

WRITING, CLEAR AND SIMPLE

PRACTICAL
CREATIVITY
BOOSTERS

BY ROY JACOBSEN



Creativity is available to everyone.

You just need to know how to attract that creative spark.

Many people think of creativity as an almost mystical spark that seems to be attracted to some people, but not to others. You either have it or you don't. However, those who have studied the phenomenon disagree. Creativity, they say, is available to everyone. You just need to know how to attract that creative spark, to tap into the creative energy that's all around us.

Here are some ideas, gleaned from several sources, of ways to boost your creativity.

Recognize creativity blocks.

“Most of us have certain attitudes that lock our thinking into the status quo and keep us thinking 'more of the same,’” says Roger von Oech in *A Whack on the Side of the Head: How You Can Be More Creative* (Creative Think, 1983). He identifies several attitudes that keep us from thinking more creatively, including the following:

- Thinking that we have to find *the* right answer
- Thinking logically *all the time*
- Being unwilling to break out of old patterns
- Not spending time playing
- Being afraid to make mistakes

One of the biggest barriers to creative thinking is thinking that you are not a creative thinker. Von Oech tells the story of a company that commissioned a team of psychologists to study what set the creative engineers apart from the less-creative ones. After three months of study, they found that the biggest difference between the two groups was that the creative engineers thought of themselves as creative, while the less creative engineers didn't think they were creative. The result? Von Oech writes:

“The people who didn't think they were creative never put themselves in a position where they could use their creativity. They didn't allow themselves to get into an imaginative frame of mind, play with their knowledge, take a few risks, or look for the seventh right answer.”

Sparks are flying; be ready to catch them.

Inspiration is all around us, so be prepared to capture it when you find it. Choreographer Twyla Tharp, in her book *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life* (Simon & Schuster, 2003) writes, “I know cartoonists who always carry pen and pad to sketch what they see,

photographers who always have a camera in their pockets, composers who carry Dictaphones to capture a snatch of vagabond melody that pops into their heads. They are always prepared.”

I carry a pocket notebook to write down snatches of conversation, random thoughts, and all the little tidbits that catch my attention. (I'm looking for a waterproof notebook, as I seem to get interesting ideas in the shower.) In my current notebook are several quotes from books, notes from speeches, ideas for articles and blog posts, and a portmanteau word of my own invention: confrontarian—someone who confronts people with his contrariness.

It's not enough to carry a notebook, you have to use it. Frequently. When anything catches your attention or tickles your fancy, jot it down. Don't judge, just record the ideas and observations when they happen. According to Linus Pauling,

“The best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas.”

Capture ideas when they happen, and evaluate them later. Don't rely on being able to remember them. The aphorism “The faintest pencil is better than the best memory” is absolutely correct. Creative ideas are useless if you forget about them.



Pay attention to the little ideas.

This is closely related to the idea of capturing ideas—big or small—when they happen. In her book, Tharp writes about the first steps of the creative process, when you're looking for an idea to get started with, which she refers to as *scratching*.

“When you're in scratching mode, the tiniest microcell of an idea will get you going. Musicians know this because compositions rarely come to them whole and complete. They call their morsels of inspiration lines or riffs or hooks or licks. That's what they look for when they scratch for an idea. It's the same for me. A dance doesn't hit me whole and complete. Inspiration comes in molecules of movement, sometimes in nanoseconds.”

Von Oech agrees, saying that even for creative geniuses, “most of their big ideas came from paying attention to their medium-size ideas, playing with them, and turning them into big ideas. The same thing holds for most medium-size ideas. These come from small

ideas which their creators paid attention to, and gradually worked into bigger things.”

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Give yourself a whack.

Don't hesitate to use what Ron Hale-Evans, author of *Mind Performance Hacks: Tips & Tools for Overclocking Your Brain* (O'Reilly, 2006) calls “creativity hacks,” simple tricks and techniques that help trigger creative thinking.

For example, you could consult a deck of creativity cards—such as *The Whack Pack* created by Roger von Oech, *Oblique Strategies* by musician Brian Eno and painter Peter Schmidt, or the *Pocket Creativity Coach* by creativity consultants Annie Kirschenmann and Monica Heeren—that offer new ways of thinking about a problem.

Another hack is encapsulated in the mnemonic acronym, SCAMPER, (which stands for Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify/Magnify, Put to another use, Eliminate/minimize, Reverse/Rearrange). Take an idea or problem (the *target*), and ask yourself a series of questions associated with each of those words. For example: “What can I substitute for or within the target?” Can I combine something else with the target to create something new?”

“Can I adapt a technique, tool, or component from another area to the target?”

You can also try to tap into the creative riches of *hypnagogia*, the mental state between wakefulness and sleep. Luminaries such as Albert Einstein, Richard Wagner, and Ray Bradbury have all used this mental state in their works.

Even the supremely practical thinker Thomas Edison used this state—in a very scientific way—whenever he found himself stuck on a problem. He would sit in a chair with his arms draped over the armrests, holding a ball bearing in each hand. On the floor directly under each hand was a metal pie plate. He allowed himself to doze off, and when his hands relaxed, they dropped the ball bearings onto the pie plates. The noise would return him to wakefulness, and he immediately made notes on whatever came to him in his near-sleep state.

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Tom Peters

Engage your emotions.

It's easier to get creative when the subject is something that inspires your passions. “I happen to believe that all innovation comes, not from market research or carefully crafted focus groups,” says business guru Tom Peters, “but from pissed-off people. People who just can't stand the opacity of current financial reports. People who are enraged when CIA database doesn't connect to the FBI database. People who throw their hands up in frustration at the little slips of paper that fall out of their hymnals (and who thence proceed to invent Post-It® Notes).”

“Creativity” isn't a mystical gift; it's just one aspect of generating ideas, new thoughts, and innovative approaches to a problem. Your critical thinking, judgment, discipline, and hard work matter just as much when the time comes to put the idea into practice.

As Tharp puts it, “Whether or not God has kissed your brow, you still have to work. Without learning and preparation, you won't know how to harness the power of that kiss.”

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