming up with a different approach.

Defining idea…

'Either he's dead or my watch has stopped.'

GROUCHO MARX

41. Lie, embellish

Use nonsense language and tell tall tales to test your ideas to the limit. It'll show up their strengths and weaknesses.

Creative people love embellishment. Other people might call this 'not quite telling the truth', but we don't usually worry about such minor details. A little bit of exaggeration can make a run-of-the mill story into something special and entertaining.

In the same way, if you stretch the credibility of your ideas, you actually might find you add more life to them. On the other hand, you may stretch them to breaking point – but at least you will have found out where that breaking point is.

Quite often one only has to exaggerate one aspect of a very straight and sensible work to create a massive effect. In the world of caricature and cartoons, for example, it's not unusual for artists to pick out just one facial characteristic of a famous person in order to nail them in the eyes of the public. Think of Steve Bell's depiction of Tony Blair with his one mad staring eye, or Gerald Scarfe's stretching of Richard Nixon's nose.

Exaggeration can apply to all forms of creativity. By making things bigger (or smaller) than they actually are, you change their point of reference. There, in fact, is the whole point of embellishment and exaggeration: you want your ideas to be better than they sounded at first. You want the creative fish you've landed to be a whopper.

You probably also want to define the limits of your project or idea, and by rambling on and adding new (imaginary) features you'll very quickly get to the point where you know you're being silly and have to stop. But, just maybe, amidst all the bullshit and lies, you may discover your next good idea.

Here's an idea for you…

Try taking something you're spinning out – a proposal, a first draft or presentation – and give it the nonsense treatment. You may be surprised by how much it freshens your perception of what you're really doing.

Defining ideas

'The trouble about man is twofold. He cannot learn truths which are too complicated; he forgets truths which are too simple.'

REBECCA WEST

'Man has always sacrificed truth to his vanity, comfort and advantage. He

lives…by make-believe.’

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

42. In the picture

So, your holiday snaps have been developed, put in an album and shelved. Surely there's more to it than that…

It has been said many times before that we photograph to remember, and to a large extent it is the fear that we might forget something about a particular experience that drives us on.

It's funny, then, how careless we can be about the photos we take on holiday. The key issue about holiday snaps, of course, is who takes them. If you're always the principal photographer, it means that you're hardly ever in the shot. Quite a lot of dads become rather shadowy figures in photo albums as a result of this. So delegate some of the duties, or make sure mum has a camera too.

To a large extent, photo albums are another form of the collecting and archiving urge. But how many of us just have a box somewhere stuffed with photos – or albums –that nobody ever looks at?

With the advent of digital technology, the problems of how to share your photos have largely been resolved. You can email them to anyone in the world just a few seconds after you've taken them. As an alternative, there are a number of online photo gallery sites that allow you to annotate and display your photos in dynamic ways for the whole world to see. One leading-edge online service worth checking out is Flickr (www.flickr.com).

There's very little point in going to all this effort to let people see your photos if they aren't actually any good. However, if you are taking the trouble to organise and display your collection, chances are you'll start getting a bit more picky about what you show. And there's no excuse not to – with a digital camera you don't need to get every photo you take 'developed', so you can simply dump the bad ones.

Here's an idea for you…

Import your digital photos into a software application such as Adobe Photoshop and you will find them highly editable. Besides simple cropping, you can highlight something unusual in the background that you didn't actually see at the time. In essence, within every digital photo there are hundreds of 'versions' all waiting to be revealed by your creative eye.

Defining idea…

'There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the

viewer.’

ANSEL ADAMS, photographer

43. Creative Jenga

We do this with celebs all the time – build 'em up, knock 'em down – but there's more to it than just sadistic pleasure.

Jenga is a very simple game. You start with a tower of plain wooden bricks. Players then take it in turns to remove the bricks one at a time, and add them to the top – without causing the tower to fall. It's amazing how many different types of tower you can build using the same standard set of blocks, and it shows you that successful structures rely as much on what you're prepared to take away as on what you decide to leave in place.

The idea of Jenga can be applied to creativity. Take a look at some of your own creative work and see if you can isolate the basic building blocks, both in terms of perceivable elements or attributes (specific sections, words, colours, columns. etc.) and in terms of the ideas and concepts which helped the work come into being. By doing this, you should already be looking at your work in a different way – seeing it as a series of dependencies and interrelated pieces rather than as a whole.

