

**THE DANCE**

**THE**

**MOSTLY HONEST**

**OF THE**

**COMPLETELY IRREVERENT**

**POSSIBLE**

**GUIDE**

**TO**

**CREATIVITY**

...

**SCOTT BERKUN**

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT EDITION  
INCLUDING FIVE CHAPTERS

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"I've been inspired by Scott Berkun's creativity for over a decade. In *Dance of the Possible*, I finally got to see how he does it." - **Jake Knapp, author of *The Wall Street Journal* bestseller *Sprint* and Design Partner at Google Ventures**





# THE DANCE OF THE POSSIBLE

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THE MOSTLY HONEST AND  
COMPLETELY IRREVERENT  
GUIDE TO CREATIVITY

BY SCOTT BERKUN

COVER AND ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY TIM KORDIK

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Dance of The Possible/ Scott Berkun -- 1st ed.

ISBN 978-0-9838731-4-3

March 2017



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# A TRULY BRIEF INTRODUCTION

(THE PAGE BEFORE THE  
OTHER PAGES)

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For years I've taught people about ideas and how they work. In lectures and at whiteboards around the world I've experimented with different ways to teach lessons on creative thinking, trying to be more concise and useful each time. I've discovered there isn't that much to know: perhaps a few well-explained insights, just enough to fill a short and worthy book, which is what I hope you find in the pages that follow.



# PART ONE





## 1. THE SOURCE

Where does creativity come from? This sounds like an important question, but the first surprise of this book is that it's not. To prove this, I've listed some possible answers based on the latest neuroscience research on creative thinking. If you guess the right answer to my question, which I doubt you will, I will give you a special and wonderful prize. Choose wisely.

Creativity comes from:

- A) Friendly aliens living underground in the planet Saturn
- B) The tasty filling found inside blueberry doughnuts
- C) An invisible gas that is released only when you finish a nice bottle of wine
- D) All of the above
- E) Some of the above (there are no aliens on Saturn)

Of course these answers are both made up and wrong. I admit that I hoped C was true, but even after many experiments I was never able to stay awake long enough to see the gas, if it exists. I promise I will keep trying, as with the pursuit of all interesting ideas, persistence is required.

Meanwhile, the only possibly correct answer is F) Your mind. This seems obvious, yet when people decide they want to be more creative, they are willing to look just about anywhere except inside themselves. I know from years of study that most of what you need you already have, despite the books, seminars and coaches that claim otherwise. I admit this is a curious way to begin a book about creativity, but I must start here. My central premise is we must first undo the damage of popular misconceptions about ideas and how they work, and in that undoing progress will naturally ensue.

The best place to start is to recognize that creativity, as a subject of study, is a modern invention. Ten thousand years ago people were too busy solving real problems in their lives to worry much about how to label those solutions, or what to call the people who made them. They also made art and music for their own pleasure and didn't worry much about what to call that either. They went and did it because they wanted to. Even the masters of the Renaissance, like Raphael and Donatello, and of the Enlightenment, like Locke and Descartes, didn't talk much about brainstorming exercises or ideation methods. This should make us suspicious about the modern obsession with studying creativity as a thing unto itself.

We can learn three simple rules from our ancestors in this regard:

1. If there's something you want to do, you must simply go and do it.
2. If you want to be better at something, do it more often.
3. If you want to improve faster, ask someone who knows more than you to watch you and give their advice.

Perhaps this seems blindingly obvious, but you are overlooking the fact that right now as you read this you are breaking all of these rules. Currently you are merely reading. Reading is a wonderful way to learn, but it is still a kind of consumption, as while reading you are not creating anything. You won't really be working on your creative skills until you put this book down and go make something. With today's abundance of knowledge from websites and books, we forget that knowing something is not the same as doing something.

The word *create* is a verb. It's an action. Creativity is best thought of in the same way—it's something you can use while involved in an activity, like painting, writing, debating or dancing. If someone tells me they want to be more creative, I will immediately ask, "Creative in doing what?" which often gives them pause. Even if they're clever and say "I want to be more creative at thinking itself!" I will still direct them to a craft, perhaps writing or filmmaking, as they need a medium in order to develop the skills of improving how they think, creatively or otherwise.

Even more insidious than forgotten lessons from our ancestors is how we've burdened ourselves with a strange obsession for labeling things. Is this cool? Is this creative? Is this innovative? Instead of simply putting effort into the skill of making good things, or merely enjoying ourselves regardless of the quality of the outcome, we worry if it meets someone else's subjective

approval. The word *creative* is often used to mean novel, a new idea or way of doing something. But in this very limited use of the word there is a big problem. A person ignorant of Western culture who has never seen a chocolate chip cookie will think it is very creative, while all of us in the West know this is a very old and traditional (yet very tasty) thing. Creativity as novelty is therefore always relative. What one person finds novel might be old news to someone else. This means worrying about what one person calls creative is often a wild goose chase in discerning their tastes, preferences and experiences.

It's far wiser to think about the effect you want an idea to have. If the goal is to make someone laugh, fix their car or increase the revenue of the widgets their company makes, that matters far more than how "creative" an idea is or is not. An idea can be very creative, interesting and inspiring and yet not solve a single problem for anyone. And

the counterpoint is true as well. If you were deathly ill and needed medical care, you wouldn't argue with doctors on the creative merits of their approach. No one has ever said, "Stop this surgery! This will cure me, but it's not creative enough!" We all know in our real lives that creativity is rarely the most important thing, but when it comes to ideas we forget creativity is a means to an end, not often an end unto itself.

If there is a goal of some kind that you are after, something you want creativity to achieve for you, you should know what that is. It could simply be that you want to create something that pleases you. Perhaps you want to write a great play that changes people's minds on a subject you care about. It could be you want to create a billion-dollar company. Whatever it is, it's important to define it. Otherwise, you'll be chasing your subjective tail, and the subjective tails of others, running around like

drunken philosophers endlessly debating the definition of every word instead of getting anything done.

