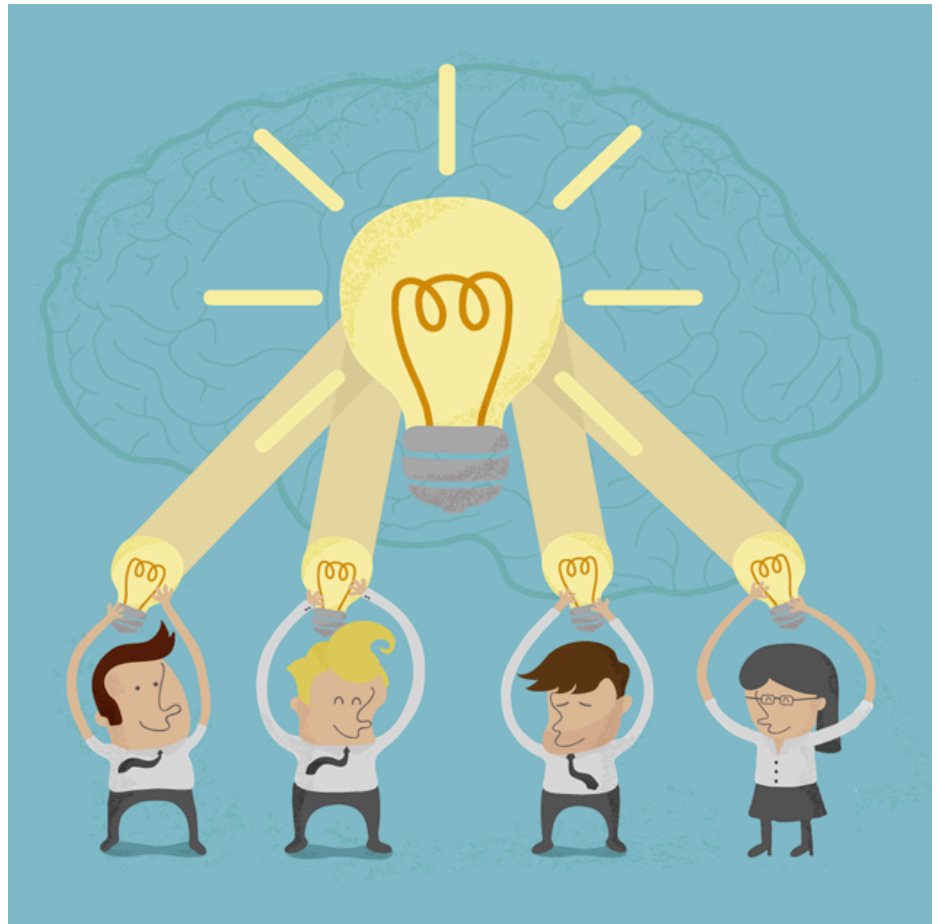


# Better Brainstorms

An eBook by Creative Huddle



Everything you need to hold a successful brainstorm. In one handy guide.

Most of us will have participated in a brainstorm at some point in our career. People's experiences and opinions range – some find them essential and stimulating, others have found them to be turgid and demotivating.

Maybe it's the name that's the problem – in fact [a county council](#) once banned the term 'brainstorming' and replaced it with 'thought showers'. Whatever you call it (might we humbly suggest 'Creative Huddle'?) here's how to make sure you get the most out of a group idea generation session.

## Where it all started

It was a New York advertising man, [Alex Osborn](#) (not Don Draper), who outlined the concept of brainstorming in his 1953 book [Applied Imagination](#). He had developed it within his advertising agency BBDO, and proposed the following four basic rules:

- Focus on quantity
- Withhold criticism
- Welcome unusual ideas
- Combine and improve

No evaluation or judgement was involved – this was purely to generate as many ideas as possible, based on the principle that the more ideas you have, the better chance there is of one (or more) being of really high quality.

## Modern usage and criticism

Brainstorms have come in for some [significant criticism](#) in recent years. Group activity can encounter problems such as 'social matching', where the group's quality of thinking gravitates towards the level of the average member – meaning that only average results can be expected.

'Free riding' can be another problem, when participants use the session as an opportunity to kick back and relax, or make jokes. 'Evaluation apprehension' occurs when participants are afraid to voice their ideas because of fear of judgement, or peer pressure. 'Blocking' means that some ideas are left unsaid, perhaps because others are already speaking, or the moderator is slow at taking down notes.

