

Chapter 1

FROM DUNCE TO DA VINCI—HOW CREATIVE ARE YOU?

Do you suffer from D.R.I.P.? It stands for a “Dearth of Robust Ideas and Plans.” Do you have a dearth? How many new ideas—for your business or personal life—have you come up with this week? This month? In the past year? Jot down the bets of them.

MY REALLY TERRIFIC IDEAS

(last 12 months)

- (1) _____
- (2) _____
- (3) _____
- (4) _____
- (5) _____

How many did you come up with? If you listed two or three, you’re an exception. Most people would probably feel blessed to list even one terrific idea. But the good news is, it only *takes* one.

Henry Ford took just one idea—assembly line production—and built automobiles cheaply enough for the masses to afford them. Putting that one idea to work changed Ford’s life spectacularly. It also, of course, changed the world. Who was the Svengali who first twisted a bit of wire into the shape of a paper clip? Who wrote the most useful cookbook among those sitting in your kitchen shelf? What was the most innovative thing your employer accomplished in the past year? Who thought it up? (Incidentally, the answer is probably not “the engineering group” or “the marketing committee.” In most cases, the truly good idea is conceived by a single individual—or a pair of individuals working as a team.) Whenever even one new idea is put into operation, *change happens*. And if you are the one who comes up with that idea, the change will bring with it a flood of positive benefits.

Okay, be honest now. How creative are you? Most people have a general idea of how “smart” they are. Somewhere along the line a teacher probably leaked your supposedly confidential IQ score and revealed that you are a 115 or a 127 or maybe even a superstar of 150 or above. But is a high IQ score a sign of high “creativity”? Not necessarily. High creativity thrives on the somewhat oddball ability to see things differently—then spot new connections in the old stuff. Most new ideas are the result of cross-fertilization between previously unrelated thoughts.

In the mid-1400s, Johannes Gutenberg spent years trying to invent a way to make duplicate copies of documents easily. The monks who painstakingly handprinted parchment sheets one at a time must have seemed awfully inefficient to Gutenberg. So he thought about: (1) the paper rubbings that reproduced pictures etched on stones. He thought about : (2) the metal coin punch used to strike an image on individual coins. And

he thought about: (3) the wine screw press that put a slow, steady pressure on a surface. Then one day he put it all together—Eureka—and came up with a stunning idea. Gutenberg carve each letter of the alphabet on its own little “coin punch.” Next, he arranged a series of the punches to form words and locked them into position with a wooden frame. Finally, he inked his type punches, put a sheet of paper underneath the rig, and applied slow, steady pressure with a wine press. When he unscrewed the press and withdrew the sheet of paper, he was looking at the world’s first printed document. Gutenberg’s “printing press”—with its movable type—was a wondrous machine that revolutionized the way people communicated. Yet it was simply a unique, innovative way of arranging familiar elements.

The mind’s ability to jump, cross-fertilize, mix, and blend (as Gutenberg’s mind did) is truly incredible—but those abilities are not measured by a standard IQ test. So let’s invent our own measure of creativity. It’s a simple line graph that will help you visualize you “Creativity Quotient,” or CQ.



DUNCE

DA VINCI

At the left of the graph is DUNCE—the dullest person you can conjure up. A DUNCE is someone who, when first asked to boil an egg, can’t find the stove. The DUNCE is a “never ever.” He has never ever had an original thought or idea. He has never ever broken a rule and follows them rigorously his entire life. Lead him to the stove and show him how to boil an egg, and he will never vary the routine by one iota. It is inconceivable to imagine that the true DUNCE, with egg in hand, would *ever* think of scrambling it.

Now, way over on the right side of the graph is DA VINCI. Leonardo da Vinci gets my vote as the world’s most original and innovative idea-maker to date. Born in Italy during the Renaissance, Leonardo produced paintings, such as his enigmatic *La Gioconda* (“Mona Lisa”) that rivaled the best of the Old Masters. But his mind stretched much further. He was also a sculptor, an architect, a city planner, a mathematician, a scientist, and a prolific inventor of such amazing things as chain links, a spring-driven car, the parachute, and the helicopter. To entertain the court occasionally, he became a singer and a lute player. And to appease the warlike, he designed concepts for shrapnel bombs, battle tanks, and a crude forerunner of the machine gun.

The little mark in the middle of the graph is the halfway point between DUNCE and DA VINCI. It represents a middle-of-the-road average for “creativity.” Now, let’s figure out where *you* are on that line. There’s no test to take. You simply make a mark where you think you are, relative to all the people you work with, play with, live with, and compete with. Chances are, your mark will fall on the right side of the graph, more DA VINCI than DUNCE.



DUNCE

DA VINCI

In other words, you think you have the potential for creative thinking, but you've probably never made a concerted effort to *improve* your CQ. As you begin to focus on the creative process, however, you'll discover that there are some simple steps you can take that will move your mark further to the right.

Do you want to generate more new ideas, and then—one idea at a time—make them happen? Do you want more of that elusive quality described enviously as “creativity”? Do you truly want to nudge your X toward the far right side of the scale? If you just answered yes, yes, and yes, the first thing you have to do is turn on the creativity you already have, just waiting to be tapped. And before long that D.R.I.P. will become a gusher.

Chapter 2

LOOSENING UP—A FEELING YOU'LL NEVER FORGET

As you probably know, the human brain controls your rational, sequential, linguistic functions. It's very good at precise logical things like math and science. (Think of the left brain as TIGHT.) The right hemisphere is emotional, visual, intuitive—and imaginative. It is free-spirited and perceptive enough to see both the forest *and* the trees. (Think of the right brain as LOOSE.) Most people agree that true creativity—the ability to see things differently, or put them together in different ways—originates in the right hemisphere. But first you may have to trick your hidebound left brain into giving your fun-loving right brain more sway.

Wouldn't it be exciting to break some of those left-brain rules you've always lived by—to start to look at things *differently*? The USSR—of all places— may have a lesson for us. As reported in *Fortune* magazine, there are now “creative development” seminars for Soviet citizens, an experiment initiated under Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of perestroika. Aimed at government officials and factory workers, these seminars include one piece of advice intended to loosen up a hidebound citizen's view of life: “Don't get stuck in confining routines. For variety, when you go to your home tonight don't enter through the door. Instead, *try going in through the window.*”

The very act of doing something in a totally new way upset your left brain's applecart and you suddenly discover the joy of an unexpected viewpoint. You edge back toward the time long ago when your left brain was a blank slate. Think about it. We make our debut on the planet as seven or eight pounds of totally free spirit. At the moment of birth, there are no no's, no constraints. It is a time of incredible freedom that goes on for several weeks, possibly even several months. But then our parental drill sergeant start to issue orders. They initiate construction of the little boxes we will be asked to live in. More little boxes pile up with a thunderous acceleration as the years go by. There are educational demands, religious code of conduct, employment obligations, social and legal requirements, the demands of relationships, and so on. Most of us live lives that are tightly confined by an astounding number of boxes. So start by jumping out of a couple of them. Open yourself to the power of new perceptions and ideas—then put them to work to make positive changes in your life. Oliver Wendell Holmes put it this way:

**“Man’s mind stretched by a new idea never
goes back to its original dimension”**

Here are some loosening-up exercises that will stretch your mind and give you a new perspective on old habits and familiar activities. Read the following list of suggestions and pick three or four to try. You’ll find that you will experience, or see, familiar things in unfamiliar ways. Your left brain will be grasping to find “logic” in your actions. Your right brain will be having a ball.