Having surveyed and catalogued those pieces, start taking some away. If we're looking at, say, a photograph, you could physically crop it so that we see only two-thirds of what the photographer saw. If it's a digital image, you could take away specific parts of the picture – rub out the person whose portrait you were taking and leave an empty space instead. Does this photo perhaps stand up as some kind of 'still life'? Is the absence of the sitter actually informing the piece?

Naturally, as you take things away, there will be a point where what you have simply isn't enough any more and it collapses into a formless mess. But this is information in its own right. You now know so much more about how your work actually 'works'.

Here's an idea for you…

Take a piece of work you're happy with and remove one thing from it. Now add something that is completely unrelated – and see if the resulting piece stands up or falls down. If it does fall, how does it do so? What pattern does the broken item (or 'new work') make when everything is lying in pieces? Even in these moments of destruction you might find something interesting and beautiful.

Defining idea…

'You must break through old structures, develop broader structures, break

through those and develop still broader structures.’
RAM DASS

44. Faking it

Here's how to appropriate other people's talents without upsetting them. 'I'll copy yours if you copy mine…'

There is a long tradition in all areas of creative practice of learning though imitation. 'Standing on the shoulders of giants' is an expression often used to describe the way an artist draws from the ideas of talented people who have gone before. And it's true that if you stand on other people's shoulders, your view of the world is generally improved.

Young writers often set themselves the task of writing in the style of a famous poet or novelist. It allows them to get 'under the bonnet' of an author and work out the basic mechanics of how things work. At art school, undergraduates are often asked to attempt a painting in the style of an old master. Again, it helps them get to grips with the specifics of technique.

Belonging to a school of creative thought or a particular gang of artists can be incredibly exciting and productive. Joining a gang or school implies a certain number of shared values or rules, so you are immediately supplied with some kind of framework or support for your work.

It's also absolutely fine to copy your heroes. In fact, you may not even understand why this person is your hero until you attempt the imitation. As Bruce Mau points out in his Incomplete Manifesto for Growth: 'Imitate. Don't be shy about it. Try to get as close as you can. You'll never get all the way, and the separation might be truly remarkable.' By imitating someone in this way, you're not only paying homage to them, you're working out what it takes to create a work that you have instinctively recognised as great. And, as Mau notes, there'll be something in the difference between your results and the original output that is recognisably yours – and could become the first sparks of a highly original work of your own.

Here's an idea for you…

By collaborating (aka copying each other), a group of artists can help develop their own distinctive elements within an agreed set of stylistic rules. Seek out a gang of creative people who all like working the same way as you. Join in and use your imitation of others to expand your own palette. Yes, gangs can get a bit too cliquey, but being like everyone else at an early point of your creative development is just fine.

Defining idea…

'The secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources.'

ALBERT EINSTEIN

45. Give it away?

Do all that hard work and then give it away for nothing? Surely, that's madness? Don't be so certain…

Suspicious about giving your ideas away for nothing? That's understandable. But if you're not prepared to share your knowledge and experience with others, you'll probably take twice as long to get anything done. You're also going to foster a culture of covetousness and non-giving in others that runs directly counter to the spirit of creative expression.

Sharing and gift-giving are actually great ways of distributing your creative ideas in a practical way. First and foremost they gain you value in terms of esteem – and later you can convert that value into hard cash. Back in primitive times, man understood the practical value of sharing. A hunter would kill an antelope and hand out meat to the whole tribe. This put him in a very powerful social position. Besides, eating the whole antelope would be beyond the appetite of even the most ravenous of hunters, so sharing didn't actually cost him anything in lost food.

If you're still not convinced, consider the fact that many of the world's great scientists operate within gift economies. The scientists with the highest status are not those who possess the most knowledge, but those who have contributed the most to their field by publishing more.

On the internet, too, a lot of sharing goes on without money or politics getting in the way. Quite often people barter skill for skill: 'You code my Web page and I'll give you a cool animation to put on your site', etc. Or people simply put the fruits of their programming labour up for all to download as shareware.