In addition, [research](#) has shown that solo idea generation can be more productive – having a room of ten people coming up with ideas individually can result in more ideas than those generated by a group brainstorm.

If you're mindful of these issues, however, there's no reason why a brainstorm shouldn't succeed. We believe it can be most effective to hold carefully moderated group sessions where activity is alternated between collective discussion and short, focused bursts of individual creativity.

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## The role of the moderator

Having someone to organise the process and keep the momentum can make all the difference. A moderator or facilitator can act as a catalyst to spark a group's creativity by maintaining energy levels, introducing creative thinking techniques, ensuring group cohesion and providing the necessary support in terms of equipment and recording.

They should ensure that everyone in the group is perceived as equal – removing any hierarchies. In the same vein they should refrain from adopting a teacher-like manner – sitting amongst the group rather than standing at the head of the table like a conductor.

They should be ready to keep up the pace of the brainstorm – if the room goes quiet, be ready to restart it with a creative technique or prompt. A moderator can be part of a team, or an outside consultant. It isn't necessary for them to have a deep understanding of the company, or its industry - in fact sometimes it can be a distinct advantage to have someone guaranteed to bring a fresh approach.

## How to prepare

A brainstorming session's success can be significantly affected by what happens beforehand. Defining the purpose and topic for the brainstorm is key – in fact this is often half the battle won. What do you want? Why do you want it? Why do you want it now? Defining this by writing a really clear brief is of paramount importance.

Next comes people. Aim for no more than ten – any more is unwieldy and susceptible to blocking. Go for diversity

– people from different disciplines and backgrounds will bring different viewpoints, styles and perspectives. Choosing a group of people that are too similar risks repetition and free riding.

Circulate the invitations and well-defined brief with as much notice as possible. Mornings are often better than afternoons – people have more energy, their inbox hasn't filled up yet, and they have less chance of being called into emergency meetings. Don't bother with croissants or doughnuts – otherwise you end up with a room full of people focusing on crumbs when they should be focusing on ideas.

Circulate rules in advance as well. Tell people that this is a focused, intense session where they should give their full attention to generating ideas for the good of the group. No cheap jokes, no point-scoring, no lounging. Ideas should be built on, not judged or criticised. You won't usually be able to keep the energy at the optimum level for more than an hour or two, so you can tell participants you have designed it this way so they can get back to their desks as quickly as possible.

Recruit a note-taker. As mentioned above, blocking can occur when note-taking is too slow. Ideally the moderator should be free to focus on moderating, so recruiting a dedicated note-taker can enable a faster flow of ideas. This person should focus solely on note-taking, otherwise they are prone to start writing their own ideas down, slowing down the group.

Needless to say, this person should be a fast and neat writer. It's also worth making an audio recording of the session should the note-taker happen to miss anything.

## Running the session

You'll have circulated the brief some time ago, so people will have already begun to have ideas before the session. Start by asking people to write these down on post-it notes, then stick them on the wall or flip chart. Your group will have much more chance of creating new ideas once they've got these existing ones off their chest.

**Have a warm-up activity ready to kick things off.** [John Cleese recommends](#) humour for getting people into the optimum mode for creativity. An improvisation game like '[Yes, and](#)' can work well here.

**Keep the ball rolling.** Watch for energy levels and keep up the pace of the discussion by throwing in prompts and questions. To keep energy levels up, encourage the group to move around now and again.

**Only allow one conversation at a time.** In saying this, people should be encouraged to communicate their idea quickly and concisely to allow for others to speak afterwards. Politely discourage long monologues.

**Allow individual idea generation.** Once or twice during the session, allow people to write ideas out on post-it notes on their own. Often they will have thoughts and ideas queuing up in their head without realising it. Encouraging them to get them all out on paper empties their head, leaving space for new thoughts to appear.

**Watch for people keeping ideas in.** Encourage them to share their thoughts, however half-baked. Remind them that this is not the time to judge or sort ideas, even in their own heads!

## Materials

Make sure you have lots of post-its, pens (that work), flip charts and whiteboards. Post-its are great because they are enable non-linear note-taking: no need to write down everything in the right order, you can always rearrange them. Make sure the whiteboard or flip chart is as big as possible so there is plenty of space to record ideas clearly.

## How to think better

The act of **recording** ideas can have an impact on the creativity of the brainstorm itself, for example it has been known for companies to recruit [cartoonists](#) to illustrate the ideas as they are being generated. As many people are visual thinkers, this can add a valuable dimension to the session, triggering new ideas as the illustration develops.