- (1) Switch your watch to your other wrist for a whole day. (Will anyone else notice? No. Will you notice? Every single time you glance at your nude wrist.)
- (2) Try an obscure candy bar you’ve never tasted. Eat just one bite and write a ten-word description of it. (Ever notice how tough it is to describe a taste)
- (3) Cut some squares, circles, and triangles out of colored paper and move the pieces around until they make a picture. How many different pictures can you make?
- (4) Rearrange your life’s place. Move your bed to another spot. Switch the TV to another position. If you work in an office and your desk faces a door, turn it so it faces a window or a wall. How do these feel. Do any of the new arrangements work better?
- (5) Using dabs of glue, build a six-foot tower of empty soda pop cans. Be eclectic in your choice of brands and in the arrangement of cans. Don’t take more than thirty minutes making it. Now lean your “pop art” tower against a wall and observe how quickly it seizes the attention of all who enter.
- (6) At night, take the shade of you living room lamps and, if you have them, install some bright, high-wattage bulbs. Then stand back and take a look at a very different room. (Where did all those cracks come from?)
- (7) Own a food processor? Thoroughly blend together one fruit and one vegetable. Taste the mixture and pretend it is a product you are going to sell. What will you name it? (For example, a mixture of crushed grapes and butternut squash might be called “Squish-Squash”)
- (8) Put your hand on a copier machine and make a series of unusual poses, from graceful to grotesque. Study them closely. What other forms and images do they suggest?
- (9) If you have a video camcorder, slither through your home on your belly pointing the lens up at the underside of tables—underneath and around chairs, appliances, and beds. When you view the tape, this “snake’s-eye view” will show an unfamiliar place you’ve never seen.
- (10) Upset your day’s routine. Do you always start your day with a shower? Tomorrow, start with a bath. Do you always finish your day with the same 11 P.M. television news show? Tomorrow, switch to another channel’s news show.
- (11) If you are right-handed, copy the following line using your left hand (vice versa for lefties). *If my life began to unravel, would I write like this?*

- (12) Take a pair of scissors to the comic section of the newspaper and clip out various cartoon characters. Tape them to a sheet of paper in a montage—a “social gathering” of famous cartoon characters. For spice, toss in a photo of a public figure. Is there a caption you can add to give it some zing?

As you did these loosening-up exercises, you were *going in through the window*, jumping out of boxes. You were breaking molds and forcing your brain to stray from familiar paths. You were seeing yourself, your routine habits, and your familiar surroundings in a different way. How did it feel? Were you surprised, confused, intrigued, a little uncomfortable—all of the above? These are the feelings you’ll get when you try something new—and this is only the beginning.

There is more to come. Lots more.

Chapter 4

GOOD RULES, BAD RULES, AND CHANGING THE RULES

Think about the world of a very small child named Julie. Julie is a few months old and has been relatively unburdened so far by the rules of those monster adults looming about her. One day, Julie’s little hand manages to grasp a small ball and pick it up. She looks at it quizzically (“*What is this thing attached to my hand?*”). Then, accidentally, she relaxes her fingers a bit. The thing leaves her hand immediately, falling to the floor of her playpen (“*What in the world just happened?*”). She grasps at the ball, watching it again attach itself to her hand (“*Will it go away again?*”). Slowly she unfurls her fingers. It drops. And she is filled with excitement. Author and child psychologist Dr. Lee Salk has observed this phenomenon many times and describes it as the child experiencing “a feeling of WOW.” Julie has just invented—for herself—the concept of gravity.

Think about those first two years of your life. Sure, you got some input from adults. But so much other stuff was coming at you from the physical environment. Every day, you bumped into new things, stumbled into new experiences. And every time you did something, discovered something, you were doing it for the first time. You really were—for yourself—inventing the universe. Your little brain was yelping out a stream of excited reactions—“Wow!” “Wow!” “Wow!” It was a rollicking good time of incessant discovery. But all too soon you also discovered “The Rules”—things you’re supposed to do and *not* do—because somebody says so.

So what about rules? Are they creativity killers for little kids (and big adults)? Let’s take a look at the “crayon rules.” Hand a box of colorful crayons to a little tyke who has never seen such a thing and watch what happens. He may dump them out and throw the crayons around. He may try to eat the purple crayon. He may discard all the crayons and play with the box. He may even—to his joy—discover that crayons make beautiful marks on paper (and walls) and happily begin to scribble the kind of art that can make parents swoon. The point is, he doesn’t know what he is *supposed* to do with crayons—or

what he *isn't* supposed to do with them. So he plays. He experiments. He does odd things with them. And he allows some delightful accidents to happen.

Little children are blessed in that they do not suffer from that perverse, universal, adult-imposed creativity squasher “fear of looking stupid.” They just playfully move ahead, allowing whatever happens to happen, until cautious parents impose some rules to exert control over their infant Picasso. With luck these enlightened dictators will impose *good crayon rules* and *not bad crayon rules*.

GOOD CRAYON RULE: Don't draw on the walls.

BAD CRAYON RULE: You must use the red crayon the draw an apple.

Naturally, good rules are those that provide constructive guidance, without exerting an iron-clamp control over creativity. And in a truly creative home, a child will always test those rules and know how to change them if they suddenly cease to apply.

MOM: “A workman is coming tomorrow to wallpaper this room.”

CHILD: “Can I draw on the walls today?”

God bless Mom if she says yes.

Do Rules Inspire or Inhibit Creativity?

Stephen Sondheim is certainly one of the most creative songwriters ever to prowl the talent-consuming world of Broadway. His credits as a lyricist and composer include dozens of musical blockbusters like *West Side Story*, *Company* and *Sweeney Todd*. So it must be easy for Sondheim to whip out a love song, right?

Well, yes, And no.

I had the opportunity to ask Sondheim how he thought up song ideas. He responded by saying that if someone asked him to “write a love song” and handed him a blank sheet of paper, he'd be at a complete loss. However, when he starts out to write a love song based on a *specific scenario*, it opens up creative options. He described an example of what a play's author might say to him to get him started a song. “Picture this,” he said. “It's three A.M. and a woman is sitting alone in a dark empty bar. She's on her fourth martini and is thinking about the man who just left her...” Writing that song, according to Sondheim, is easier because the situation “sets the rules.” Within those rules he will create a hauntingly romantic song about a woman you will care very much about. You will never have heard a song anything like it; the song may move you tremendously. But it will have followed the rules.

There is a common misperception: “Innovation thrives best in a totally uninhibited, unencumbered environment.” In fact, the opposite is usually true. Rules tend to inspire creativity because they set the boundaries—and then permit more intensive exploration within them. Rollo May, in his 1975 book *The Courage to Create*, writes about “... the phenomenon that *creativity itself requires limits*, for the creative act arises out of the struggle of human beings with and against that which limits them.” Turning to the world of music, May describes asking Duke Ellington how he created his musical compositions. The Duke explained that since his trumpet player could reach certain notes

beautifully but not other notes, and the same was true of his trombonist, he had to write his music within those limits. “It’s good to have limits,” Ellington said.