A healthier perspective is that creativity is simply making interesting choices. If this is true, then creativity can be found just about anywhere—in small amounts, perhaps, but it's there nevertheless. There can even be creativity in how consumers, people who don't make anything, consume things. At a fast food restaurant watch how people choose to eat their hamburgers (with the left hand or right? What condiments do they use, or don't? How do they add them?). Or at work, watch how people sign their names or arrange their desks. If you are around children, watch them finger-paint and build worlds in *Minecraft* and you'll see effortless creation without them ever even thinking of the word. Even as bored adults, with lives defined by stressful morning commutes and boring daily routines, we make choices all day



long, and in every one of those choices is the possibility to do something interesting.

Consider the decisions you made today. Did you go to work the usual way, or take a route without being sure where it would lead? When you dressed this morning, did you put on the boring socks and underwear, or the fun ones? Are you reading this book the normal way, or are you lying upside down and holding it above your head? We always have more freedom than we think, we just forget. We spend so much time trying to be efficient that doing anything interesting feels like a waste of time. And in this tendency is another misconception: creativity is rarely efficient. It always involves taking chances and trying things that might work but might not. The question then is: are we willing to spend time to be interesting, to think interesting thoughts and make interesting things?

We all have the power, but perhaps not the willingness.

I encourage you at this point to put on your creative socks, if you have any, before continuing this book. If you don't own any creative socks, take a pair of boring socks you never wear because of their unbearable ordinariness, perhaps they were a gift from a very dull third cousin who lives in the flat and distant lands of Boredomvania, and transform them. With a thick marker or pen write CREATIVE or FUN on each one. This is your first act of creative defiance: make something interesting out of something boring. Is this a transformational, world-changing idea? No. But it is possibly interesting, and that is the best first place to aim for. Many great ideas are really just interesting ones that were highly refined over time by a motivated mind.

If you don't like the very idea of this sock project because it seems silly to you, I say ha. Being silly often leads to

having fun, and having fun means you are more likely to try new things. How do you expect to be more creative if you're not willing to try anything you haven't done before? Not willing to try makes you a victim of the status quo, the greatest killer of potential since the dawn of humanity.

Many books on creativity trivialize the subject by making it all about games and crafty projects, and it'd be fair to complain that with my sock project I am pushing you toward the same trap. However, I ask you to only make this complaint after you've enhanced your socks, not before. This is a good rule for new things, as we instinctively dismiss opportunities in life out of fear of being made uncomfortable, a feeling that comes with growth (which we claim to desire). Lastly, if your objection is the absurdity of having a book dictate that you be "creative" by forcing you to follow a "fun" instruction, I commend you for your sense of autonomy. For

you I suggest using whatever label you wish, perhaps "oppressive pseudo-creative project," but good luck fitting that on your sock.

This chapter began with a question about where creativity comes from, and I gave you a mostly dishonest and silly answer. Here is a more serious one. We get the majority of our creative powers from our subconscious mind.<sup>1</sup> We all know that our nighttime dreams, where we experience wild stories and vivid images, are things we do not consciously choose. They feel like they are happening to us, right until we wake up and realize our own mind created the experience.

There is a similar set of cognitive powers, fueled by our subconscious, that give us ideas while we are awake. We have all had an experience when we

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<sup>1</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013).

were stuck on a problem and decided to stop. Then, hours later, perhaps while doing the laundry or going for a walk, surprise! Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a solution surfaces in our mind. It feels magical and leads us to think that perhaps, yes, there are aliens from Saturn giving us these ideas. The truth is far simpler: your subconscious mind has been working on the problem for you. Our subconscious minds are better at making associations and connecting diverse ideas than our conscious minds are, which explains the wild, but sometimes insightful, experiences we have in our sleep. There are ways to help this part of your mind work for you, and we will get to them later in this book.

Despite what science tells us about our subconscious, there is a powerful romantic appeal of creativity having an external source, coming from a place, a spirit or a substance outside of us (perhaps even a book). It's attractive be-

cause if creativity is a product, or a possession, then it's something we can just go and purchase like a candy bar or a box of blueberry doughnuts. If this were true, we could escape the challenge of understanding ourselves and how our own individual minds work. Instead of hoping for magical desserts, we should simply become comfortable asking ourselves the following questions:

- In what situations do I feel most creative?
- How can I protect time each day to work on a creative project?
- What are the daily habits of creative people I admire?
- What attitudes do I have that help or hinder me?
- Why do I own so many boring socks?

These questions scare most people because they require us to think, and mostly we don't like to think (though

we like to think that we do). Thinking takes time and requires effort, but I can promise you here, at the close of this opening chapter, that time and effort are required for anything interesting you wish to do with your creative powers. This has been and always will be true.

This book is divided into three parts. Each part has a series of short chapters, some only a page long. Some chapters explain a technique, while others explore, or debunk, a way of thinking. It's a short book by design because if I have written it well, you will soon want to work on something where you can apply your creativity, and the faster I get out of your way, the better. Huzzah! And Tally Ho!





## 2. HOW TO BEGIN

Imagine that you land on the friendly planet Walden in a nice little energy-efficient spaceship/house, with all your favorite people and favorite things. All around you, for the entirety of the world, are undiscovered lands. If your goal is to explore to find interesting things, will it matter which direction you go in first? Any choice you make for where to start will result in a discovery of some kind, even if it is finding an impenetrable radioactive swamp of industrial waste (much to Thoreau's disappointment) or, more likely, learning there is nothing but ordinary forest nearby. But that first discovery, whatever it is, good or bad, will inform you about where to explore next and possibly what to look for or avoid. You will have made the tremendous psychological leap from having zero knowledge to having a little knowledge.

