

Creativity Training: Generate Ideas

with Stefan Mumaw

Course Exercises

02_03 Motivation, Exercises

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I Used a Skeleton Key, You Used a Door.

Just because we're out in public doesn't mean certain natural, human urgencies are not part of our existence. NO, NOT THAT! I'm talking about needing to use the restroom. Most public restrooms are separated by gender, save for the occasional unisex restroom. Differentiating which restroom we should choose is pretty simple: look for the icon on the door. The men's restroom looks oddly enough like a man, while the women's restroom... you guessed it, looks like a woman. We learn which icon to choose pretty early.

But if we lived, say, in medieval times, would we know the icons we use today are meant to separate the restrooms? Suspend the fact that there wasn't separate restrooms in medieval times, what icons would we use to communicate which outhouse is men's and which is women's? That will be your task today.

Choose a theme to start:

Medieval Times

Wild, Wild West

Ancient Rome

Prehistoric Times

Under The Sea

Futuristic Space

Major Sport

On Safari

After choosing a theme, create the iconic restroom signs for that theme. One for the men and one for the women. And wash your hands after.

The Printer Will Only Print in Red Tomorrow

Do you think if fortune cookies didn't have fortunes in them that they'd be as popular as they are? Probably not. It's the fortune that makes them so popular. The problem with fortune cookies is that the fortunes are typically so vague that you're assured that they will come true. Crackin' open a fortune cookie that reveals that you will travel a short distance soon is a pretty good bet, since you have to travel said short distance to get home from the Chinese place where you're eating that cookie. Let's change the vague nature of the fortune cookies and create ones that actually mean something.

Your task is to create a series of fortune cookie fortunes around one of these themes:

Your agency or work environment

Your occupation or field

Client relations

Odd human behavior

Restroom etiquette

Write at least five for any given theme.

This Is DesignyWood. Everybahdy Got a Dream!

Tread the streets of Hollywood at just about any time of year and you'll be presented with multiple opportunities to purchase a map that leads to the major tourist highlights of the area, as well as some promised "secret" locations, like movie stars' homes and points of historical interest along the way, true or not. Following the map generally provides some insight into the area, even if that insight isn't always reliable information. If nothing else, it makes for some entertaining stories.

There are probably some entertaining stories that could be told about your environment as well. If there aren't, the questionable nature of the information provides an acceptable forum for great entertainment. Your task today is to create a tourist map of your office, home, or studio. First, draw up a crude map of your area. After you have the map, start filling in the "points of interest." Start with the highlights that anyone coming to your office or home shouldn't miss. Then start supplementing this with second-tier attractions. Lastly, you'll need a few historical sites along the way, with a less than average chance of them being real. When you're done, set up a booth at the door and make your fortune!

It's a Grape Juice Shopping Cart Pushed by a One-Legged Meerkat

Ever been at a meal somewhere and noticed the stains on a tablecloth or the shape of coffee stains on the table? Sometimes, these stains can be quite beautiful in their randomness. Like looking at the shapes of clouds, we often interpret the shapes into recognizable forms. But even with the finite shape of something like a cloud, different people see different things, proof that experience and perspective gives each of us a unique view on the world.

Let's explore this concept a little today. First, you will need to create a stain. Get a piece of paper and find something that you can use to stain the paper. Keep it to a relatively thin liquid, as the heavier and oilier the stain agent, the harder it will be to draw over it. Coffee or juice would work. Once the stain has dried, spend some time looking at the stain. Turn it around, look at it from all angles, then grab a pencil and make that stain into something by drawing on it, around it, and over it.

The Better Mousetrap

School backpacks have one unique purpose: transport books and other school supplies from one place to another. That is, until you come along and change the whole school backpacking game. You're going to redesign the common school backpack.

First, identify the core issues school kids deal with in regards to the backpack. Next, either on paper or in some tangible form, develop the solution or solutions for those issues. Take all of your research and insights and apply them to a completely new schoolbook and supply transport system by drawing out your new prototype, complete with new features.

The Madison Avenue Medicine Show

In the early to mid-19th century, traveling medicine men would pedal magical elixirs that promised to cure ails and reinvigorate life. From the deck of wagon-wheeled carts, these showmen would shout promises of health and prosperity with their bottles of oils and tonics, weaving tales of incredible recovery and gargantuan vitality. Rarely more than sugar water or fish oil, the power of suggestion was often enough to simulate effectiveness. But the pitch was profitable, for sure!

Your task today is to create the magic elixir that cures the symptoms of a corporate ailment. Create the office ailment of choice for your situation. Then create the pitch for this bottled tonic by writing the tale of the ailment, the cure, and the stories of success to convince others to purchase the elixir. After you have completed the task, slap on that top hat and let the peddling begin!

Are You Going to Be a Cheapskate on This Project, Too?