### Solo vs Group Brainstorming

As mentioned in part one, it can be beneficial to run short bursts of solo thinking time as part of the overall session. Participants can write down ideas on post-it notes using any of the techniques mentioned in this guide. Brainwriting is a hybrid of group and solo creativity – give each person a sheet of paper, and ask them to write an idea on it, then pass it to the next person, who expands on the idea. Repeat the process until the sheets have made a full circuit of the room.

### Acting it out

The usual way to guide participants through most techniques is by asking gently probing questions around the theme (i.e. “What if there were no regulatory issues?” for a revolution-based brainstorm, or “What if we were in France?” for related worlds). Physically acting something out can sometimes make the issues feel more real and immediate – acting and improvisation often actually serves to distract people from the creative process, meaning that ideas flow more naturally.

### Constraints

You will likely be constrained already, by the limited time available to hold the session, but it can be beneficial to introduce some other constraints to stimulate participants' creativity. Constraints can be time-based, such as dividing the group into two, and setting a challenge for the most ideas generated in the next five minutes. They can also be form-based – for instance poetry has many constraints. Setting constraints helps to focus thinking – proving that sometimes thinking inside the box can actually be helpful!



## Creativity techniques to get ideas flowing

If you search the internet, you'll find references to hundreds of creativity techniques – often with special names and convoluted instructions – however most of these can be distilled down into several key themes. Whilst this is by no means an exhaustive list, these are the techniques that we believe work best. This isn't a schedule to follow, it's more a list of techniques that you can pick and choose from in each brainstorm session.

It's usually worth starting with time spent on **Deep Analysis**, so that the problem is fully defined, to broaden where to search for new ideas. James Webb Young's brilliant book [A Technique for Producing Ideas](#) was first published in 1939, and can be read in an hour. It is worth quoting a passage here:

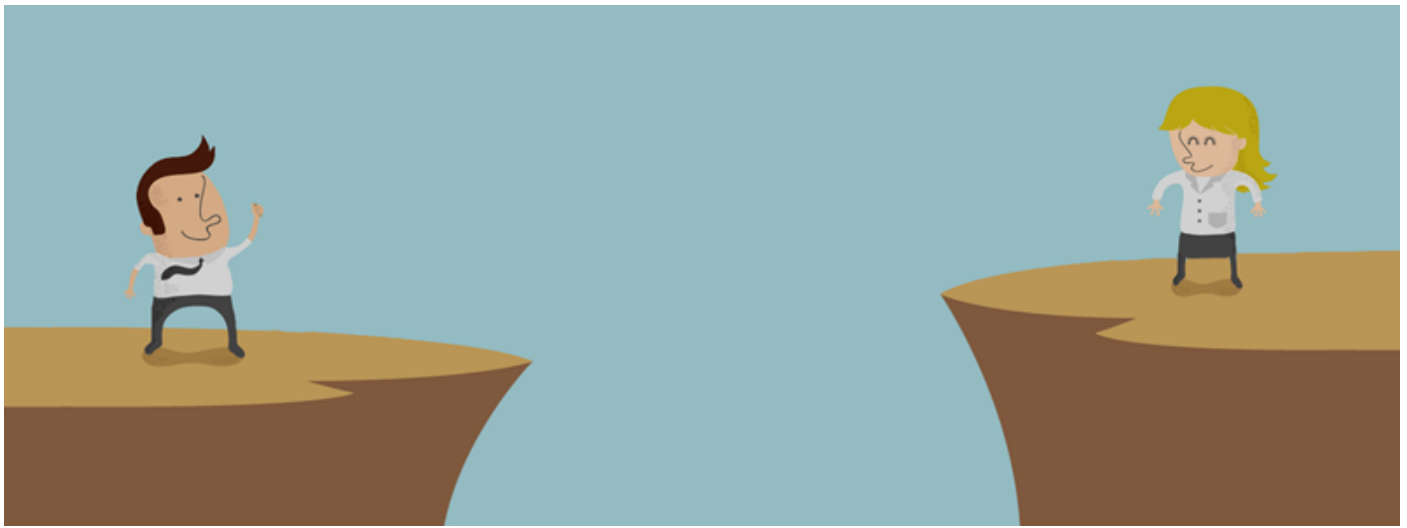
***“A real knowledge of a product, and of people in relation to it, is not easy to come by. Getting it is something like the process which was recommended to De Maupassant as the way to learn to write. ‘Go out into the streets of Paris,’ he was told by an older writer, ‘and pick out a cab driver. He will look to you very much like every other cab driver. But study him until you can describe him so that he is seen in your description to be an individual, different from every other cab driver in the world.’***