Here's an idea for you…

The act of 'giving' is shrouded in ritual. We wrap and decorate our gifts, attach cards and labels, create elaborate ceremonies and specific places in which to leave them, whether it's under a Christmas tree or on a pillow. Consider these peripheral elements of your work: the packaging, the labelling, the means of distribution and delivery. Does the way in which you 'wrap' your idea change the way it is received?

Defining ideas

'To make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself.'

MARCEL MAUSS, ethnographer

‘Give to get.’

Sir GERALD INOMYNTE, President & CEO, XPT plc

46. Cut the crap

If your brain has ever become befuddled by information overload, here are a few ideas for clearing excess data out of your life.

Information overload is one of the less attractive by-products of the knowledge economy. It's been estimated that the amount of information stored globally has been growing at the rate of 30% a year for the past ten years.

It's a real problem, and one that is not likely to go away. Overload can cause stress, which increases the likelihood of our making mistakes. And a reputation for making mistakes is definitely not what we want in either our professional or our personal lives. We need to be smart about how we handle information. Here then are a few ideas for clearing the excess out of your life.

With reading matter, review what you actually do buy and read thoroughly. See if you can reduce your intake. Tear out the magazine articles and news items that you really want to read and throw away the rest of the publication before you get distracted. On your computer, learn how to use search engines efficiently. Most have help sections that will teach you how to search to best effect and not waste time with pointless hits.

Seek out 'trusted filters' (high-quality people, journals or websites) that you can rely on to give you the distilled lowdown on subjects that you have an interest in. Where possible, go for the 'edited highlights' rather than the 'live transmission'. A breaking news story on a 24-hour news channel can stretch 30 seconds of hard content over 15 minutes. It's far better to seek out a more considered news piece once the story has played out.

Remember one critical point: the purpose of this pruning is not to replace one lot of information with a different set. Genuinely aim to reduce the amount of time you spend dealing with 'information'. After all, there must be something else you would rather be spending your time on.

Here's an idea for you…

When you are in an ongoing email correspondence with someone, change the words in the subject field, rather than just let it become a series of 'Re:'s. Making the change can reflect how the dialogue has moved on, so the recipient (and you) can decide whether to read the message now, later or not at all.

Defining idea…

‘There is a real temptation that the thing that comes in the latest is the one you shift your attention to, even though that may be the least important.’

BILL GATES

47. Pick a card

The best decisions are made when you have choice, but not too much choice. Here's how to manage life's choice-points.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz, author of The Paradox of Choice, believes that having as much choice as we have today isn't necessarily good for us. Because of the growing number of options we are presented with in so many facets of our lives, we don't always have the time to look at all the information out there to make the best choice.

Dr Schwartz asks us to think about the difference between 'the best' and 'good enough'. He suggests that there are two types of decision makers. The first group, which he calls maximisers, are people who want the absolute best. They have to examine every choice or they fear that they are not making the most of their opportunities. However, some people take the view that life's too short, so we shouldn't obsess over making choices. He calls people in this second category satisficers: these are people who look at some of the options and choose one that might not be the best, but it's good enough.

Generally speaking, says Schwartz, we should strive to be satisficers rather than maximisers, because satisficers are usually happy with the choice they have made. In contrast, maximisers often come to regret their decision.

Of course, some decisions are more significant than others. So how can we make the best possible decision about something important? Well, we can sift through as many options as we are able to, and then in our own time make the best decision we can, considering all the available options we are aware of at the time. Having decided, we act. At this point, for the sake of our mental well-being as much as anything, we need to live with our choice and not beat ourselves up if it looks like better options might have become available.

The important thing is to recognise that, most of the time, we won't find a solution that is best in class both now and for any length of time into the future. So let's get used to the idea.

Here's an idea for you…

Learn to switch between satisficing and maximising. Both have their time and place. It's more important to select the right life partner than the best choice on a restaurant menu. So don't sweat the small stuff.

Defining idea…

'A man's got to know his limitations.'

DIRTY HARRY

48. Success fails

Something that works today doesn't necessarily work tomorrow. Every great idea contains the seeds of its own failure.

Darwin warned: if you can't evolve more quickly than your environment, then you're doomed. Much more recently, writer and consultant Richard Pascale has described the ephemeral nature of success. In his view, even if we manage to locate a winning formula, it will be a formula with a sell-by date. He summed this phenomenon up with the phrase: nothing fails like success.