The same is true about deciding where to start for creative work. To create means to make something new, at least for you, and to do something new is like going off of the map, or more precisely, deliberately choosing to go to a part of the map that is unknown. In this case it rarely matters where or how you start. Many people obsess with trying to start in a perfect way, but that's a good sign they have the wrong attitude. The primary goal when you're starting creative work is to explore, and to explore demands you do things where you are not sure of the outcome. There will be false starts, twists, turns and pivots. These should be welcomed as natural parts of the experience, rather than resisted as mistakes or failures.

Of course for some projects like baking a cake or building a shed you could choose to use a recipe or buy a blueprint, but the level of creativity involved would be less than if you invented your own. As a strict rule, the

more ambitious the project the more explorations you are going to need before you find the path you seek. From your house in Walden it'd take more wanderings to find a beautiful waterfall than, say, a handful of dirt. Many people claim to have the desire for creating masterpieces born of their own minds, but in reality they only want to expend the effort required by a paint-by-numbers *Mona Lisa* replica kit. Passion doesn't mean much unless you can convert it into the energy to do the work. The grander the idea, the more work you'll need to do.

To help getting started it's common for makers of all kinds, from artists to engineers to filmmakers, to keep a journal. A journal is simply a private place to put ideas, notions, questions, observations or inspirations so you can refer to them later. You won't know when you scribble something down what it means yet or how it might be used, but by putting it down it exists in

the world and not just in your mind. Some makers keep one journal for all of their thoughts and sketches, but once they commit to a specific project they create a new journal. You will have to experiment to see what works best for you (an experiment about how you prefer to experiment, if you will).

The act of preserving your ideas is critical because humans have terrible memories—so awful, in fact, that we don't notice how much we forget. For example, what did I say in the third paragraph of the first page? Since it's written down you can easily return to it whenever you like. But if it wasn't written down and you didn't remember it, it'd be gone forever.<sup>2</sup> Our attention spans are very short, which means we likely have very interesting ideas cross

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002).

our minds every day that, uncaptured, fade away forever.

It's a biological fact that in any moment you are awake there are ideas you are thinking about. Most are banal, but some are interesting and may have potential. Maybe during boring conference calls at work you invent new ways to pretend like you are listening while you're really scrolling through Facebook. Or when you watch a bad movie, you easily see changes to make that would turn it into a good one. These little thoughts are seeds that, if given a safe place to live, might grow into something wonderful. The problem for most people is these ideas have nowhere to live. They quickly enter their minds and then just as quickly disappear forever. A journal is the safe place they need. It can be on paper or a digital device, it could be a sketchpad or a voice recorder—it doesn't matter as long as it's something you keep with

you and find comfortable enough to use habitually.

Regardless of the means you choose for capturing ideas, if you don't take seriously the thoughts that cross your mind, no one else will have the chance to either. You must learn to love your mind, to nurture it by feeding it quality ideas and thoughts, and give it time to prove what it can do.

Often ideas come to mind when we're involved in another activity, and it can feel like a burden to have to take out our journal to write down what might just be a random thought. But I know that if I don't write it down, I'll never get a second chance to evaluate it again. Despite my convenient hope that I'll remember it later without writing it down, I know, scientifically, that I'll likely forget it, and forget that I forgot it. For this reason I fuel my idea journal discipline by imagining forgotten ideas as being cursed for eternity, falling for all time into an endless pit of darkness,

crying my name out into the void knowing I will never hear their sad screams. Don't let this happen to your precious thoughts. Instead, put your ideas down somewhere, anywhere. Once they exist in the world there's always a chance, however small, you can return to them.

It's only by keeping a journal that you will notice useful patterns. After two weeks you might realize you get more ideas in the evening, or first thing in the morning, or when you wake in the night after a dream. Maybe it's when you are stuck driving in traffic, or perhaps it's when you are on the treadmill at the gym. If you keep a journal and diligently scribble down your thoughts, you'll encourage the creative part of your brain to speak up more often and more clearly. Your subconscious mind will get more confident at sharing with you what it observes, and you'll get better at feeding your

mind with works by others that inspire you.

Don't judge what you put into your journal. No one else will see it. You may be surprised by some of what you put down, but that should fascinate you: you are getting to know your creative instincts and your subconscious better than you ever have before. This relationship is one of the most important you will ever have.

If you're interested in a specific project, like writing a book or a business plan, have a section in the journal that's just for thoughts about that project. At first the ideas will be random and maybe not all that interesting, but over time you'll have a pile of them that can be worked into a simple outline. Now you're on your way, and when you sit down to start, you will not be working from scratch. You'll have a collection of thoughts and ideas to borrow from to fill your first blank pages.



### 3. ALL IDEAS ARE MADE OF OTHER IDEAS

A first principle of creativity is that ideas are everywhere. We are often so busy in our daily lives that we forget this fact. We spend most of our days struggling to get everything done and looking for ways to make our lives easier. But the first thing to learn if you want to make things yourself is to remember this little mantra: all ideas are made of other ideas.

Steve Jobs did not invent the computer. Mozart didn't invent the piano, and Rembrandt didn't invent paint. They built upon countless ideas developed by other people. Marie Curie, as brilliant as she was, didn't discover radioactivity in a flash of insight. Instead, she studied the history of chemistry and physics and conducted experiments to build on what was

already known, which helped her become one of the only people in history to earn Nobel Prizes in both subjects. Even Einstein's famous formula  $e=mc^2$  is mostly a combination of ideas developed by other scientists.<sup>3</sup> We have always borrowed, reused and stood on the shoulders of ideas that came before us, and we always will. This is a fundamental law of how ideas work.