***“This is the real meaning of that trite talk about getting an intimated knowledge of the product and its consumers. Most of us stop too soon in the process. If the surface differences are not striking we assume that there are no differences. But if we go deeply enough, or far enough, we nearly always find that between every product and some consumers there is an individuality of relationship which may lead to an idea.”***

Ask questions to start the ball rolling, such as Who, Why, What, When, Where and How. Encourage participants to list attributes of the product or problem – really break it down and simplify it. Examine feelings and emotions triggered, and look at what meanings people attach to it. What assumptions are made – can they be challenged? List pros and cons, or conduct a SWOT analysis.

**Exaggeration** is like it says on the tin – simply take a component or an idea and exaggerate or distort it. What would happen if it was twice as big / fast / expensive? What would we do if we had twice as much time? What if the market was ten times smaller? The superheroes technique can be good for generating ideas in a fun environment – ask each participant to assume the guise and special powers of a superhero, and see how that affects their thinking (i.e. The Incredible Hulk might worry he would break a delicate product).

If something is holding you back, it can be useful to think in a **revolutionary** way – as if all regulations and restrictions were abolished and the market was rewritten. Alternatively, change the rules to force another way of thinking – such as imagining your budget halved, or cutting out an existing route to market or abolishing a particular form of communication.



## Developing

Sometimes your brainstorm will be about developing something as opposed to coming up with something completely new. The thinking model SCAMPER can help here:

- Substitute – which elements can you substitute – i.e. components, materials, people. What can you substitute them with and why?
- Combine – what could you mix in, combine with other products or services, or integrate into something completely different?
- Adapt – how could it be altered, or the function changed?
- Modify – could you increase or reduce it in scale, change shape, or modify attributes (e.g. colour)?
- Put to another use – does it have a dual purpose?
- Eliminate – are there any elements you can remove to simplify it, reduce it to its core functionality?
- Reverse - inside out or upside down.

## Perspectives

If you're an agency brainstorming a client project, you'll have used deep analysis to gain an intimate knowledge of the product and consumer. If you're brainstorming for your own company or product, you'll likely be too 'close' to it. For that reason it can be useful to think about gaining other perspectives.

- What would a different generation think? Imagine how your grandparents would view it, or a young child. How would their perspective differ from yours?
- In the same way, how would someone from a different country or culture think? Even if they're not the desired market it can help to look to other cultures for ideas and influences.
- Think about how iconic figures might view the problem – how would Steve Jobs approach it? Or Winston Churchill, or John Lennon.

## Other worlds

Similarly to perspectives, it can be useful to stretch our thinking further.

- Look at different industries: how do they launch products, conduct customer service, approach manufacturing or cost cutting? What influences can you take?
- Imagine you are brainstorming at a set point in the future or past – how might that affect your ideas? This can help with such issues as new technologies or markets (future) or drilling down into core values (past).
- Think of a parallel universe, where everything is the same except for several key things, for example there may be no gravity, or people might speak backwards, or eat breakfast at teatime. How would you launch your product there?
- Analogies: for example an anglepoise lamp is like a human arm (can bend and move to suit space or purpose), or a jumbo jet is like an albatross (big wingspan, elegant, graceful).

## Random links

Throwing in some curveballs can take a group's thinking off in unexpected directions. Introduce a noun from a dictionary, for example, and ask them to associate that with the area they are thinking about.

Random objects can also be used to great effect – stimulating the group's need to see and touch things (bringing two more senses into play). Pictures can work just as well.

An alternative method is to try and remove the context – such as the market, the audience, the competition, the history – surrounding the issue being brainstormed to see if that reveals fresh perspectives and ideas.

## Mash it up

It is often productive to create a mash-up of techniques to offer a different twist – for instance taking **related worlds** and then **exaggerating** the results. Or you could start by establishing several **analogies**, then introducing **random** objects or words. Combining existing ideas is one of the most common methods of creating new ideas. As Steve Jobs famously said: "Creativity is just connecting things."



## How Disney did it

Walt Disney employed a three-room strategy. The first room was the place where dreams were dreamed, ideas were spun out, with no restrictions and no limits.

Any crazy idea was freely developed. The second room coordinated the ideas and organised them into storyboards. The third room, the 'sweat box', met to critically review the project to date with no holds barred.

Once the ideas had been aggregated in room two, the critical process in room three was safe because it was the project rather than a particular individual that was being criticised.