The message is simple: success is not self-maintaining. On the contrary, success has such a short shelf life these days that the very factors that bring us success today contain the seeds of our destruction tomorrow. Rather than lapsing into complacency when we achieve a level of success, we need to develop a sense of 'divine discontent' – yes, bask in the glow of our achievements, but also strive constantly to make the next leap forward. So here are two key questions to think about:

Taking in all aspects of your life, what is working for you now perfectly well that you know in your heart of hearts won't work anything like as well in one year's time? This could be about your job, your relationships, your financial situation, the qualifications you currently hold, the level of knowledge you have about a particular subject, your current level of fitness and so on. It could even be about something as down to earth as the state of your car, your sash windows or your computer. The point is to be as thorough and as comprehensive as you can.

What do you need to do about the areas you've identified and when do you need to act? Having determined those areas of your life where a 'more of the same' strategy just won't deliver the goods, it's time to put together some action plans setting out when and how you plan to deal with the problems.

Here's an idea for you…

Sit down and list your winning life strategies. Think about things like how you gain new contact, how you tackle exams, how you have succeeded in your career and so on – you may well find that you have recurring patterns that you deploy. Then consider how 'future-proof' these strategies are. Constantly test your assumptions to ward off complacency.

Defining idea…

'The significant problems that we face cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.'

ALBERT EINSTEIN

49. Come back to it

Know when to put things on the back-burner, and how to let them simmer there rather than just grow cold or go mouldy.

Fair enough, if it's getting late but you're motoring and 'in the zone', or the deadline's tomorrow, then stay up and feed off that feeling. At some point, you may have to think tactically about what you can get away with, and burn a bit of midnight-oil thinking up good reasons why you're not going to deliver under the original terms of engagement.

However, never, ever bother bashing away at a problem late at night just for the sake of it, when you know you're not really solving anything. That really is a waste of time. And nobody will be impressed with your bleary eyes and woolly mind next day unless the work itself has clearly been worth the effort.

In most cases, admitting defeat and coming back to something in the morning can really help, not only to finally complete your piece of work in a good way but also to ensure that you're in a fit condition to really deliver at the critical moments to come.

And remember Woody Allen's point: 'Eighty per cent of success is showing up'. If you expend all your energy working fruitlessly through the night, you really aren't going to stand much chance of 'showing up' in the morning – you'll be fast asleep.

It really is true that you can see things differently in the morning light, especially if you're well rested and alert. Sleep can also bring with it all kinds of strange dreams and thoughts that may come to your aid in the morning. It's amazing, too, how just by letting time pass, a problem can go away.

For most creative people, it's tempting to think that things only happen because of your presence and your input. But, actually, things also happen without you. Plants still grow, the world still spins, etc. Crucially, you may find that if you take a step back for a while, somebody else will come along with the necessary input to fix things.

Here's an idea for you…

If you're about to miss an imminent deadline, try taking your half-finished work to the meeting, admit your problems and ask for help in fixing them. Sometimes this makes everybody feel creative and valued, and makes you look like a committed team player.

Defining idea…

‘One must also accept that one has uncreative moments. The more honestly one can accept that, the quicker these moments will pass. One must have the courage to call a halt, to feel empty and discouraged.’

ETTY HILLESUM

50. Multiple futures

When you don't know what the future holds, it makes sense to have a few options up your sleeve

When you consider the possible impact of biotechnology, nano-technology, globalisation, climate change and the like, who of us can predict with any confidence what's in store even ten years down the line. The fact is that there's no absolute knowing where we might be heading. The future has never been less predictable, be it at a global, national, organisational or personal level.

Against that backdrop, we can take one of two stances. First, there's the 'que sera sera, whatever will be, will be' approach – in other words, a vaguely fatalistic view of the future where the strategy, if there is one, is to deal with things as they happen. Alternatively, we can try to anticipate what's coming and think how we would respond. Be prepared, as every boy scout will recommend.

This is the basis for a technique called scenario planning, which involves constructing a series of possible future realities and then examining the ramifications of each scenario. The tool was developed for organisations to use, but the principles work just as well for individuals.

Creating scenarios requires us to question our broadest assumptions about the way the world works. Good scenarios are plausible, surprising, and have the power to break old stereotypes. Using scenarios is 'rehearsing the future' such that, by recognising the warning signs, an organisation or person can adapt, and act effectively. Ultimately, the result of scenario planning is not a more accurate picture of tomorrow but better thinking about the future.