It can be hard to see this fact because by the time we experience an idea, it is often manifested in a finished movie, book or painting. It seems complete on its own, and unless we are experts in that field, we don't see the countless references and inspirations that led to what we see. While Edison's light bulb and the Wright brothers' first plane are

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<sup>3</sup> David Bodanis, *E=mc<sup>2</sup>: A Biography of the World's Most Famous Equation* (Berkley Publishing Group, 2001)

famous, the hundreds of ideas and inventions from other people that Edison and the Wrights reused rarely surface in history books.<sup>4</sup> We love to lionize creators, putting them on high pedestals so we can take more pleasure in looking up at them. Ordinary people find this sufficient. They take comfort in viewing creators as extraordinary, believing they have capacities beyond what mere mortals can achieve. But you are not reading this book to become ordinary. This means you must look more closely at things than other people do. You must be intensely curious about why things are the way they are to imagine the better ways they could become.

If you pick any song, invention or philosophy and walk backward through the history of its development, you'll

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Berkun, *The Myths of Innovation* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2010). Yes, it's weird to footnote myself!

discover they are all recombinations of other ideas. Sometimes the grandest ideas, once you get past the romance you feel for them, are the easiest to dissect. What is an automobile? An engine + wheels. A telephone? Electricity and sound. Fettuccine Alfredo? Flat noodles and cheese sauce. On and on it goes. Even Shakespeare borrowed significantly from the stories of Sophocles (and Disney's *Lion King* is a retelling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), just as Aristotle incorporated thoughts from Plato. The act of creating an idea is always an act of bringing existing ideas together in some shape or form.

Of course, simply slamming two ideas together won't necessarily result in an interesting outcome. An engine that runs on cheese sauce would be a disaster (but perhaps a tasty one, although "engine cheese" would be a terrible name). Understanding the relationship between ideas helps your intuition decide which things might

combine well. For example, an experienced musician knows certain chords work better with certain melodies. But to write a song, they will combine many ideas, in different ways, experimenting their way into creating something they desire. It takes time to develop the craft of combining ideas in interesting ways, but it can only begin when you see ideas for what they are.

Whenever you look at a painting, watch a film, eat a meal or even listen to a business lecture or sit in a meeting at work, ask yourself: what is the central idea? What ideas were combined to create this? And then ask yourself: if I rearrange these ideas, what creative possibilities can I make?



#### 4. EIGHT (OR MORE) METHODS FOR FINDING IDEAS

Finding interesting ideas is not very hard. For example, I've often wondered why there isn't a car that runs on laughter, can teleport instantly to habitable planets in other galaxies, and exhausts only harmless lemon-scented fumes that cure cancer. Now that's an *idea*. Of course it's entirely improbable given what we know about science, but it's an idea nevertheless, isn't it? What we really want in the end are good ideas we can make into something in the world: perhaps a book, an organization or a transportation device. Coming up with ideas is one thing, but ideas are just abstractions. An idea for a great film or invention can take a few seconds to think of but require years or decades to build, if it turns out to be possible at all.

Yet many popular books on creativity center on the promise of methods for coming up with ideas. The technique of brainstorming itself is focused on the volume of ideas it can generate. There is nothing wrong with having a big pile of ideas. In fact, this is an essential part of starting a project. You are looking to explore a wide range of territory, but a big pile of ideas like my laughter-fueled car can leave a lot of work to do no matter how many great ideas you have. Never forget this fact. Finding good ideas is one thing. Developing them into finished works is another.

However, because the romance about finding ideas is so strong, it's easy to think: if I have two ways to find ideas, won't having ten ways make me five times as creative? The answer is no. Having 100 hammers won't make you a better carpenter. You'd be better served by having a small number of different hammers you are familiar with and can use in different situations.



To that aim, here are the eight methods for finding ideas I teach and recommend. Some are straightforward exercises, while others involve attitudes you will need to develop. There are no rules here. Try them and see if they help. If not, there are plenty of others. In all cases you will quickly realize that a central element to the value of all of these methods is persistence.

## **1. Scout**

Back on planet Walden, instead of picking a direction to explore at random, you could ask where your friends have gone and what they saw. You could climb onto your roof to get a better perspective of the entire landscape. For whatever kind of ideas you want to find, there is always a way to scout, or study, to learn more before you even begin. Having a map can help you decide which direction will be best.

Every kind of problem has a history of people who tried to solve it before. If you learn from what they did and why, you'll discover insightful questions you didn't even think to ask. People are often surprised to learn that the Wright brothers studied birds and how they flew. They exhausted the history of human ideas and scouted into the natural world, as did Leonardo da Vinci, to find models and methods they could reuse.

When you scout well, you'll find techniques and approaches that have been forgotten but are still useful today. For example, Alex Osborn's 1953 book *Applied Imagination* is a far better explanation of brainstorming, a term he coined, than what's practiced in the working world decades later. The greatest fuel for combining ideas might just be to take ideas from two different generations, cultures or places that haven't been used together before. Many breakthroughs occur when

someone wanders from one field into another, as they're willing to try things, motivated by insight or ignorance, that others are not. Fusion cooking, where food traditions from two different parts of the world are combined, is an excellent example of what's possible if you recognize that the boundaries between groups of ideas are often arbitrary. But you can't make this recognition without some awareness of what kinds of food already exist.

Even late into a project, when you are stuck and don't feel like creating, you can still use scouting and study to your advantage. Read a biography about a hero in your field. Watch a documentary about how something you use every day was made. There are always ways to fuel your future creativity even if you don't feel like creating anything right now. A walk through an art museum or a hike on a scenic trail can allow your mind to interact with ideas, shapes and feelings, which might just be combinable with

something you are working on. Your subconscious is always working in the background, making connections and insights for you. While strolling through town or across a hillside might seem like leisure to others, you know ideas are made from other ideas, and there will be more going on in your mind than people assume.

With your journal in hand, you can make notes from what you observe. Writing in your journal is a mini-creation, your own notes based on someone else's work. In that act of creating by responding to something else, you might discover a way through whatever has been blocking you.