Speaking of rules, restrictions, and limits, how about the game of football? This contest is played on a field with carefully specified sidelines and goal lines. There is a comprehensive rule book that goes on for page after page detailing what can and cannot be done. At game time, a bunch of uniformed officials prance around the field making sure each team lives up to the letter of the law. As an environment for creativity, doesn’t that sound restrictive, constrained, and stultifying? Hardly. Talk to an hundred coaches and each will tell you at length how he manages to be cunning, crafty, and sometimes wildly creative within those rules and boundaries. There is creativity in football. There is creativity in the tightly defined world of business. And there is creativity available to you in your personal life.

Most experts agree that it is the left brain that sets the rules: “This is the way it *should* be done. This is the way it’s *always* been done. This is the *only* way it can be done.” Such rules can be a lead weight on the playful, experimental impulses of the right brain, inhibiting creativity. Or they can be challenge.

How about creativity—and rules—in business? The demands of a competitive marketplace require that commercial innovation always work within some set of rules. That is the challenge of any creative assignment. Imagine a company founded in the 1920s and dedicated to providing customers with the most innovative toiletry the products and his managers can think up. In a moment of nautical inspiration, the owner dubs the company “Sailor Boy.” It is his decree that all of their new soap, shaving cream, colognes, and mustache waxes will carry the proud “Sailor Boy” brand name. Fortunately, the company launches a couple of good products and immediately sets sail profitably. But sprinkled among their successes, a couple of wacky ideas are proposed. For example, the response to their flower-scented aftershave is lousy; it turns out that men don’t particularly want to smell like lilacs. So the owner then does what all owners do when they start to lose some money here and there. He makes some rules about new Sailor Boy products. And in this case, they’re pretty good rules:

RULES FOR NEW “SAILOR BOY” PRODUCTS

- (1) It must cost less than 5 cents to make.
- (2) It must sell for more than 50 cents.
- (3) Customers must like it.
- (4) It must get used up quickly.

Back in the twenties, you could probably have built a major American toiletries company by heeding those rules—and demanding that every product idea meet those four tests. Rather than inhibiting the creative process, the founder’s four rules would probably spur employees to greater flights of imagination.

But rules aren’t made in vacuum. As times and circumstances change, the marketplace adapts to them and the rules must also be changed. If not, good rules can quickly become bad rules and instead of inspiring creativity, they stifle it. For example, let’s say we’re back in the 1940s and you’re a talented young executive just starting a

career with Sailor Boy. Now in business for twenty years, the company has achieved incredible success. Many of its products are number one in their categories and the founder's four rules have been engraved in stone. Your boss thinks you're an eager beaver and has assigned you to new product development. Of course, the company rules have been adjusted for inflation. Rule 1 now allows product cost to reach 10 cents and Rule 2 now requires that you product sell for more than a dollar. All else remains the same.

Your boss turns you loose in the shaving cream category, where your company has much earlier pioneered the idea of taking shaving soap out of the shaving mug and putting it, in liquid form, into a handy tube. Sailor Boy tube shaving cream is doing just great: It's number one in the market with a 48 percent share of the tube shaving cream category. How in the world are you going to top that? You stew. You talk to store managers. You surround yourself with tubes. And you think very, very hard. Then, one day, your wife comes home from the hardware store with a newfangled can of bug spray. It has some sort of gas in it so that the insecticide sprays out in a fine mist when a little button is pushed. You start to think. Bug spray...gas...push button... shaving cream... gas... push button... Suddenly an idea strikes: What if we made push-button shaving cream?

Eagerly, you contact the manufacturer of the bug spray can to find out how the spray mechanism is made and how much it costs. Bad news the device costs at least 15 cents to manufacture. To that you will also have to add the cost of soap, can, and packaging. Obviously the rule that requires that all products must cost less than 10 cents to make has just become an incredibly bad rule. If Sailor Boy insists on maintaining the "10-cent cost" formula, the firm will miss the opportunity to create the aerosol shaving cream category—the chance to be both innovator and share leader in a new products form. What is at stake may be the difference between climbing to a 40 or 50 percent share as the first entry in a hot new category or sinking to a minuscule sales level as your outmoded, dusty tubes are shoved to the back of drugstore shelves.

But your fellow executives will understand this instantly and change the rules—right? Not necessarily. Depending on the entrenched strength of the people defending those rules, you may have a really tough battle ahead. To cite another example of good rules gone bad, soon after World War I ended, a group of powerful naval officers argued long and hard that aircraft carriers were a foolish and frivolous concept, and that it should be obvious to any person of reasonable intelligence that battleships were the answer to all future challenges of naval warfare. The airplane itself was simply a little toy sometimes useful for aerial scouting or carrying the mail. Some of the hidebound thinkers continued to hold their opinions until one Sunday morning in December when the Japanese sunk a big chunk of the American fleet—and did it with "little toy airplanes" launched from aircraft carriers.

The ability to recognize when good rules have become bad ones—and the foresight, intelligence, and imagination to change them—is the hallmark of true creativity. Here's an example. T. Vincent Learson spent his career at IBM, progressing from a beginning sales job to become the first chairman of the company not blessed with the last time of Watson. A six-foot, five-inch, booming-voiced decision maker, Learson was not the sort of person prone to sit around meekly following rules. By 1954, he had taken charge of engineering, manufacturing, and sales for all IBM computers. However

the company's leading computer, the IBM 702, was plagued with problems and Learson championed a decision to withdraw it from the market. ("It wasn't a very good machine," he recalled in a recent interview.) *The New York Times* pounced on his story and declared that apparently IBM was dropping out of the computer business. No doubt the executives at IBM's fierce competitor, the UNIVAC company, were delighted, rubbed their hands in glee, and redoubled their efforts to sell UNIVAC computers. Immediately, precious time began to slip away. IBM's "computer gap" could not be allowed to continue for a number of months. Learson led a crash engineering project that, in the remarkable span of three months, developed the IBM 705, a significantly better computer than the recently dumped 702. Now he had to sell a large, high-profile customer and reestablish the IBM reputation. The 705, which was invented but not yet *manufactured*, would be the key.

Fortunately there was a big, ripe customer shopping in the marketplace. Out in Chicago, the huge Commonwealth Edison utility company had asked both UNIVAC and IBM to bid on satisfying their computer needs. And the growing world of computer users was watching this contest with keen interest. Learson went to Chicago and pitched the account personally. The Commonwealth Edison people thought the 705 sounded like a good, possibly even superior machine. But the utility's board of directors has a little problem: "We'll be able to save \$50,000 a month with your new machine, Mr. Learson. But if you deliver late, will IBM pay a penalty of \$50,000 a month?"

Back at IBM headquarters in New York City, Thomas Watson, Sr., the founder of the company (and the author of the company's longtime slogan, "Think") was very much running the show. The "Old Man" was as tough as nails—and he had established some very strict rules. One of them: "IBM does not pay penalties." A companion rule: "Anyone who allow a change in the standard contract is automatically subject to be fired." Employees were not expected to *think* about those two rules—just obey them. But on the spot in Edison's offices, Learson did not hesitate when asked about the penalty. He did not request the opportunity to "sleep on it." He did not ask for a minute to call the home office. He simply said, "Yes sir, we'll accept that penalty—and we'll write it into the contract." Commonwealth Edison agreed to the IBM proposal. Learson signed and then returned to New York to face the music. This is how the lyrics went:

THOMAS WATSON, SR: "What about this penalty?"

LEARSON: "It was absolutely essential to the deal, Mr. Watson. This is the number account in the country—and the whole country is watching to see which way it goes."

WATSON: "I think you did the right thing. Thank you very much."

P.S. Learson's manufacturing team pulled it off and got a brand-new IBM 705 installed in Chicago on time. The company never paid a nickel of penalty.