## Evaluation & Implementation

Once you've held a successful brainstorm, you'll want to evaluate and act on the ideas that were generated - moving ideas from Post-It notes to the market. This guide aims to provide a simple framework for idea management and implementation.

### Who should be involved

Ideally, a separate team should evaluate the ideas, as they can be relied upon to make the most objective judgements and rational evaluations. They won't be attached to specific ideas that they, or their favoured colleagues, may have come up with. A small management team should be chosen, ideally with the authority to say 'yes' as well as 'no'. It's important to maintain momentum after a brainstorm, so this process should start as soon as possible.

### Gather and sort

Categorise the ideas as much as possible so you can see if any are similar, if they can be merged, or if they attempt to solve the same problems. This is particularly useful if you need to end up with just one idea to implement.

### Communicate

It's crucial to let your company know the status of the ideas. If there are ideas that you decide not to move forward on, how will you tell your staff? It's usually a good idea to be as transparent as possible, certainly about the process - tell the workforce everything you're doing and why. Make sure your communication is consistent and keep the tone upbeat and approachable.

Recognition and reward is also important - thank the team for their hard work, and reward where possible. If they can see that their ideas are being acted upon, and that their creative thinking is appreciated, they are much more likely to buy in to the process.

### Prototype / test

Depending on the complexity of the idea, it can usually help to create low-investment, quick ways of trying it out in the real world - to see how it reacts, and how people react to it. Developing a pilot (or [Minimum Viable Product](#), as everyone seems to be calling it nowadays), allows you to understand the idea and the potential market better, as well as gaining a better appreciation of what it will take for your organisation to deliver that idea. This last point is crucial - when you consider that every organisation is only optimised to achieve what it currently does.

### Ongoing

Create an implementation timeline for each idea - using a [Gantt chart](#) or similar, break each project down into a series of [small steps](#) that take the idea through to implementation and beyond.

Wherever possible, instil accountability and measurability so you can keep an eye on the idea's progress against specific criteria. How many people sign up per day? How many enquiries per day? Measuring these things at regular intervals - per day/week rather than overall - means you measure the idea's quality at the moment, as opposed to historically.

Assigning a specific person to manage and champion the project will help maintain momentum and give the idea a better chance.

## Evaluate

Use questions such as these as a guideline and modify to suit your situation as necessary. Evaluate whether the idea is negative, positive, or neutral in each:

- Is the idea a new concept, or is it a blend of existing concepts?
- What are its potential faults or limitations?
- How easy or difficult will the idea be to implement?
- Does it have natural sales appeal?
- Is there a defined market?
- Can people use the idea easily? Is it easy to adopt?
- Is it easy to understand?
- Is there a timing factor?
- Can short-term gains or results be forecast? How about long-term?
- What risk factors need to be considered, or what problems might the idea create?
- What, if anything, is your competition doing in this area?
- Are there barriers to development, i.e. industry regulations?
- Does your company have the immediate capability to act on this idea, or are extra resources / staff / equipment required?
- What potential partners are needed to implement the idea?
- Does your company have existing relationships or do they need to be developed?
- Does your company & staff have the motivation and desire to act on the idea?
- Is the idea likely to come across any 'closed thinking', power struggles or office politics?
- How well does your company cope with change?
- Are suitable communication channels / procedures in place?
- How are ideas funded and measured financially?

recap	before	during	after
<p>This guide should provide a basic framework for many successful brainstorm sessions.</p> <p>The subject of creativity is complex and wide-ranging, however - so don't hesitate to contact us if you want to take your creative quotient to the next level.</p>	<p>Define the brief</p> <p>Invite the right people</p> <p>Circulate rules</p> <p>Find a note-taker</p> <p>Gather materials</p>	<p>Warm-up to start</p> <p>Analyse the brief</p> <p>Introduce techniques</p> <p>Keep ball rolling</p> <p>Alternate between group &amp; individual</p>	<p>Invite the right people</p> <p>Measure against criteria</p> <p>Communicate well</p> <p>Prototype / test</p> <p>Break into tasks</p> <p>Recruit champions</p>

## About Creative Huddle

We believe that creative thinking is a skill, and that it can be taught. Our training courses help people develop their creative thinking abilities, and apply those skills to their business.

Better ideas benefit everyone, therefore everyone should be allowed and encouraged to learn how to be more creative. We help people learn about creativity in the following areas:



Get in touch at [info@creativehuddle.co.uk](mailto:info@creativehuddle.co.uk) or call us on **01273 782076**.