## **2. Combine or Divide**

If all ideas are made of other ideas, then the challenge is to combine them in interesting ways. Cooking is a good analogy for creativity: a chef's talent is in their ability to bring ingredients

together to create something new. Even the most brilliant chefs do not make towering cheese soufflés or perfect lobster risotto through concentration alone. They must also use excellent ingredients and techniques developed by other people. They choose them carefully and then combine, refine and develop them into delicious dishes. A good chef can also break one item down into many. If you give them a whole chicken, they can divide it into its component parts, each of which can be used in

different ways to make different dishes. The same is true for ideas of all kinds. You can always break an idea down into smaller ones, or combine small ones together into larger ones.

With any set of ideas you can:

- Bring two or more ideas together
- Divide an idea into smaller ones
- Use the ideas in a different order
- Get rid of, or add, an idea

Here's an example. Quickly pick two things in front of you, say this book and your smelly dog Rupert. Now imagine different ways to divide them and different ways to combine those parts—make sure your creative socks are on first. Or if you wish, add a third idea into the mix. If you're stuck, here are some ideas I came up with:

- A book about Rupert
- A smelly book
- A book chapter about Rupert's creativity
- A clone of Rupert made entirely out of engine cheese
- A book about a smelly clone of Rupert made entirely out of low fat engine cheese

If you withhold judgment about any particular combination until later, you can quickly generate dozens of ideas. While many of these combinations might be terrible, weird, strange or even

offensive, they're certainly interesting. Adding a fourth element, say a gallon of black coffee, might yield even more interesting combinations (a book about a smelly clone of Rupert made of engine cheese that gives you a caffeine high when you read it).

Another approach to finding interesting combinations is called a mind map. On a large piece of paper write your main goal, subject or idea down in the center and circle it. Then think of an attribute, or an idea, related to the main one and write it down, drawing a line back to the main idea. Then think of another and another, connecting each one to any previous idea that seems most related. Keep drawing lines and making associations. Soon you'll have a page full of circles and lines capturing different ways to think about your main thought.

Don't worry about accuracy or even coherency while you do this. You simply want to let the associative part of your

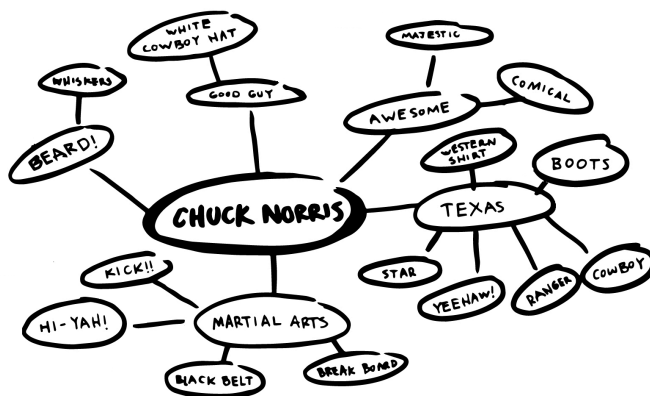
mind, the part that's good at finding connections between different things, to have its way for a while. Mind maps are helpful because they are nonlinear and nonlogical. They allow you to express your thoughts in shapes and curves, rather than in neat columns and straight lines.

Once you run out of steam, the value of the map becomes clearer. You can pick any two items you wrote down and combine them, asking: "What could this be?" Here's an example mindmap by Frank Chimero about Chuck Norris.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Modified with permission from Chimero's essay  
How To Have An Idea  
<http://www.frankchimero.com/writing/how-to-have-an-idea>.





Over time, creative masters learn combinations or patterns that can be used again and again to develop new ideas or modify old ones. They find exercises, like mind maps, that help them explore what's in their mind.

In any particular craft there are combinations, and types of combinations, that become familiar because they tend to work well. There are good reasons many famous films have a likable underdog who overcomes tough challenges. It's no surprise that most cuisines have some kind of bread stuffed

with tasty fillings. It takes dedication to learn these patterns in any field, and to develop ways to transcend them into being more than just clichés. Over time your instincts for which combinations to try first, or to try to obtain a specific quality, will improve.

### **3. Kill False Constraints**

We're afraid. We're afraid of the dark, of our parents and what our parents do in the dark. Our powerful reptilian brains do their best to keep us from thinking about things we fear or don't understand. This is good for survival, but bad for creativity. We shut down the pursuit of many combinations because of predictions we make about the result. Will this idea offend Bob? Will I be embarrassed if I say this out loud? We're scared to think certain thoughts or even to write them down.

Making a list of the constraints, both practical and psychological, about a

project can reveal limitations you are creating that don't need to exist (fear is a kind of imagination, after all). If you can remove a false constraint, new possibilities, and combinations, will instantly be revealed. Even if a constraint is real—perhaps you have a tiny budget—putting it aside for a time can allow more possible combinations to try. After you have some promising ideas, bring the constraint back. You may discover with a specific good idea in hand you are motivated to overcome the constraint and find possibilities you wouldn't have tried to find before.

Constraints can be helpful. It's easy to think the fewer you have the better, but that's rarely true. They focus your attention and force you to think, rather than simply spending resources. Adding challenging constraints, for a time, can let you see a problem in a new way, leading to ideas that are valuable even when the constraint is removed.

#### 4. Play the Opposite Game (It's Good to Be Bad)

Normally people assume the goal is to find good ideas, but this creates psychological pressure. The desire to perform well intensifies certain fears we have about being judged or feeling inadequate. A fantastic technique to escape these traps is to take ten minutes to deliberately find terrible ideas. I call this the opposite game. It works best with groups of people but can also be used solo.

For example, if your real goal was to invent a better mobile phone case, instead switch to the goal of inventing the most terrible one ever created. By framing the goal this way, we lower our psychological stakes. Instead of feeling pressure, we feel free and encouraged to have fun. And then combining these "bad" ideas makes for ideas that are increasingly terrible, and often quite funny.