Truly creative people usually do their best work within a set of rules. But there are good rules (the ones that are still sharply relevant) and bad rules (the ones that have gone out of whack). If you can spot those off-kilter rules and then muster up sufficient creative gumption to propose new ideas for old assumptions, new solutions for old problems, you

can be a person who brings energy and innovation to your job, your community, and your personal life. So now that you have loosened up to do things a little differently, now that you know how to think visually, and now that you have honed your understanding of what rules are—and are not—it's time to move on to the process of creating new ideas and making them happen.

It is now time to S.T.R.I.K.E.

S.T.R.I.K.E.

How to Increase Your Creativity

Chapter 5

THE DREADED BLANK SHEET OF PAPER

(1) How could you have said something that dumb to her? You're back at your place now, it's after midnight, and you know she's still awake. And very angry. You don't want to call; that will just start the argument all over again. So you decide to write a note and drop it at her door in the morning. You reach for a pen and a blank piece of paper.

You stare at the paper. It stares back at you. And nothing happens.

(2) "We'll meet at three this afternoon," your boss said earlier today. "Bring along all your ideas on how to open up the new sales territory in Minnesota. Oh, I'd like them in a written memo." You do have a couple of half-formed thoughts—and would have been far more comfortable just winging them at the meeting—but now you need to put them in writing. Your ideas need to be specific and understandable. You take out a blank piece of paper.

You stare at the paper. It stares back at you. And nothing happens.

(3) So far, you've got an A in this course. The book reports you've turned in have been well-written summaries of assigned novels. But the teacher pulled a fast one today. "Let's pretend you are the novelist," she said, "and on Monday I'd like you to turn outline of a new novel you are working on." What in the world should you write about? You've been asking yourself this question for several hours now. There are seven crumpled sheets of paper—clumsy, false-sounding attempts—in your wastepaper basket.

There is an empty pot of coffee on your desk. And there is yet another blank sheet of paper in your typewriter.

You stare at the paper. It stares back at you. And nothing happens.

Any of these situations sound familiar? At one time or another, most people being asked to do some original thinking have faced the hellish taunts of a blank sheet of paper. This special torture is not exclusive property of authors who complain of “writer’s block.” Instead, it should be called “idea block” because it affects the entire world of would-be creative thinkers. Anyone—novelist, artist, entrepreneur, designer, CEO, tinkerer-in-the-garage, middle-manager, teacher, student, engineer, salesperson, farmer, office worker, housekeeper, assembly line worker, lover—can suffer from “idea block.” It especially afflicts those who are consciously trying to be creative for the first time in years. To creative neophytes, a simple sheet of paper can seem to be an insurmountable obstacle. “I’m not creative,” they whimper—and that blank sheet of paper is proof. “Why did I ever expect that I could think of a good idea?”

Fortunately, there is a path out of this barren ideascap. There is a way to sneak up on that formidable sheet of flimsy white stuff and then ambush it with creative preparation and follow-through.

S.T.R.I.K.E.

These initials stand for six steps that will take you by the hand and show you how to have an idea happen. The S.T.R.I.K.E. process is extraordinarily powerful. In its ultimate form, S.T.R.I.K.E. can launch industries, restyle governments, and thrill multitudes. But its proudest accomplishment is simply to bring that blank sheet of paper to its knees.

The “S” in S.T.R.I.K.E. stands for “Stew.” It’s how you begin, by thinking—stewing—almost aimlessly about all your problems, goals, and opportunities. What’s not working? What’s bugging you? What could work better? Is there something new you’d love to do? Give your mind free rein to mull over a thousand possibilities. Then, little by little, start to focus on some problem you’d like to solve (“Should I try to get a better job?”), some opportunity you’d like to explore (“Do I want to transfer to Portland?”), or some goal you’d like to achieve (“There has to be a better way to make that distribution system work.”).

Now, move on the “T.” It stands for “Target.” From the rich grist that your stewing has produced, pick one specific objective and define it carefully. Be able to write that target down in *less than ten words*. Make it clear. Make it concise. Make sure it contains your goal. If you’ve been stewing about your job, there could be a dozen different objectives you want to achieve. Pick one of those objectives and state it in ten words or less.

The “R” is for “Research.” Be adventurous in your explorations. Go to the library and get whatever books have been written on your target. Look at magazine articles. Write letters requesting information. Talk to people who know about your target. Ask friends to introduce you to their friends who might know about your target. Chat with bartenders, barbers, and taxi drivers. Take note incessantly—and put together a file folder of scribbled notes, articles, reports, and relevant information that’s at least *one inch thick*.

The “I” represents the fabulous world of “Ideas.” With your ten-word target emblazoned in your mind and your one-inch-thick research file close at hand, you’re ready to arm-wrestle that blank sheet of paper. First, think about the rules that convention expects you to follow. If you don’t like them, change them. Now, unleash yourself. Be bold, spirited, and visual. Conjure up words, pictures, phrases, all the while keeping a close eye on your target objective. Be happy. Be wild. Be loose. Just be sure to write, sketch, or somehow record every little shred as you go along. Fill up sheets of paper with your scribbles idea fragments. Then watch the incredible thing that happens. The best of your little creative blips will almost magically transform themselves into real workable ideas. You will have a batch of ideas.

“K” is for the “Key” idea. In your bulging inventory of fresh ideas you probably now have several very good concepts. Force yourself to pick the *single best idea*, the one you believe will hit the bull’s-eye of your target. Why just one? Because the most difficult part of the creative project is making an idea actually happen. If it is an ambitious idea (and I hope it is), accomplishing that idea will require all your resources. If you make the mistake of trying to push three ideas forward simultaneously, your energy will be splintered and you will dramatically increase your chances of failing on all three. Focus your efforts. Pick the Key idea. Then move on to the critical last step.

“E” is the undoing of the most attempts at creative change in our lives. It stands for “Execute.” Now you will be asked to leave the privacy of your office, your study, your garage workbench and take your fragile idea public. This is scary stuff because in order to make an idea happen, it often must be exposed to strangers—coldhearted, judgmental critics who will freely offer opinions of your fledging concept (“Boy, what a lousy idea!”). Along the way, you may have suffer many slings, arrows, and Bronx cheers, but it’s vitally important to realize that *this is ultimately the most important part of the creative process*. You must be prepared to listen to the outside world, perhaps adjust your course, but continue to press forward. If you’re selling your abilities or yourself, somebody has to buy or you’re nowhere. Henry Ford and Thomas Edison were great salesmen as well as great inventors. So get behind your idea and push it. Make it happen step by step. When it finally does happen, give yourself a pat on the back. Then move on to invent your next idea, starting the S.T.R.I.K.E. process all over again.

Quite possibly, any creative venture ever launched and accomplished can be roughly boiled down to S.T.R.I.K.E. These six steps will unlock your latent creativity and allow your right and left brains to work together in harmony, not in conflict. At the outset of the creative process, the right brain stews and stew about a problem until the left brain says, “Enough already, let’s pick a specific target.” Then, after the practical left

brain has busily researched that target, the free-wheeling right brain thinks up a dozen different ways to hit it. Finally, left and right join to select the key concept. It's the one idea that can best hit your target—an original, imaginative, innovative idea that will really work. "Now we're really cooking," the left brain says. "Left's roll!" says the right brain. And the right and left brains join forces to make that idea happen. What begins as a tug-of-war ends with the left and right brains pulling together in the same direction—a truly remarkable accomplishment.