The future may be unknowable, but it's not unmanageable. The more options and choices you have available, the better equipped you are to handle whatever the future throws at you. If you only have Plan A, maybe Plan B at a push, your options are very limited.

Here's an idea for you…

Make a list of the five worst things that could happen to you. Then start thinking of how to develop a reasonably detailed plan of action for each one.

Defining idea…

'More than at any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroad: one path leads to despair and hopelessness, and the other to total extinction. Let us pray

we have the wisdom to choose correctly.’

WOODY ALLEN

51. Distraction loops

Got a problem that's tied you in knots? You can take your mind off it without completely giving up the fight.

Sometimes, when you're right in the middle of a piece of work, getting up and doing something else can be just what the creative doctor ordered. Some might say this is exactly what the coffee break was invented for.

We call these little breaks 'distraction loops' because they are very often repetitive rituals whereby things happen the same way pretty much every time. Making a cup of coffee is a classic example of this: not only do you make your coffee in pretty much the same way every time, you often do it at the same times of day, too. It's also a circular or 'looping' exercise because you end up pretty much where you started – the cup is empty and you're back at work.

Small and simple repetitive tasks are also a way of calming the mind and the body. Sometimes creativity can be very stressful. You're in the middle of an idea and you're stuck. The clock is ticking. You have a deadline. You feel like you're banging you're head against a brick wall. You daren't take a break because you have so much to do – but you're not actually achieving anything by sticking at it either. Not only do you definitely need a break, but engaging in a distraction loop may also very well help you to calm down and return to the fray in a better state.

Breathing exercises are themselves a form of distraction loop. Breathe in through your nose as you slowly count to four. Hold your breath for a count of two and then exhale through your mouth for a slow count of six. Repeat this at least a dozen times and you'll find that by regulating your breathing, you will also have slowed down your heart beat and relaxed physically.

Here's an idea for you…

Find physical distraction loops to build into your working days: mowing the lawn, swimming, walking to the shop – anything that takes you away from the coalface and leaves your brain untaxed. The exercise will do you good and it buys you some free thinking time to ponder problems and perhaps uncover a rich new seam of creative endeavour.

Defining idea…

'Every exit is an entry somewhere else.'

TOM STOPPARD

52. Brain care

Here are some tips for keeping your thinking gear in fine fettle.

Your brain is a lifelong work-in-progress. There's so much we all can do to develop our potential. Given the amount of change we can expect to face over the coming decades, lifelong learning is not just a trendy human resources concept, it's a survival necessity. So, here are a few ideas you might want to consider working on if you want to upgrade your brain in the years to come.

Commit to lifelong learning: Recognise that the skills, knowledge and experience that got you where you are today won't be enough to get you where you want to be in the future. 'Learning' does not always have to mean 'courses'. You could read a book; talk to an expert; surf the net for info; take a secondment; or do some work in the community.

Become a fluent communicator: Gain the confidence that you can give a prepared talk with style and clarity.

Aim at being 'media-friendly': today's politicians can't succeed without this communication skill and people who are competent in their work but who don't come across well on TV or in person will struggle to move into senior roles in the future. To polish your writing skills, try reading The Pyramid Principle by Barbara Minto, one of the best books around on how to present complex ideas in writing.

Embrace technology: Fewer than half of Britain's senior directors can use email and 60% can't log on to their company's website without help. Okay, there may be something faintly comical and endearing about these titans struggling to find the on/off switch. However, if you're a thirty- or forty-something with a disdain for new technology, be warned: you can run, but you can't hide.

Don't think yourself to a standstill: Upgrading your brain involves a mixture of thinking and action. You need both – thinking without action is sterile, action without thinking lacks direction and mindfulness. So, what are you going to do?

Here's an idea for you…

Develop your goals, pursue your dreams, go out and grab your life. Compose the life you want but don't ignore opportunities to be spontaneous. There are two tips. Now develop six more ideas of your very own. This idea connects to just about every other idea in the book, so why not close your eyes and open the book at random?

Defining idea…

‘I am always doing things I can’t do. That’s how I get to do them.’

PABLO PICASSO

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