A session like this might generate terrible ideas like:

- It weighs 575 lbs
- It only comes in blinking neon pink.
- It smells like rotting cheese
- It drains your battery four times as fast (to power the blinking neon light)
- It gives you tuberculosis (and makes your breath smell worse every time you speak into the phone)

Once the pace of finding new ideas and combinations slows, you know it's time to stop. If you set the right tone, morale will be high. People will have shared laughter and truly collaborated by building new ideas based on ideas they heard. This, on its own, is a sizable achievement. Many creativity exercises fail because they never get the group of people in the room to start to trust and connect with each other.

There is a final, possibly more directly productive, bonus step. Go through the list of "bad" ideas and, with the group, try to invert each one back into a good idea.

Good ideas (by inverting bad ones):

- It weighs almost nothing.
- It comes in any color a customer wants.
- It smells like your favorite perfume.
- It gives extra battery life.
- It protects you from, and detects, germs in the air (and freshens your breath).

Finding good ideas is always easier after inventing some terrible ones first. Your creative energies are already flowing, you've had some fun, and if you're working with other people, you've established some trust in each other from all the laughs and ideas you created together.

## 5. Switch Modes

There are many ways to express a thought. You can sketch, write, talk or even sing. If you switch the way you're expressing the idea, or the mode, different kinds of ideas, or improvements to the idea, will be easier to find. There's an old joke about trying to explain a notion through an interpretive dance. Usually this is meant to mock that we can go too far in abstracting away from what we're trying to express, when a more direct method will do. However, there is a truth in it too, at least for the interpretive dancer. Even a failed attempt to convey an idea will force you to think differently, and that might just be enough for you to see a new path. Like a game of charades, realizing the current approach you are taking isn't working might just be the motivation you need to seek and find a better one.

Here are some easy ways to switch modes:

- Write with your opposite hand
- Look at your work upside down, from ten feet away or while standing on top of it Jackson Pollock style
- Put sunglasses on (make the work black and white)
- Represent your project as a cartoon, a short film or... an interpretive dance
- Try to explain your project to someone who knows nothing about it, perhaps a child, a neighbor or a friend you know will ask challenging questions

Of course these are all experiments. You can't be sure which one will yield the new perspective you desire. But even the slightest new insight can provide the leverage needed for a breakthrough.



## 6. Change the Environment

Creativity is personal. We are all unique, and it's in understanding how we are different that gives us greater potential to find interesting ideas. This means you must spend time asking yourself questions like:

- When do ideas come easiest to me?
- Is it when I am alone or with friends?
- Is it in busy places like bars and coffee shops, or quiet ones like a library?
- Are there times of the day when I'm most relaxed and thinking freely is easier?

Changing the environment you are in will likely change the way you feel and think. Even if you've learned your own patterns for productivity, changing them for a day or an hour will give you a

different kind of energy to work with. You might discover your preferences have changed. Or you'll hate the new environment so much that when you return to your preferred one you'll feel a boost of comfort and motivation.

## **7. Find a Partner**

Many people are most productive when they're with people whose company they enjoy. Partnering on a project, or even being around other creative people who are working on solo projects, can have a stimulating effect. It also gives you a person to lean on who will understand your situation when things go sour. It should not be a surprise how many great works in history were made by people working in pairs or small groups: Paul McCartney and John Lennon, Charles and Ray Eames, and Gilbert and Sullivan. Some of these relationships were contentious,

but it was a productive tension that pushed both parties to do better work.<sup>6</sup>

But remember that everyone is different. You might work best on your own, or with only a certain kind of partnership. Perhaps what you need most is a mentor, or a mentee. Maybe you just need someone who will give you honest feedback. For every project, it's possible you will need a different combination of relationships with other people to achieve what you want.

## 8. Lock Yourself in a Closet

When someone tells me they're stuck and can't find any ideas at all, I ask if they have ever been locked in a closet. I

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of creative abrasion, created by Jerry Hirshberg, is defined as a useful tension between teammates where they challenge each other to do their best work. See Jerry Hirshberg, *The Creative Priority* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).

admit this is a strange thing to ask someone, but it's surprising to learn how many people have locked their siblings in all sorts of terrible places, including closets. Anyway, I ask this question not to study fraternal social disorders but because anyone locked in a closet for a sufficient amount of time will become very creative in trying to find ways to get out. It's pure biology. When you are stuck in a place you don't want to be in, all sorts of possibilities, some more creative and desperate than others, come to mind, and they come with the courage to try them out. It's a reminder of how easily we forget what we are capable of at any time.

Now of course it'd be silly to lock yourself in a closet every time you wanted to compose a song or bake a cake, but some famous creators, including authors Po Bronson and Annie Dillard, have done it. Some professionals ask to be locked in hotel rooms to meet deadlines, or retreat to a

cabin in the woods with no internet or electricity. It can be a kind of ritual (of their environment) for some people in that they rely on having a place where there are few distractions and they can find just the right balance of "comfortable enough but not too comfortable" to be productive. Some artists have very carefully constructed their studios to create the perfect atmosphere for themselves, but this is extremely personal. If you took any two of these people and made them work in each other's workspaces, the results would likely be disastrous. So don't look at any of your hero's habits as the answer, but as merely an experiment to consider trying.<sup>7</sup>

Personally, I like to believe I have enough self-discipline that I don't need to be physically trapped in small, un-

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<sup>7</sup> See Mason Currey, *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

pleasant spaces to achieve ambitious things. However, I do use the *idea* of it to help me. Sometimes when I don't want to work, or don't feel creative, I close my eyes and imagine being locked in a closet. I consider how, if that happened, I'd rediscover my primal powers of creativity that I forgot I had. Just the thought of it often changes my attitude. The blank page doesn't seem anywhere near as tough as scratching my fingers raw from reaching underneath the closet door, with my stomach aching for a morsel of food, my soiled jeans sticking to my bony thighs, my throat burning from days of unanswered screams... Okay, perhaps that's more than you need to know about the dark visions at work in my mind. The lesson is that real or imagined states of going without can be potent motivation.