It can happen for you.

Chapter 9

HOW TO THINK UP IDEAS—THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Ideas are not generated in a vacuum. They take a lot of stuff: facts, fancies, old ideas, odd musing—trillions of information bits whirling all around us. A fresh, original idea can occur when you put two or three of those bits together in a new way. Of course, if you get lucky, nature might do it for you (like the rockslide "arch"). Then, of course, you have to be perceptive enough to recognize the new connection revealed by the accident—and be able to make it happen again. But don't wait around hoping to stumble on a cosmic accident. Because the truly exciting part of creativity is when you go out looking for a new idea, pick out your own selection of those swirling bits of information, and combine them in a brand-new fashion.

The "I" in S.T.R.I.K.E. stands for IDEAS. Once you start to focus on idea-making, you'll find that great concepts sometimes pop up when you least expect them. Or you may find that ideas are shy little puppies you must coax and cajole out of hiding. Of course, you've already put things into motion. You started the process by Stewing, which led to your Ten-Word Target. Then you journeyed on to collect your Research, and now you are prepared to generate IDEAS. So what do you do first?

SWITCHING ON

You must tell yourself: "I am going to *think up* ideas." For me, this is a mental set that requires specific switching on. I need to click into the creative mode. I do it with the simple act of reaching for a 14" X 17" pad of paper. For years, while reaching for that pad, I've felt my mind sliding into a sort of free-flow mode. I own a small advertising agency, and many of my duties are quite left-brain in nature: client meetings, marketing strategy discussions, research and media planning review, contract negotiations, billing questions, landlord relations, even the occasional legal dispute. You will rarely see my 14" X 17" pad emerge in those situations. I save that inspirational trigger for the time when my creative partner, Art Gilmore, and I sit down to tackle a new campaign or ad for a client. That pad of paper seems to say: "Okay, John, it's time to get cracking." It is like a seductive siren's song—and I have learned to obey its call.

What should your trigger be? It could be a big pad of paper. It might be a special pen, or the act of putting on old clothes. Or (particularly good for a lot of people) it could be enough just to change your environment. For example, move your desk to a new spot in your home and tell yourself that this is where you'll think up ideas. If you work in an office, pick an unused conference room or empty office and make it the place where you switch on. The point is that you need to send an unmistakable signal to your brain that the thrill of creativity is about to begin. Find the trigger that works for you. Then pour your right brain a strong cup of black coffee—and send your left brain out for a long walk.

Don't make the mistake of assuming that creativity is an activity you will practice only on weekends and holidays. Your "originality mode" should be available to be switched on twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There may be a "best time of the day" for you—personally, I can really crank up at 6 a.m. (Erasmus, the sixteenth-century Dutch humanist, evidently agreed, saying, "The muses love the morning.") But no matter when you switch on, you'll discover that the more you practice thinking up new concepts, the better you'll be able to whistle up a batch of idea on demand. Which brings us to the next point:

QUANTITY BREEDS QUALITY

I have had this experience hundred of times. A fertile idea-generation session has just begun and—voila!—without even trumpeting its arrival, a terrific idea pops onto the scene. It looks great. It seems perfect. It speaks to me with a powerful voice that says, "You're done now. You've found the best idea." I always allow myself to fall a little bit in love with this new idea. But I also insist on being almost immediately unfaithful. "Let's pin it up on the wall," I'll say in creative session with my colleagues, "and see if we can top it." We push on and allow more ideas to flutter up from the subconscious. We ignore each new idea's wailings and importunings ("Hey, I'm a sensational idea. You can stop now!") and keep the pressure on for more ideas. Eventually, a funny thing happens. When we review our prolific batch of ideas a few days—or a few hours—after starting, those initial ideas never seem to make the final cut. We always do seem to top those first creative upstarts. It will be the same for you, so heed this warning well:

**NEVER STOP WITH THE FIRST GOOD IDEA;
THERE MAY BE A BETTER ONE
RIGHT BEHIND IT.**

Generating ideas is a wonderful, loose, free-associating process that allows your mind to churn through all the information you have stuffed into it. As your brain bounces happily along, your ten-word target will send out a clear homing signal that keeps you on

course. I'd suggest that you print those ten words in big block letters on a piece of paper and tape it to a wall in front of you. It will be a powerful stimulus to your idea-making for, as the pragmatic American philosopher John Dewey said half a century ago, "A problem well stated is half solved." The rules and requirements implied by your ten-word target will help—not hinder—your creative output.

This approach to idea generation works for cartooning, script writing, solving engineering problem, inventing a new way to get a job done, concocting a new recipe, figuring out a new career for yourself, or just about anything that requires you to think up something that wasn't there before. When you're about to put thing together in a new way "for the first time ever," you must set about it with eager determination. So activate your trigger, unhook the telephone or put on the answering machine, and start to freewheel with the bits of information you have accumulated. And—very, very important—follow this one magnificent rule:

**SKETCH YOUR THOUGHTS
AS YOU GO ALONG.**

Creativity is a very visual process. There is probably not a single creative idea that cannot be portrayed by a sketch of some sort along with a few descriptive words. Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks were full of drawings and written notations. A sketch forces you away from long detailed word essays and lets you portray an idea in a looser, less restricted way. Your sketch helps to record a right-brain idea in a form that is quickly accessible to your left brain when you want to spin back through your inventory of new concepts. When generating ideas, I like to sketch pictures and scribble words random thoughts, and concept fragments—the building blocks of new ideas. When a bona fide new idea appears I sketch its essence, then add to the scene a few "labeling" words. Remember, your pictures can be very crude—anything vaguely recognizable will suffice, from stick figures and diagrams to clipped-out magazine photos.

Here's proof of the importance of the visual in conveying ideas. Thomas A. Edison was a prolific—and visual—genius. His papers are being published by a team of historians headed by Professor Reese Jenkins of Rutgers University. According to Jenkins, if the more than *four millions* individual sheets of paper churned out by Edison and his squadrons of fellow workers, tinkerers, and idea-makers were stacked in one pile they would reach "higher than the World Trade Center towers." If you were to look through those papers, which helped to generate 1,093 U.S. patents, you would find that thousands of them carried Edison's explanatory little sketches along with the expected scientific language. Amazingly, in a letter he wrote in 1868, Edison stated: "I have for nearly 3 years been experimenting on a 'fac simile' which I intend to use for Transmitting Chinese Characters." Edison's sketch of a copying press demonstrates how his visual thinking easily portrayed a fax-like machine that could transmit characters over telegraph lines. If he were around to look at one of today's ubiquitous fax machines, Edison might smile a knowing smile and say, "Yeah, that's what I was driving at..."

You can spin through a large collection of Edison's sketches-with-captions and in fifteen minutes get the drift of a hundred different things he was "driving at." You could

never accomplish the same fast overview if you were required to look only at his words. This is one of the reasons you want to keep your idea generation *visual*. You want to be able to accomplish a quick review of your ideas many, many times during the process. The visual “parade in review” will stimulate new ideas, new combinations, new directions. It will give your right brain a chance to shine.

