

Playbook For Creative Thinking

In short, creative thinking is developing innovative and imaginative solutions to problems/issues. Generating ideas that break away from the usual thinking patterns. Author Roger von Oech identifies four main roles in the creative process: Explorer, Artist, Judge, and Warrior. We've put together a playbook for you to use as you stand in each of these roles in your own creative thinking process.

The Explorer – your role for searching for information

In order to create new ideas, you need the raw materials from which they're made: facts, theories, concepts, rules, information, feelings, and impressions. To help you find them, you need to bring out the first member of your creative team, your Explorer. Exploring involves venturing off the beaten path and opening yourself up to the world (new ways of thinking, seeing, and believing). Here are some strategies to support your Explorer.

Using the Explorer's Compass

Be curious. Adopt an inside out look.

Create a map for yourself. Have an idea of what you're looking for.

Leave your own turf. Look in outside fields, disciplines, and industries.

Too much is not enough. Look for lots of ideas.

Don't be afraid to go astray. You'll find what you weren't looking for.

Break up your routine. Use obstacles to get out of ruts.

Shift your focus. Pay attention to a variety of information.

Don't overlook the obvious. What's right in front of you?

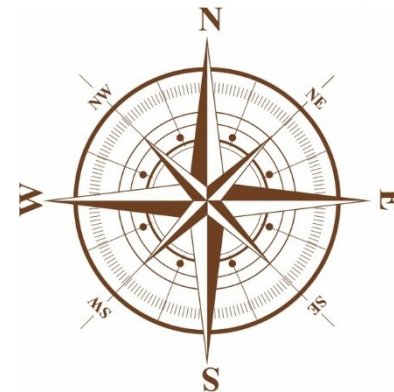
Get out your magnifying glass. Big things come in small packages.

What does it all really mean? Stand back and look at the big picture.

Slay a dragon. Look for ideas in a place you've been avoiding.

Remember where you've been. Trigger the ideas you already have.

Stake your claim to the new territory. Write your idea down when you find it.



The Artist – your role for transforming information into new ideas

Being an Artist is about changing patterns, looking at things in different ways, and experimenting with various approaches. It's also about the ability to change contexts and the way we view things in order to discover possibilities. The Artist is your role for “doing something” with your materials, for taking an array of information, patterns, and ideas and transforming them into something new. The tools in your Artist toolkit for “doing something” might consist of changing contexts, tinkering, and looking at what you're doing from strange angles. It might also include adding something, taking something away, using your imagination, and just plain experimenting. In the end, you'll come up with an original idea. The greatest dangers your Artist face are becoming a prisoner of familiarity as well as a prisoner of your inner critic.

Using the Artist's Palette

Take your concept and “do something” to it. What patterns can you change? How can you alter the way you think about it?

Adapt. What different contexts can you put your concept in? What historical contexts? What futuristic ones? What unusual geographical or political contexts could you make it a part of?

Imagine. What unusual “what-if” questions can you make up involving your concept? How far-out can you go? How surreal?

Reverse. Look at your concept backwards. How does it look upside down? Or inside out?

Connect. What can you combine with your concept? How does your concept fit in with the rest of your knowledge?

Compare. Make a metaphor for your concept. Sometimes a metaphor can give you fresh insight into a problem. What similarities does it share with music? Medicine? Warfare? Cooking? Gardening? Traveling?

Eliminate. What “rules can you break”? How far can you push the boundaries of limitation? What's obsolete? What's taboo? What's no longer necessary?

Parody. Use humor and absurd “what-if” questions to loosen up your imagination and look at things in a fresh way. Make fun of your concept. The Artist believes there is a close relationship between the *ha-ha* experience of humor and the *aha!* experience of creative discovery.

Incubate. What ideas are you working on that it would pay you to pause for a little bit? Sometimes putting an idea on the back burner allows beneficial things to happen. It can help put the problem into perspective, the solution seed can continue to grow in your subconscious, and you will likely approach the problem with somewhat different assumptions after allowing your idea to incubate.