Every new client project gets a client project questionnaire. It's the process for thousands of creative agencies across the nation. The questionnaire gives insight and a baseline to the project, tells us what we're making and for whom we're making it. It has questions like "Who is the intended audience?" and "What are the three most important things to communicate?" These questionnaires provide valuable information, but they could be so much more fun, couldn't they? If you said "yes!" with a slightly devious smile, then continue.

You are going to develop the world's worst client project questionnaire. The questions you ask are to be hideously inappropriate, questions that would never be uttered to a client... ever! The questionnaire will be half truthful and half shocking, but all fun. Develop the kind of questions that cut through the ordinary and get right down to the core of the project. Start with 10 questions. Just make sure you don't accidentally send this questionnaire instead of the real one!

The Object of the Game Is to Hit Mike with Blank DVDs

In 1971, the first coin-operated video game was installed in the student union at Stanford University. In 1972, Atari was founded and they released the father of all console-based video games: Pong. Since then, video games have become a \$10 billion dollar industry, with millions of households gathering around the TV to play the Microsoft Xbox, the Sony PlayStation, or the Nintendo Wii. Games are developed for everything from war scenarios and flight simulators to cooking challenges and dance competitions.

It's time you entered the world of video game development by creating a video game for your environment, or better yet, of your environment. Create a video game that revolves around something in your workplace or environment, considering the intended console (and what features that console provides,) point-of-view, and scoring. Is it an action game, a role-play game, or maybe a multi-player, story-driven game? Write it out as a description or draw out the console and games.

The Smell of Pinocchio's Shorts Is Overpowering My Porridge

There's nothing like that new car smell, huh? It's such a desirable smell that inventive air freshener companies have captured it and encourage you to hang that new car smell from your rear-view mirror, even if that mirror is attached to a '79 Gremlin. There are other recognizable smells that would make good air fresheners, like the leather straps from a guillotine, torch oil, or freshly polished armor. Well, that would be the air fresheners of choice if you lived in medieval times. Which is exactly the type of thinking you're going to need for this next exercise.

Your task is to create a set of hanging air fresheners for the rear-view mirror for one the following five themes:

Children's Storybookland

The Oval Office

Your Environment

The 60's

The Wild West

Create a 4-pack of different scents based on one of the themes. Write or draw out your solutions.

The Ump's a Bum, But My Seat Warmer Is Nice!

If you've ever sat in the bleacher seats at a professional baseball game, you know the sorry state of your derrière shortly after. The bleachers are hard, uncomfortable, and support the craziest, rowdiest, dedicated fans a team could ever have. The bleachers are the cheap seats and as such, are the targets of the hardline faithful who attend almost every home game of an incredibly long season. These tried and true fans deserve more. Move them to the front row? Not a chance. The front row isn't good enough for these fans. They deserve more. Professional baseball teams pay out close to \$100 million to their players. It's time to give some back to the bleacher bums.

Your task today is to develop a set of ideal bleacher improvements. Take into account the average bleacher bum and what they could use. Money and technology are no object. Design the ideal bleacher experience. They deserve it. Let's play two!

03_03 Strategic Play Exercises

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Fire in the Hole!

The plastic spoon is one of the greatest and humblest inventions known to man. What would we eat plastic shot cups of processed chocolate pudding with if it weren't for our pint-sized friend? And stirring? Don't even think about it. But there is one usage category that the plastic spoon is remiss to take the lead in, and that's the flinging category. Little known fact about plastic spoons: They make GREAT flingers, of just about any semi-weighted material! It's time to test it out. You're going to need a friend or two for this contest. It's a flinging contest. Distance wins. Materials are up to you. Find the material that you think the plastic spoon will best fling for distance and have a fling-off. Try to aim away from the boss's door!

High Fructose Corn Syrup Is Not a Banned Substance.

We drink 'em all day, and regardless of our personal stance on recycling, beverage containers are rarely used for anything besides filling up a receptacle. That's going to change, at least for today. So down that carbonated beverage of yours, and get crackin'! Your challenge today is to get 2 other willing participants and race those cans! Create a vehicle of some form out of an empty soda can. It can be land based if you have an incline to roll down, water based if there is a body of water handy, or even air based if you can engineer a way to keep them airborne long enough to judge distance. Use whatever elements you have at your disposal to create the way it will roll, float, or fly. You can even decorate it with sponsors logos or speed aides. The sky's the limit, or the wall at the end of the hall, whichever comes first.

If You Want to See Your Beloved Pencil Sharpener Alive...

You're a mastermind criminal. Who isn't? But you know something almost every other criminal doesn't know. Practice makes perfect. Your task today is to practice the devious skill of thievery. First, you must plan. You're going to "borrow" something from someone's office or desk. You may have to go scope it out, and find the right person and the right object. Find someone that will be willing to play along when the practice begins. Got it? Good. Now, you're going to replace the object you "borrow" with a riddle alerting the victim that something was "borrowed" and if they want it back, they have to solve the riddle. Once you know which object you will be "borrowing," create the riddle and type it out or cut out the words from a magazine. So they won't guess your handwriting, of course! Then, in your stealthiest mode, "borrow" the object and leave the note. If you really think you're a mastermind criminal and expert actor, even play dumb and find the note for them, or try and help them solve it when they find it. Now, go back to your desk, rub your hands together, and bellow out your most maniacal evil laugh. Mooohohohohohohaaahahaha!