The visual stimulus can work in another way. As you generate ideas, if you find pictures or diagrams that are relevant to your target, pin them up on the wall in front of you. Add to them as new pictures become available. Mix your own idea sketched right in with them. Cook up a creative chowder and invite your eyes to the feast. One of the ways the Ford Design Center inspires new car designs is with something it calls “image boards.” When setting out to, for example, design a midpriced car for young, upwardly mobile families, Ford’s designers put together a wall-size board photographs and drawings. They use pictures to answer such questions as: What kind of houses do these car buyers live in? What kind of watches do they wear? Where do they go on vacation? What kind of art do they hang on their walls? As the swarm of pictures grows, an understanding of who is going to buy this car and what might appeal to them begins to emerge. As the design process moves along, the fresh new car designs that are created can be checked against the “information” the image board contains. Because it is visual, this checkoff can be done quickly and—again, because it is visual—the experience is not hidebound or restrictive.

GO A LITTLE BANANAS.

Ask anyone who thinks up idea for a living and he or she will probably agree that *good idea often evolve out of bad ideas*. Just like the creative “loosening-up” exercises in Chapter Two, off-kilter ideas can open you up to more creativity. Start an idea-generation session with a few practical ideas—but then loosen up and “go a little bananas.” Force yourself to be a little silly. Push beyond the pale/ Sketch and describe some dingbat ideas that could never, ever possibly work. Here’s an exercise to get you into the spirit. Try to think up fifteen uncommon uses for a straight pin. Start by listing five reasonable, practical uses, things like “a bulletin board pin,” “a crevice cleaner,” “an instrument to draw blood.” Then for the next five ideas, go a little bananas. Think of outlandish ideas like “a sword for an elf,” “an antenna for the world’s smallest radio station,” or “an object to provide the Meaning of Life to a pincushion.” After you’ve pushed your mind to silly extremes, return to thinking up practical ideas for your last five entries. You may find that these last thoughts are the best—solid ideas now equipped with a little sass and pizzazz.

15 UNCOMMON USES FOR THE COMMON PIN

Practical

- (1) _____
- (2) _____
- (3) _____
- (4) _____
- (5) _____

Outlandish

- (6) _____
- (7) _____
- (8) _____
- (9) _____
- (10) _____

Practical

- (11) _____
- (12) _____
- (13) _____
- (14) _____
- (15) _____

Back in the 1920s, there was a creative man at Procter & Gamble named Vic Mills. Mills, a chemical engineer, was a fountain of new product ideas, many of which he got by looking at one product or system and applying its principles to another. One day he was thinking about soap when he really went “a little bananas.” “I wonder what would happen,” he must have mused, “if I ran liquid soap through an ice cream machine?” It probably occurred to him that the machine would add some air that would stay in the soap mixture as it hardened into a bar. He was excited to find out if this would give the soap better sudsing ability. So he got an ice cream machine and tried out his idea. The result of course, went into the “Soap Maker’s Hall of Fame.” The new air-filled Ivory Soap did make better suds. But to the everlasting delight of small children the world over, it also *floats*.

So this how you put your creativity in motion. Your information base is in place; your research file has been completed and you’ve reviewed all of articles, book, and interview notes. Your ten-word target is posted on the wall in front of you. Flip your creativity switch ON and feel yourself begin to climb out of all your tight, constraining little boxes. Grab your 14” X 17” pad and put all your thoughts down in visual form. Scribble notations. Push yourself to extremes—go a little bananas—and think your problem in unexpected ways. Let the ideas flow; don’t fall in love with the first pretty little idea that comes along. These are the general principles of idea-making. But that exciting process is just beginning. There are still some very specific techniques you can use to increase your flow of brainstorming.

Chapter 10

HOW TO THINK UP IDEAS—THE NINTY-GRITTY

Once you get your ideas flowing how do you *keep* them flowing? For one thing, you'll need to clear all negative thoughts out of your mind, and out of the room.

Kill the Critic

Dismiss the drill sergeants. Nix the nay-sayers. Suspend all critical judgments/ Allow even the dumbest idea to surface and find its way to your pad of paper. Write it down or scribble a picture and keep going. Give even a bad idea the opportunity to flourish for a few moments. I once began working with a newly marketing executive who asked to sit in on one of our idea-generation sessions for an important new client. With his wire-rimmed glasses and neatly trimmed mustache he seemed a little uptight for a hang-loose creative session, but we allowed him a spot at the table anyway. Big mistake. Every time an idea was suggested that didn't precisely fit his conception of "where the solution lived," he would scowl and shake his head and mustache abruptly from side to side while muttering, "No! No! No! No! No!" Little budding ideas were snuffed out instantly. Windows of opportunities and exploration were slammed shut. The mood darkened and all creative spirit drained from the room. Finally, we had to disinvite this wet blanket and, after the shell shock wore off, we were able to get our little creative engine back on track. Whether you're creating alone or in a group, stick to this advice during idea generation. No negative thoughts allowed. All ideas—even oddball ones—are welcome.

Be a Martian / Be a Child

This is another technique that works creative wonders. Most people approach problems with a static mind-set. Their first instinct is to ask "How is this problem usually solved?" and then they look at the problem as thousands have before them. Instead, try to think about the problem as if you were a newly arrived man from Mars. The Martian has no preconceived notions; he just observes and tries to make sense of what he sees before him. Take the story of the Martians who landed their flying saucer in a small town in America, studied the suburban hamlet carefully for a week, and then returned to Mars to make their report:

"Esteemed Commandant, we found Earthlings to be a very advanced race of four-wheeled metal monsters. These four-wheeled Earthlings live in small houses which have large structure attached to them where their 'service units' are accommodated. The 'service units' have hair and two legs and are built of soft, mushy stuff. They are obviously enslaved and do everything the four-wheeled Earthlings require. The two-leg units wash the Earthlings. They feed the Earthlings through hoses. And they are forced to climb inside the Earthlings any time it wants to go somewhere. It is our recommendation

that we not attack Earth at the time as the Earthlings are a superior form of intelligence—with quite dominating personalities.”

It is slightly skewed version of life on this planet, but there can be an element of truth, the seed of a creative idea, in even the most offbeat observation.

Always throw away your preconceptions and look at your problem through fresh eyes. Have you ever seen a child examining an unfamiliar toy? She turns it over, shakes it, pushes it around, trying to figure out what it’s supposed to do, how it works. Approach your problem with the curiosity and ingenuity of a child, as in another story reported years ago in *Reader’s Digest*.

A large trailer truck has stopped before a recently constructed highway overpass. A group of adults is considering the problem: The truck trailer is half an inch too high to pass under the concrete bridge overpass and is tying up traffic for miles. There is no way to drive around the structure. And the only escape routes involve turning the rig around, backtracking at least fifty miles, then taking much longer, circuitous route to the truck’s destination. The adults on the scene are noisily advising the truck driver to back up and take the detour. Then a six-year-old wanders up and looks at the situation. “Why don’t you let some air out of the tires?” he asks.

Like/Not Like

Martian and childlike approaches to a problem are essentially right-brain techniques. Now try a left-brain one. List every idea you can recall that is anything like the idea you hope to find. Has someone had to solve a problem that’s similar to yours? What was his solution? And then ask of that solution: “What’s like it?” Search for these preexisting gems. And don’t limit yourself to your own field of interest. Loosen up and hunt broadly—often an idea from another area is enough “like it” to give you a creative tweak toward coming up with a solution for your own problem.