The Judge – your role for evaluating an idea and deciding what to do with it

The Judge performs the evaluation function of the creative process. When you adopt this role, you decide what to do with the idea: implement it, modify it, or discard it completely. The Judge is probably our most well-developed role. We use it to evaluate everything from what clothes to wear and what books to read to deciding where to spend our vacation and how we should invest our money. The Judge's role in the creative process is a delicate one. You have to be critical enough to ensure that you give your Warrior an idea that's worth fighting for. But you also need to be open enough so you don't stifle your Artist's imagination. A well-balanced Judge understands the need to look at both what's worth building on and what might not work with an idea. A good Judge knows that sometimes a drawback in an idea, if the idea is interesting enough, can serve as a steppingstone to a practical creative idea. Your judge should remember that the overall purpose is to help get good ideas produced, not to revel in the beauty of their criticism.

Using the Judge's Scales

Objective. What is the idea trying to do?

Positives. What's interesting and worth building on?

Negatives. What are the idea's drawbacks?

Probability. What are its chances of success?

Downside. If it fails, what can be salvaged?

Ripeness. Is the timing right for this idea?

Deadline. How long do you have to make your decision?

Bias. What assumptions are you making?

Currency. Are these assumptions valid?

Blind spot. What assumptions are you making that you're not even aware of?

Arrogance. Have you been successful with similar ideas in the past? If so, could this success prevent you from seeing pitfalls in the idea?

Humor. What would the fool say about the idea?

Verdict. What's your decision?



The Warrior – your role for carrying your idea into action

The role of Warrior is to take responsibility for making your idea a reality - for carrying an idea from the world of “what if” to the world of action. The Warrior provides the payoff for the whole creative process. As a Warrior, you're part general and part foot-soldier. You develop a strategy and put your plan together. You also have the discipline to slog it out in the trenches and the passion to keep on going when things get tough. The greatest enemies your Warrior face are fear and lack of confidence. Your most important weapon to combat these is in your head - it's your belief that you can actually make it happen. As Henry Ford put it, “Whether you think you can or can't, you're right.” If you don't execute your ideas, they die.

Using the Warrior's Battle Cry

Be bold. What qualities do you have that will enable you to implement your idea?

Put together your plan. What's your strategy to reach your objective?

Put a fire in your belly. What motivates you to reach your goal?

Put a lion in your heart. Have courage to try a new idea and exercise your “risk muscle”. What are you willing to sacrifice? What are the consequences of failure?

Get going. What excuses may prevent you from getting started?

Sharpen your sword. What skills can you develop to implement your idea?

Know what you're selling. What is your idea's product of the product? What opportunities does it create for other people?

Strengthen your shield. What type of criticism do you expect to receive? How can you respond to it?

Follow through. What obstacles might get in the way? How will you get around them?

Use your energy wisely. What are some needless battles you can avoid?

Get up when you get knocked down. How persistent are you?

Savor your victories and learn from your defeats. What did you accomplish? What did you learn?



Types of Creative Thinking

Creative thinking comes in several forms, each shaping how you generate ideas and approach problems. Here are some of the most widely recognized types, grounded in what experts describe across creativity research and practice.

1. Divergent Thinking

Generating many different ideas or possibilities rather than narrowing down to one. It's the classic "think outside the box" mode.

2. Convergent Thinking

Taking many ideas and narrowing them into a single, effective solution. It complements divergent thinking by helping you evaluate and refine ideas.

3. Lateral Thinking

Approaching problems indirectly and creatively, often by challenging assumptions or reframing the problem. Edward de Bono popularized this approach.

4. Brainstorming

A rapid, free-flowing generation of ideas without judgment. It can be done individually or in groups and is one of the most common creative thinking techniques.

5. Abundance Mentality

Building on others' ideas rather than competing with them. This mindset encourages collaboration and richer idea generation.

6. Conjecture

Making educated guesses when information is missing. This helps you explore possibilities and imagine scenarios beyond the known facts.

7. Preserving Ambiguity

Delaying assumptions or constraints so ideas can develop more freely. This helps prevent premature narrowing of possibilities.

8. Creativity Through Constraints

Using limitations (time, materials, rules) as a spark for innovation. Constraints often push people to think more resourcefully.

9. Visualization & Concept Expansion

Using diagrams, mind maps, or concept fans to expand an idea into multiple directions. This helps uncover hidden connections.

10. World Café

Collaborative dialogue method where small groups rotate between tables to explore a shared question from multiple perspectives. Designed to spark collective insight by blending conversation, creativity, and cross-pollination of ideas.