## 9. Meta-Methods

If all ideas are made of other ideas, what does that mean for this chapter? Any of the methods above can be combined in different ways, and each one has many creative variations to try. You may have realized that being locked in a closet is just an extreme version of changing your environment, which suggests there are other possibilities. Maybe a picnic at a park with a friend, combined with the inversion game, is what you need. There are always new experiments to try, and since we are changing all the time, we can never quite predict when an old method will fail us, or when a new one will save the day.





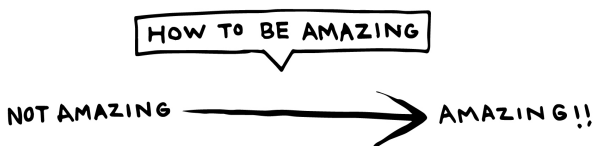
## 5. THE DANCE OF THE POSSIBLE

All projects are a dance between two forces, expanding to consider more ideas and shrinking to narrow things down enough to finish. For example, in the course of writing a book, authors go through many phases of this dance, at levels both large and small. Even something as simple as deciding the title of a book involves this dance. Many writers generate lists of possible titles, exploring all sorts of combinations and directions, including soliciting suggestions from friends and fans. But then eventually they must decide on a single title, casting all of the other choices aside. If they don't spend enough time exploring possibilities, the odds of having a good title are lower. But if they spend too much time exploring, they won't have enough time to solve other important problems.

I call this a dance because unlike the diagrams I'm about to show you, it's an intuitive process rather than a logical one. There is no algorithm you can use to be certain you've spent the right amount of time exploring. This is similar to asking questions like: how many wines should you sample before buying an entire bottle? Even if the first one is delicious, might the next one be even better? How good is good enough? What if instead of wine, the decision is buying a house? Or finding a spouse? The more time you use to explore each possible option, the longer it takes to get anything done. But if you don't spend enough time exploring alternatives, you probably won't like the results. Since any creative project consists of hundreds of choices, large and small, you are guaranteed to do a lot of dancing.

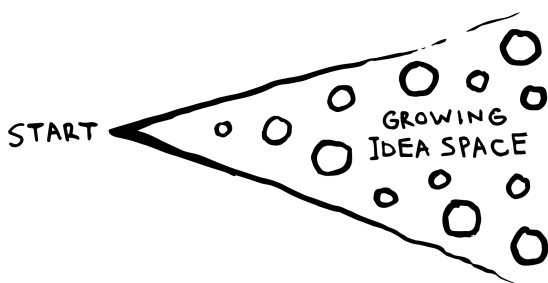
As I mentioned, I have some diagrams to share with you. While diagrams can be enlightening, consume

them carefully. In trying to convey one concept, diagrams often unintentionally let people assume that no other concepts apply. Diagrams, like maps, work because of what they omit, leaving things out to help make one point clear. Even worse, some diagrams make you feel like you've learned something, but teach nothing because they've omitted important details. For example, take this diagram:



It's wonderfully simple until you sit your pre-amazing body down in a chair and try to apply what you learned from the diagram. It's good advice to consume all diagrams with caution. Too often they maddeningly skip right past all of the hard parts, pretending that they don't exist at all.

With that warning in place, here's a diagram for the first part of the dance. In any creative act, from picking where to go on vacation to deciding on the plot for your screenplay, the shape looks like this:



As you come up with ideas, and pull the best ones from your journal, the space of possibilities for what the project can be grows. And if you're good at seeing combinations, and add them as you should, it grows fast. If you're

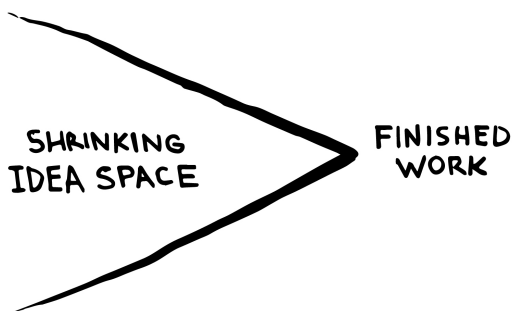
working with other people who collaborate well, it grows even faster.

The fancy word for this is *divergence*. Most of what people think of as creative work is divergent in that the goal is to come up with as many interesting ideas as possible, especially ideas that are different from each other. Diverging is often great fun. It's exhilarating. Anything can be considered, including wonderfully bold but impractical ideas. It's important to always play with a few impractical notions, as some will turn out, after you play with them awhile, to be more possible than you first assumed.

In the end the only projects the world will ever see are the ones that get finished. And to finish something means it has to converge all the way down to a singular (or maximally convergent) work. That may happen after a week of effort or a decade, depending on how ambitious the project is, and how many different alternatives

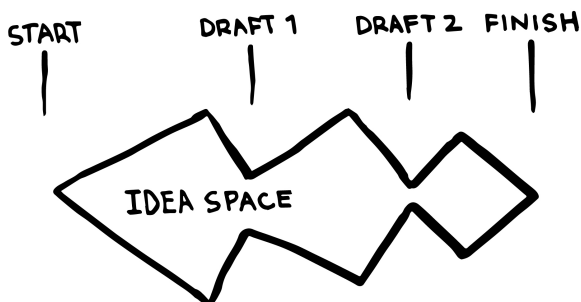
you choose to explore before making each decision.