A recent story in the *Wall Street Journal* relates how, in 1967, inventor Joseph Engelberger was a guest on *The Tonight Show*. He showed Johnny Carson his new robot, a clever machine that could open a can of beer and lead the band. The audience loved it. And talent agents called to book the act on other shows. The Japanese, who were trying to develop robots for factories that would cut labor costs and build products more accurately, saw the show and had a very different reaction. Here was a “What’s like it?” idea—and wanted to know more. The Japanese government sent Mr. Engelberger a first-class ticket to Japan and invited him to address an audience of seven hundred industrialists. He fielded questions for six hours. The Japanese robot industry was able to learn, adapt (Nibble-Nibble), and ultimately leapfrog ahead. Americans saw that early robot as a novelty. The Japanese saw it as “something like” the creative solution they needed for their specific problem—and today they dominate the world market for industrial robots.

But don’t give up on American ingenuity. Take, for example, Jill Barad. She’s an energetic, dark-haired young woman who has become a key idea-maker in the toy business—and industry that lives and dies on new ideas. In 1988, Jill was an executive in

product development at Mattel, Inc. The company has a long-running, hugely successful product—the Barbie doll line—and is always looking for new doll ideas. For several years, Jill had been trying to accomplish a specific ten-word target: “*Develop a doll that brings little girls and makeup together.*” But she had yet to come up with little lipstick tubes and makeup containers. But when the doll was tested with little girls, it invariably ended up a gloppy mess. How could Jill somehow have a doll with makeup that didn’t stain carpets and clothing?

Fortunately, right in the company, there was a “What’s like it?” idea just waiting to be recognized. Another of Mattel’s sizzlers was the Hot Wheels line of toy cars for little boys. And in 1988 they introduced Hot Wheels Color Racers. A kid got a yellow car that, if dipped into cold water, changed to ruby red. Warm water returned it to the original yellow. This chemical color change process worked with a wide variety of colors. Jill Barad thought about her ten-word target. What it boiled down to was that she needed a *nonmessy* way to get cosmetic colors onto a doll’s face. Some “What’s like it?” thinking convinced her the toy car idea should work just fine; if a car could adopt new color, why not a doll?

Jill made the idea happen fast. In two weeks the company had a prototype of a L’il Miss Makeup and were showing the doll at the annual industry toy fair. When the doll’s face was touched with a cool water wand, the colors of light lipstick and rouge appeared. When very cold water was used in the wand, the lipstick was transformed into a darker shade, and eye makeup materialized. When warm water was used, all the color disappeared from the doll’s face. Within one year, L’il Miss Makeup was a fast-growing \$40 million business. If it hadn’t been for Jill Barad’s pursuit of “What’s like it?” thinking, this new profit center would never have existed. (P.S. Shortly after this success, Jill was promoted to president of the company’s Girls and Activity Toys Division.)

Or you can ask the question “What’s not like it?” sometime ago, a fire official must have been sitting around thinking about accident fire trucks were having while speeding through intersections. This could have led to a ten-word target: “How can we cut down the accident rate at intersections?” The more expected solutions might range louder sirens, to flashing headlights, to motorcycle escorts preceding the fire trucks, even to recorded Dalmatians barking from loud-speakers as intersections are approached. Looking for better ideas, the fire official might have thought about the basic run-of-the-mile fire truck and asked: “What’s not like it?” And that could have led to this answer: A fire truck that isn’t red. That insight (let’s give it a “Eureka”) quickly pointed the way to optical studies demonstrating that lime yellow is, in fact, significantly more visible than red. The creative solution was at hand. Since 1970, fire trucks painted lime yellow have been speeding more safely through intersections in a number of America’s towns and cities. But tradition dies hard. A 1984 research study reported in *Firehouse* magazine pointed out that lime yellow fire trucks had been involved in half as many intersection accidents as traditional red rigs, yet today the color red still prevails in many communities.

Giantism/Tom Thumbism

To find a creative solution to a problem, sometimes all you need to do is take something and make it bigger. Several years ago, Magazine Publishers of America, the

trade association for the country's eight hundred or so largest magazine, was looking for a way to get ad agency creative people more involved with the magazine medium. (Eschewing magazine assignments, copywriters and art directors usually prefer the more glamorous task of creating TV commercials.) So MPA concocted a creative awards contest with a \$25,000 first prize for the best magazine ad campaign of the year. In advertising, there are many creative awards competitions—and this was the only one with a money prize. But it laid an egg. The association didn't put much promotional money behind publicizing the contest, and agency creative people barely knew it existed. In spite of the \$25,000 prize, entries to the competition were minimal. "You know what?" one of the publishers said at a meeting. "Maybe we need an agency to promote this thing." So a number of ad agencies (mine included) were invited to submit proposals. The association had a relatively small advertising budget and the agencies were all asked how they would use it to promote the contest. Here's what we did: (1) We thought about the MPA's modest budget. (2) We dwelled upon the invisibility of the \$25,000 prize. (3) We applied a little giantism. In our presentation, I suggest that MPA take \$75,000 out of their advertising budget and add it to the prize. "Give your awards show a \$100,000 grand prize, and I promise you that every creative person in the business will sit up and take notice." Then I delivered the clincher: "And you won't have to spend much money advertising it. The price itself will generate a ton of free publicity." The publishers on the selection committee were momentarily nonplussed. Then intrigued. And then enthusiastic. Our agency was appointed, and today the annual Kelly Award with its \$100,000 prize had become an ad business institution. As you might expect, each year a flurry of high-profile publicity (all free) features the members of the winning creative team picking up their check. A big check.

Or go to the other direction from giantism and apply some "Tom Thumb" thinking. Funny how Japan keeps popping up in creative examples, but a couple of decades ago somebody over there must have been sitting around at one of the huge electronics firms, pondering a problem. The company was building big, bulky cassette players the size of small briefcases. But it was also making palm-size transistor radios. Why not "Tom Thumb" the cassette player? That challenge no doubt started a headlong creative dash toward developing little, pocket-sized cassette players. The products that resulted, such as the Sony Walkman, are a "Tom Thumb" idea that founded a product category worth billions. So after you try your idea out as big ideas, see what happens when you make them small ideas. And continue to put all of your thoughts on paper.

Look / Don't look / Look

You're a young Frenchwoman. And you're an executive vice president at American Express headquarters in Manhattan. To have quickly ascended to that position, you must have some unusual talents. Anne Busquet, a charming, straight-talking executive, did it by thinking creatively herself and inspiring her people (including the number-crunching "credit people") to feats of creative accomplishment. In 1986, she was given marketing responsibility for the launch of the company's first delayed-payment credit card. Up until then, the only credit cards American Express offered (green, gold, platinum) required payment in thirty days. The new credit card would be a critical, aggressive step and had to have the right name, design, and positioning in the market

place. Hundreds of names were generated by dozens of people. Gradually, Anne and her team whittled the list down to four names: Centurion, Maxima, Complement, and Optima. Which name should they select? Naturally, the research department was hard at work with complex, sophisticated research techniques intended to guide this choice. But Anne reached for a little pad of Post-it notes and handwrote one name on each sheet. Then she stuck the four little notes, with their four little names, up on her boss's office wall—and left them there for days. Every time she walked in for a meeting, she and her boss would stop for a moment and look at the four little stickers. Visual input. Looking at four names simultaneously is a powerful screening device. Ultimately, three names were eliminated one by one and there was just one name left on the office wall: Optima. The program was launched, and today the Optima Card is promoted on television, in magazines, on store door stickers, and in million of mailing. You see the name everywhere. But a short time ago you could only see it on a yellow scrap of paper—stuck to an office wall.

