



Book How to Get Ideas

Jack Foster
Berrett-Koehler, 1996

Recommendation

It’s a shame that some readers might overlook this book as just another entry into the super-saturated and rarely enlightening field of creativity. Using quotes and examples drawn from the origins of well known - and even life-altering - ideas, creations and inventions, Jack Foster has crafted an educational, entertaining and inspirational book. He gets right to the point, makes you laugh and never descends to the level of psychobabble. He is aided and abetted by illustrator Larry Corby. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to all readers - Even if you aren’t transformed into an idea fountain, you’ll enjoy yourself, and probably learn something.

Take-Aways

- You can cultivate the ability to generate new ideas.
- An idea is actually the joining of known elements to form a new whole.
- To become idea prone, make your sense of humor work for you.
- Call upon the imagination and openness of the child you used to be.
- Develop your curiosity.
- Visualize your goals.
- Rethink your thinking.
- Believe that you can create ideas and you will.
- Overcome your fear of rejection.
- Reject so-called practical, logical boundaries.

Summary

Become Idea Prone

No matter your age, skill, job or training, you can come up with more ideas, faster and easier. You can condition your mind to

become "idea prone." The basics include:

- Making your sense of humor work for you.
- Calling upon the imagination of the child you used to be.
- Developing your curiosity.
- Visualizing your goals.
- "Rethinking" your thinking.
- Combining different ideas.
- Overcoming your fear of rejection.

“Whether you think you can or can’t, you’re right.” [Henry Ford]

The basis of humor is also the basis of creativity, "the unexpected joining of dissimilar elements to form a new whole that actually makes sense." Generating ideas is fun, but you have to let loose to free yourself to have new ideas. In fact, it’s almost impossible to separate humor or fun from creativity.

“Computer systems are doing much of the mundane work you used to do, thereby (in theory at least) freeing you up - and indeed, requiring you - to do the creative work those systems don’t do.”

What sets idea-prone people apart from those who aren’t? People who come up with ideas know that ideas exist and know that they will find them. The people who don’t come up with ideas don’t know that ideas exist and don’t know that they will find them. It’s really that simple.

You can always find another idea and another solution. Know that there are hundreds, if not more, ideas or solutions for your problem or situation. Know you will find those ideas. Doubt yourself and you put yourself at a severe disadvantage.

“Kids are natural-born scientists. First of all, they ask the deep scientific questions: Why is the moon round? Why is the sky blue? What’s a dream? Why do we have toes? What’s the birthday of the world? By the time they get into high school, they hardly ever ask questions like that.” [Carl Sagan]

Your self-image determines what you are and how you perform. Effort and force of will come later. Without a confident self-image, they’re useless. Henry Ford once said, "Whether you think you can or can’t, you’re right." To significantly improve your performance, improve your self-image. To become idea prone, accept two basic facts:

1. What you think about yourself is the single most important factor in your success. Everything else is controlled by your self-image. If you think of yourself as a failure you will probably become a failure. If you think of yourself as successful you will probably become successful. You can see this in action every day: seemingly gifted people fail while the mediocre succeed wildly. They all do it because they think they can. The difference between people who bubble with ideas and those who don’t has little to do with some natural born ability to generate ideas. It has to do with the belief that they can come up with ideas.
2. People can alter their lives by altering their attitudes. Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre said, "Man is what he conceives himself to be." Sages, clergymen, doctors, researchers, philosophers, psychologists, parents, teachers, coaches and poets all cite plenty of evidence. Real life examples abound. The mind alters how the body works. The mind can also alter the mind. If you believe yourself to be creative, you will be.

“New ideas are the wheels of progress. Without them, stagnation reigns.”

Forget about time. Some ideas take longer to get than others, but getting ideas doesn’t depend upon time. Nor does it depend upon workplaces, schedules or workloads. Don’t imagine getting ideas - imagine that you’ve already gotten them. They will flow.

Be More Like a Child

The child in you is creative, not the adult. The adult thinks too much, and is hampered by experience, knowledge, boundaries, rules, assumptions, preconceptions and fears. The child is innocent and free, and doesn’t know what he can’t or shouldn’t do. He sees the world as it actually is, not the way adults have been taught to believe it is. Children see possibilities; adults see limitations.

“Whether you’re a designer dreaming of another world, an engineer working on a new kind of structure, an executive developing a fresh business concept, an advertiser seeking a breakthrough way to sell your product, your ability to generate good ideas is critical to your success.”

To be more creative, wrote psychologist Jean Piaget, "stay in part a child, with the creativity and invention that characterizes children before they are deformed by adult society." J. Robert Oppenheimer said, "There are children playing in the streets who could solve some of my top problems in physics, because they have modes of sensory perception that I lost long ago." And, Thomas Edison said: "The greatest invention in the world is the mind of a child."

“Information’s real value - aside from helping you understand things better - comes only when it is combined with other information to form new ideas.”

Children don’t know about "before" and only know about "now," so when they search for a solution to a problem, they see it freshly for themselves every time. Children always see the new relationships among seemingly unrelated things. "They paint trees orange and grass purple, and they hang fire trucks from clouds." They also study ordinary things with great intensity - a blade of grass, a spoon, a face - and have a constant sense of wonder about things that most adults take for granted. They also constantly ask questions.

“There’s never been a time in all of history when ideas were so needed or so valuable.”

