



Brainstorm - 8 Rules

At its most basic level, a Brainstorm session requires you to sprout related points from a central idea.

Brainstorms are therefore one of the primary methods employed during the Ideate phase of design thinking. Brainstorming is a great way to generate many ideas as it leverages the collective thinking of the group and encourages group members to engage with one another, listen to each other's ideas and build upon them. While it is best to focus on one problem or design challenge at a time when you brainstorm, the main aim is to generate as many ideas and potential solutions as possible. Let's take a look at 8 key best practices so you can brainstorm at your best and really make the most of this divergent phase of the design thinking process!

01: Set a Time Limit

You should always set aside a specific time for when your team will be in "brainstorm mode." You should **allocate 15–60 minutes**, however it can be shorter or longer, depending on the difficulty of the problem and the motivation and experience of the group.

02: Stay Focused on Your Problem Statement

Before you start your brainstorm session, you should already **have a clear understanding of what problem you want to ideate solutions for**. A great way to communicate this to the rest of the group is through a short "How Might We" question. What's more, you should ensure you stay focused on this problem statement at all times. It's easy to veer off and take lots of different directions during a brainstorm session, especially when you try to be open-minded and unconstrained. However, it's important that members stay on topic and continue to generate solutions around the core problem statement, otherwise the process can become confusing and ideas can become muddled. You may even want to assign this task to a particular member of the group—it is then their job to maintain the thread of conversation and prevent team members veering off on a tangent.

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03: Defer Criticism and Judgment

Ensure everyone involved in the brainstorm session knows it is not the time to argue or question other people's ideas, even in a non-verbal way. You should try your best to set a positive, unthreatening tone from the outset and tell participants to **reserve all criticism for a later stage in the ideation process**. After all, the best ideas often come from practitioners, students and people who dare to think differently, not necessarily from the highly skilled and experienced managers. It's often a great idea to prohibit the word "no" in your ideation sessions. You'll be surprised to see how effective this small change can be to the overall ideation environment, and how it helps to open up minds and create collaborative, curious and friendly ideation sessions.

04: Encourage Weird, Wacky and Wild Ideas

No idea should be deemed off limits or too "out there". In fact, these ideas should be actively encouraged! You should do your best to create an ideation environment where **all team members feel comfortable enough to verbalize any and all of their ideas**. This type of free thinking may produce some ideas that are way off the mark, but it's good to remember that brainstorming is about generating as many ideas as possible. You whittle them down at a slightly later stage until the best possible option remains—this isn't your main aim when you brainstorm.

"It is easier to tone down a wild idea than to think up a new one."

—Alex Osborn

05: Aim for Quantity

Brainstorming is effectively a creative exercise, and design thinkers should be encouraged to let their imaginations run wild! The emphasis should therefore be on **quantity, rather than quality** at this stage—the assumption is the more ideas you generate, the bigger your chance of producing a radical and effective solution. Brainstorming celebrates the maxim "quantity breeds quality."

06: Build On Each other's Ideas

It's often the case that one idea leads on from another. You should encourage team members to consider the thoughts, opinions and ideas of other team members during brainstorm sessions and **embrace and build upon the most out-of-the-box notions**. This will ensure participants do not get lost or trapped inside their own trains of thought, and it will also allow for new insights and perspectives to be achieved. Make a rule that you all say "and" when you'd normally say "but" and proceed with the mindset "1+1=3"!

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07: Be Visual

When you write something down or sketch it out, you bring the idea to life and help people think up new ideas or even view existing ideas in a different way. Your brainstorm session is more likely to be a success and organically evolve if team members visualize and bring ideas to life, rather than rely on discussions alone. You should therefore **use colored markers to write on Post-its and put them on the wall—or sketch your ideas out**. Make sure people know that sketching ability has nothing to do with it; it's all about the idea behind their sketches that's important!

08: Stick to One Conversation at a Time

Make sure the brainstorm group focuses on one point or conversation at a time so you don't muddy your thinking or lose sight of the train of thought and current design challenge. Listen to each other, elaborate on each other's ideas and don't get obsessed with your own ideas. You're here to ideate together!

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