I can't overemphasize the importance of keeping every step of your idea-generation process—all those thoughts and glimmers—in an easily accessible *visual* form. Put your concepts up there where you can see them. Look at them. Scribble down all random thoughts that pop into your head. If a word or a phrase occurs to you, write it down. If a picture seems a more appropriate way to record an idea, draw a crude doodle to illustrate it. Look at all your visualizations as the ideas begin to proliferate. Do not criticize or edit your work. Let those idea fragment flow. If you have filled one sheet of paper, put it aside and begin another. Look at you visualizations. Move them around. Keep looking.

And then *don't look*. Put your sheet of paper away. Go do something else. Try to put the problem out of your mind temporarily. This seems to me to be a very important part of the creative process. It gives the left brain a chance to rest, but the right brain is still churning. You've certainly had the experience of trying very hard to remember a person's name and becoming extremely frustrated when you can't force it up from your subconscious. But as soon as you forget about trying to remember it and do something else—*pop!*—there's the name. So, for a while, walk away from your ten-word target and sheets of paper. Then come back and ambush them. Return to your target and papers and *look again*. You find that new combinations and solutions fairly leap off the paper. When I'm trying to "break the code" on a knotty creative challenge, I look over my sheets of paper just before going to bed, thinking hard about the problem I want to solve. The mind is now in gear, and while your left brain sleeps your amazing right brain will keep on working. Always keep a notepad by your bed to record those 3 a.m. thoughts that will occasionally jounce you wide awake.

I learned about the "Look/Don't Look/Look" technique during my first job in the advertising business, in the mailroom at Young & Rubicam's San Francisco office. Since my goal was to stop running the postage meter and start making ads, I began an aggressive campaign to persuade the creative director of the agency to give me a creative assignment. His name was Hanley Norins. A Groucho Marx look-alike, Hanley has a dark mustache and dark, darting eyes constantly seeking the next visual connection for a great idea. Hanley was (and still is) "The King of the Thirty-foot Pad." Whenever a new project started at the agency, Hanley would unroll a big roll of brown butcher's paper and pin the strip around two walls of his office. Three feet wide and thirty feet long, it would

form a gigantic blank “pad of paper” waiting to be filled. As various copywriters and art directors shouted out ransom thoughts, Hanley would scribble them on the paper with his black felt-tip marker. The excitement would build as the paper filled with words, phrases, and explanatory little drawings. Members of the creative department would wander in throughout the day and add an idea or combine it with an idea already there. Walk in (Look) and walk out (Don’t Look). Then, maybe a day later, walk in and ambush the paper again (Look).

The crossbreeding of ideas was thrilling to watch. A word in the upper left-hand corner might suddenly combine with a scribble in the lower right. Throughout the process, Hanley was an enthusiastic commending general—a high-spirited Patton stirring the brew as, day after day, new thoughts and concepts were added to his billboard. Suggest even a so-so idea, and Hanley would yell, “That’s great!” and scribble it on his thirty-foot pad. Hundreds of ideas would be born, dozens would survive the initial scrutiny, and ultimately, one idea would emerge victorious. During my first few weeks at the agency, I managed to scribble a couple of winning ideas in Hanley’s wall. Just before my third-month anniversary, Hanley called me into his office and said with a grin, “Congratulations, John, you’re now a junior copywriter.” As the newest officially sanctioned “idea-maker” in the advertising industry, I bid farewell to the mailroom. But at every creative session since that day, I’ve never been without a big pad of paper and a felt-tip pen. The simple process of visualizing your ideas can stimulate new ones, show you ways to enhance existing ideas, and help you remember what you’ve done. Why does visualizing work so well? Maybe because—of all your sensory organs—your eyes have the most direct connection to your brain.

Have you ever seen a photograph of the studio Pablo Picasso had in Paris during the early 1900s? It was a wonderful visual conglomeration of furniture, paintings, books, fabrics, foods, jugs, jars, musical instruments, toys, and various assorted objects Picasso had found God knows where. The entire space was a cluttered churn of visual information. In a sense, the visualizations of the ideas you jot down on a piece of paper are your version of “Picasso’s studio,” a place where the mind is stimulated to take leaps, to look for new connections, to find new ways of putting things together. Always record your new ideas—as visually as possible—on paper. Stay loose and let the paper gain a life of its own. (Jazz great Charlie Parker once said: “Don’t play the saxophone. Let it play you.”) Record your thoughts with words and pictures. Then keep coming back to your sheets of paper with new scribbles and fresh insights. Put them away for a while. Then sneak up on your pages; jump the, unexpectedly and look for sudden new connections. You are creating a visual environment—your own Picasso’s studio—in which ideas will flourish.

Be Alert for Hunches

The “Look/Don’t Look/Look” technique is fertile ground for hunches. Sometimes a hunch will creep up softly from your right brain. On other occasions it will come barreling in with bells, whistles, and skyrocket. At first, you’re never sure a hunch is a good idea; the logic usually escapes you (which is probably the definition of hunch). But deep down inside, you feel it’s a great idea. Your gut says: “Wow! This is a goof one!” So I always give a hunch plenty of room to breathe. Suppressing my left brain’s demand

that the newly arrived hunch have some “logical” *raison d’être*, I simply record the gist of it on paper—as fast as possible. Once on paper, the hunch gains a certain concrete reality. Logic will follow in due time.

Let Your Right Brain Be Your Guide

Harold Simmons is a tall, rangy, seemingly easygoing Texan who is in the business of taking over companies. Not a love-‘em-and-leave-‘em sort of raider, Simmons prefers to stick around and make sure his new acquisition is run more profitably than it was by the previous administration. One other thing about Simmons: he’s self-made, personally worth well over a billion dollar, and rather proud of it all.

Early on a Sunday morning, I met Simmons at his Dallas mansion. He answered the door himself in an open-collar shirt and jeans. We went into a living room that was the size of a small house and talked about creativity in the world of takeover financing. The ideas he generates are not product ideas; for example, a clever way to build a better mousetrap holds no appeals for Simmons. But ask him to think up a clever way to take over a controlling interest in the mousetrap manufacturer’s company, and he’ll come up with a dozen of so brilliant ploys. “Most companies operate with too much capital,” he says. If he noticed that the mousetrap maker was maintaining a huge backlog inventory of steel springs, and that the price of steel-spring wire was going up fast, he might buy enough stock to gain control of the company, sell off the unneeded steel wire—which is tying up capital funds—and use the proceeds to reward the stockholders with a big dividend. And get a load of this next twist: Since he is the largest stockholder in the company, his dividend might actually pay for his stock purchase. In effect, he uses the trap maker’s own money to buy the trap maker.

I asked Simmons how he got ideas. “Well,” he said, “it’s important for me to get my mind off what I’m thinking about. I give my conscious mind an easy, routine task; then my subconscious can really wander around and pick up all these creative ideas.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“I get a lot of ideas in my car driving to work,” he replied. “I put on the radio. I sing. And then these ideas, they just come to me.” Then he added with a smile, “Of course, I only work five minutes away from here. I guess if I had a longer drive—I’d probably have a lot more money.”

Simmons is a perfect example of creative thinker who lets his right brain be his guide. When you’re in search of creative ideas, you will find they will spring forth anytime, anywhere. But ideas can be elusive things—like fireflies.

When we are little kids, we captured fireflies in a bottle. Think of your pad of paper as a bottle capturing your ideas. Collect as many as you can find. Then you will be ready for the next step in the creative process—picking the best idea and making that idea happen.