Carl Sagan said, "Kids are natural-born scientists. First of all, they ask the deep scientific questions: Why is the moon round? Why is the sky blue? What’s a dream? Why do we have toes? What’s the birthday of the world? By the time they get into high school, they hardly ever ask questions like that."

“Adults tend to do what they or other people did the last time. To children there is no last time. Every time is the first time. And so when they go exploring for ideas they explore a land that is fresh and original, a land without rules.”

"Children enter school as question marks and leave as periods," agreed Neil Postman. If you haven’t already, become a question mark again. Whatever you see, ask yourself why it is the way it is. If the answer doesn’t make sense, there’s room for improvement, a new idea. See through a child’s eyes again. Forget what has been done before. Break the rules. Be different. Be illogical. Be silly. Be free.

Get More Input

Creative people are courageous and extremely curious. Their insatiable curiosity makes them wonder how things work, where things come from and what makes people tick. This curiosity leads them to gather an enormous amount of knowledge, from the seemingly trivial to the profound. Most curious people feel they are this way naturally. All their lives they have had "the need to know." This curiosity forces them to accumulate knowledge continuously, and eventually they combine these nuggets of information with other information to create an idea. The more conceptual elements someone has, the more ideas they can create. So, curiosity is fundamental to creating ideas.

“You are wrong. You can think differently.”

If you get more "input" by letting your curiosity run free and gathering knowledge, you will become more idea prone. If you don’t have a curious bone in your body, make yourself become curious. Get out of your rut and learn how to see.

Remind yourself every day that a whole world is out there to explore. Read, think, imagine. Think of things in a new way. Notice things you have never paid attention to until now.

“You can search for an idea while you’re eating lunch or taking a shower or walking your dog. And you can find it in the instant you start your car or snap on the light.”

Courage is just as important as curiosity. The more naturally creative you are, the more fear you probably feel since your antennae are more finely tuned and you’re more aware of other people’s thoughts, more sensitive to their feelings and more affected by their actions. In *The Grace of Great Things*, Robert Gruden wrote, "Creativity is dangerous... We cannot open ourselves to new insights without endangering the security of our prior assumptions. We cannot propose new ideas without risking disapproval and rejection."

Fight through your fear and blurt out your ideas.

“You must screw up your courage and tell somebody about your idea.”

Remember that the people who don't approve are merely afraid of your ideas. That's because all ideas are inherently destructive - ideas can change things. The more original the ideas, the more radical the changes. People feel threatened by that, so they often oppose new ideas.

There is no such thing as a bad idea. Remember that Madame Curie had a "bad" idea that turned out to be radium. Richard Drew had a "bad" idea that turned out to be scotch tape. Joseph Priestly invented carbonated water while he was investigating the chemistry of the air.

Also, remember that for every idea, there's an even better idea. Rejection isn't defeat - look at it as an opportunity to do something even better. You don't have to put all your dreams into one idea. Come up with a lot of ideas. Not all ideas are successful. So, this way you'll be known as "that genius with all the ideas" instead of "that jerk with the lousy idea."

Rethink Your Thinking

Bertrand Russell once said, "Many people would rather die than think. In fact they do."

The way you think affects what you think about, and, therefore, what kind of thoughts come into your head. The more kinds of thoughts you generate, the more fuel you'll have for ideas. To "rethink your thinking," try the following:

- Think visually - People have been taught to think with words. When you form a thought, it's probably in the form of a statement. But, many of the world's most creative minds have thought with pictures instead of words. Einstein said that he rarely thought in words. Ideas came to him in images that he would try to express in words or formulas later. William Harvey looked at the exposed heart of a living fish and suddenly he "saw" it as a pump. Alfred Wegener noticed that the west coast of Africa fit into the east coast of South America and saw instantly that all the world's continents were once part of a single continent.
- Think laterally - People are also taught to think linearly or vertically, to go logically from one point to the next until they reach a conclusion, like placing one brick on top of another. But, there is another way of thinking. In lateral thinking you don't have to follow a logical path, you can think sideways, take side trips down other roads that, at first, don't seem to be leading anywhere. In fact, many seem quite illogical, but that's often the best way to come up with new ideas and solutions.
- Don't assume boundaries - People often inhibit their thinking because they unconsciously assume that a problem or situation has restrictions, boundaries, limitations and constraints, when in fact it doesn't. Don't put restrictions on your thinking.
- Set some limits - Leonardo da Vinci said, "Small rooms discipline the mind; large rooms distract it." In *The Courage to Create*, Rollo May explained that creativity itself requires limits, for the "creative act arises out of the struggle of human beings with and against that which limits them." Without a few limits of some kind, most people will flounder. Great ideas often come about because of a framework that institutes some kind of parameter, like a deadline, a 30-second commercial, a 900-word essay, or the use of only certain resources. A chef invented the Caesar salad because he was forced to make something out of the ingredients he had. That same dilemma led to the invention of chicken Marengo, bread pudding and countless other dishes.

Learn How to Combine

Since a new idea is just a new combination of old elements, you'll come up with more ideas if you know how to combine old elements in a variety of ways, including analogies, breaking the rules, playing "what if," looking to other fields and taking chances.

About the Author

Jack Foster has been working in advertising for 40 years, writing ad campaigns for companies including Carnation, Mazda, Sunkist, Mattel, ARCO, Albertson's, Ore-Ida, Suzuki, Universal Studios, and Rand McNally.