You're Walking on My Line.

There's an age-old adage that says, "A bad day golfing is better than a good day working." Sometimes you just have to find the silver lining. It's safe to say that in the absence of a full round of real golf, three holes of office golf will have to do. Your first task is to make a club. In the spirit of keeping everyone in the office safe from misguided drives, let's stick with just a putter. You have to find something to make into a putter, including creating the head of the putter. If you don't have any real golf balls around (who wouldn't?!) you can make tape balls with masking or duct tape. Now all you need is the course. Spec out some space, either down hallways or in open areas, where you can create your three-hole course. Using obstacles as hazards, create a putting course by creating the tee box with tape on the floor and the flag by rolling up paper and taping it vertically to the floor. You can even create the flags if you like. Fore!

Bland No Longer.

The garden-variety orange traffic cone has been the universal symbol of "go away from here" for years. When otherwise friendly, outgoing people see someplace that multiple orange traffic cones have gathered, they go the other direction, avoiding any contact with the cones. This has obviously led to a generation of orange traffic cone exclusion mindsets, dejected and inconsolable orange traffic cones taking their own cone lives on many occasions. In honor of your newfound, hopeful desire to help change the cycle of cone abuse, your task today is to redesign or decorate the orange traffic cone to make it more inviting, and make people want to hang around cones once again. Think of it as "Extreme Makeover: Orange Traffic Cone Edition."

You Mean There Really Is Truth in Advertising?

Advertising, by and large, has stretched the truth over the years to sell products. Not every product is truly the best. And not every product will perform the way it is represented. This we all know. But what if advertising told the truth? The late actor Dudley Moore made a comedy called *Crazy People* that explored that very thought. Your task today is to create some truth in advertising. Choose three major car manufacturers, and then choose one vehicle from each manufacturer. Write down your “truth in advertising” headline for each vehicle by creating a headline that, for once, actually communicates to the consumer what the vehicle really represents. When you’re done, go rent *Crazy People*.

Does This Color Go with My Work Boots?

Men. Manly men. Manly men don't carry un-manly men things. It's not manly. Manly men don't coordinate clothing and accessories, they don't order Caesar salads, and they don't carry umbrellas. Umbrellas are NOT manly. Manly men say they don't mind getting wet, it's just water. The truth is, and don't tell anyone, but manly men actually do mind getting wet. It makes them cold. Manly men say they don't mind being cold, but they do. If only they could carry and use an umbrella without giving up any manliness. The trick would be that the umbrella would have to be cool. And manly. That is your challenge today. Re-engineer the common umbrella to make it acceptable for a manly man to use it. It'll need more than a paint job; it'll need some thought as to what will make the umbrella manly again. The only restriction is that, at its very core, it has to keep rain off the manly man. His tootsies might get wrinkled, and no manly man wants that.

Creatures of Habit.

Humans love repetition. We go to the same places, eat the same things, sleep on the same side of the bed, and watch the same shows night after night. We love repetition because we find comfort in it. Every one of us has a routine. Even if we don't know it, we have certain tasks that we perform the same way every day. Routine can often be a deterrent to creativity. In routine, we miss experiencing something in a new way, and the lack of this experience may affect what we can bring to the table during idea generation. Before we can assess our routine, we have to be aware of it. Grab a digital camera. Take fifteen photos of things that you do everyday, things that are part of your routine. Take nothing for granted; think about every thing you do and in what order. Even think about how you perform those individual tasks. After documenting this, try to change one routine every day. Even the slightest change in perspective can have unexpected results.

Haiku-a-Gogo!

What in the haiku is a “haiku?” Simply put, a haiku is a form of poetry. While there are many styles and forms of a haiku, one of the most popular iterations is a poem that is three lines and follows this formula:

5 syllables

7 syllables

5 syllables

The 5-7-5 form is the only restriction; the poem doesn't have to rhyme. Your task today is to write a haiku about one of the following subjects:

Your typical day

Your boss

Grape jelly

Country music

The eraser

Garbage

Cheese

I Knew That Xylophone Would Come in Handy One Day.

We spend a lot of time at work. Whether that's "at home" at work, or at the office/studio at work, we spend many hours in our own work environment. We've seen the objects in their respective places so many times, we don't even recognize they are there anymore. Time to change that perspective and explore our environment once again. Grab a digital camera. While seated in your usual work environment, take a picture of something in your area that begins with each letter of your name. If you're name is John Smith, you'll be taking nine photos, one for each letter. We're terribly sorry if your name is Alexander Christiansen Constantinopolis.