

5 Simple Steps to Creative Thinking and Idea Generation

The following process has a proven track record of success for creating new ideas across a wide sphere of disciplines, from poetry to painting, engineering to science, from advertising to legal.

The aim is to make new connections between existing events or subjects, completing a new picture, analogous to making a jigsaw for the first time.

It is essential to understand that this is a sequence and not just a list of tasks. Therefore, each step should be completed in the sequence listed. Each individual step is the foundation for success at the next stage.

1. Collect Raw Materials

This step is often skipped or only partly completed but is a key to the overall success of the process. The quality of ideas generated depends on the quality of the preparation and assimilation of the raw materials. Raw materials can include paper and magazine cuttings, photographs, advertisements, original observations.

Two types of raw materials should be collected:

Specific – Those relating directly to the area of interest, customer group, proposed product etc.

General – Those relating to the broad subject of life events and current affairs. The more widely we spread our net for general materials, the greater our chance of generating creative ideas. This is an ongoing process on which we can build each day.

It is a good idea to assemble these into some kind of order or pattern. Scrapbooks are a great way to collect general materials. Specific materials can be catalogued in some way to make retrieval easier.

Do not short-cut step 1.

2. Digest the Materials

This step involves taking each piece of information and studying it from as many angles and in as many different ways as you can. Really try to 'get inside' what it is about, what it is saying, how it looks etc. Continue this process with each piece of specific and general information, looking at the facts and trying to bring them together to see how they fit. A 'fit' may be found for some pieces of information without too looking too deeply. As bits of ideas come to mind, write these down, no matter how wild or part-formed they are. This process will help cement them in the mind and is a precursor to generation of complete ideas.

It is hard work and at some stage the mind will become tired, but keep going at this stage as you will develop a second burst of mental energy. Only when everything becomes a complete jumble with no clear solution anywhere should you stop this process.

3. Drop the Subject

A common trait in the creative process and idea generation is that these ideas come to us when we are least expecting them to, and often when we are doing something that is totally unrelated to the area in which we have been seeking to generate ideas.

So, this third step is quite simple; get as far away as possible from the thinking process on our chosen area. Do something different, preferably something where you can relax and something that you really enjoy. Typically, this will be a topic or activity in which you feel most creative, such as, listening to music, reading poetry, playing a sport.

This allows our subconscious to mull over the information we have input in steps one and two.

4. The Idea from Nowhere

At some stage an idea will 'appear as from nowhere' and usually during a pretty mundane activity such as eating breakfast, having a bath or shave, going for a walk. This is the point at which you must write it down to capture it (having a pencil and notebook in the pocket at all times is a very useful exercise) and then

5. Test the Idea

Once ideas have been generated it may be apparent that they are not the complete picture or not as great as first thought. However, the best way to test these is to expose them to a trusted judicious few. This may seem a bit of a threat. After all, we may not feel like sharing ideas with others (hence the word 'trusted') and we may be afraid of them being shot down in flames (hence the word 'trusted').

What is most interesting is that a good seed of an idea will generate more flesh from those who encounter it. So, our idea will benefit from the wisdom and experience of others and grow as they add their ideas to it. The idea expands into opportunities and possibilities that we may have overlooked.

What we end up with is a creative solution, shaped and developed from an idea into a practical solution.