Therefore, the second half of the dance is as important as the first. With each decision that gets made the number of possibilities for what the work will be shrinks, which looks like this:



Here's an example that might help the entire dance make better sense. Imagine you have just finished writing a novel about life on the planet Walden. If you did it like many authors do, you successfully wrote one draft, obtained useful feedback from wise colleagues,

wrote a second draft, obtained more precise feedback and then wrote a final version. In terms of diverging and converging, it would look something like this:



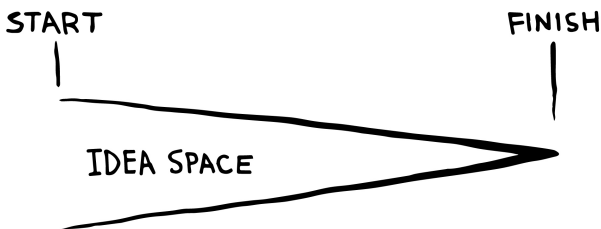
Looking back on a finished project, you might think the time spent exploring ideas that didn't get used was wasted. It's easy to believe you should have known from the beginning which ideas would work best and which wouldn't. This is an illusion. Creativity is exploration. You are going into the unknown on purpose. You can only

learn about ideas as you develop them, and there's no reliable predictor of which ones will pay off and which ones won't. Certainly the more conservative you are in the ideas you pick, the more predictable the process will be, but by being more conservative you are likely being less creative and will discover fewer insights. Arguably the more creations you make the better your intuition gets, but you won't find any successful creator, even the legends, who gets it right all the time.

People obsessed with efficiency have a hard time accepting this truth. They would also have a very hard time being at sea with Magellan, working with Edison in his lab or with Frida Kahlo in her art studio. They'd be stunned to see the "waste" of prototypes and sketches, and mystified by how many days Magellan had to spend at sea without discovering a single thing. Discovery is never efficient.



The fantasy is that there could be a person so brilliant that their idea space for a project would look like this:



The only reason to expect a shape like this is if you were doing a project very much like ones you'd done before, say, cooking macaroni and cheese from a box for the 500th time. But you wouldn't call your achievement a creative one (Yes, you did *make* dinner for someone, but that's not as creative as inventing a new kind of meal to serve). If you like certainty, pick projects more like making macaroni and cheese. If you have more ambition, accept that you will be doing lots of inefficient dances.

Another possible explanation for the diagram above is that you had a complete and precise vision in your mind for all the details of the thing you wanted to create. And that your mastery of craft was so supreme that all you needed to do was put your vision down in confident strokes onto paper or a canvas of some kind. This is possible but so unlikely that you should pretend I never told you it was possible at all. Many legends exist of writers or musicians creating an entire book or a dozen songs over a weekend, but if you do some digging you'll find they're almost always exaggerations. Yes, Ray Bradbury did write 25,000 words of *Fahrenheit 451* in just a few days. But what's often not told about that amazing burst of productivity is that he later revised the book several times over the course of a year, expanding its length and heavily editing it, before it reached its final published form. In every legendary story

of bursts of creativity there is a dance somewhere if you look carefully.

I recommend looking for more representative stories, like how J.K. Rowling filled five pages in a notebook of invented words starting with q before she settled on Quidditch.<sup>8</sup> Or that Hemingway wrote 47 different versions of the ending of his famous novel *A Farewell To Arms*.<sup>9</sup> Why did Rowling and Hemingway need to do this? We'd think someone with their talents would have projects that look like the last diagram above, nearly a straight line without much "waste." Hemingway didn't try 47 different

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<sup>8</sup> "J. K. Rowling on *The Diane Rehm Show*," October 20, 1999, <http://www.accio-quote.org/articles/1999/1299-wamu-rehm.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Julie Bosman, "To Use and Use Not," *The New York Times*, July 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/05/books/a-farewell-to-arms-with-hemingways-alternate-endings.html>.

versions of every section of the book of course (if you're not fond of his minimalist style you might wish that he had), and Rowling didn't fill pages in a notebook before deciding on every single word she wrote. The lesson to learn from these examples is to prioritize our dancing. We have to pick which handful of decisions are worth spending time doing grand explorations, and which ones to make quickly and cleanly.

This dance of possibilities is like life in many ways. We are never entirely sure we've made the "best" choices about careers, partners or where we live. Is there a better option out there? How can we be sure there isn't? And sometimes in life it is not our choice to keep dancing. Sometimes it's a client, or a boss, or a spouse who tells us we must revise and rethink a task we believe is already finished. Or that we must hurry up on a decision we think is worthy of more time. Sometimes we learn in revising our work that they were right,

but sometimes even after more exploring we merely confirm the dance was done all along.

Knowing about this dance won't directly help you come up with better ideas. It also won't, on its own, help you make better decisions. But being familiar with the feel of the dance, and finding ways to embrace and enjoy it, will serve you well, as you will spend much of your time dancing as you work.

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Thanks for reading this exclusive excerpt from *the Dance of the Possible*.

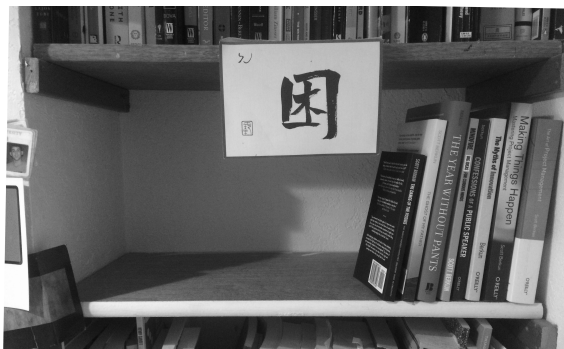
The rest of the book is **EVEN BETTER**, we promise. You can buy it (in print, kindle or audio) with a single click over here: <http://bit.ly/dance-k>

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Have a nice and creative day.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Scott Berkun is the best-selling author of books on many subjects including *The Myths of Innovation*, *Confessions of a Public Speaker* and *The Year Without Pants*. His work as a writer and public speaker has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Wired Magazine*, *Fast Company*, *Forbes Magazine*, and other media. He has taught creative thinking at the University of Washington and has been a frequent commentator on CNBC, MSNBC, and National Public Radio. His popular essays and entertaining lectures are free at [scottberkun.com](http://scottberkun.com), where you can sign up for a monthly email of all his recent and best work. He tweets at @berkun.





