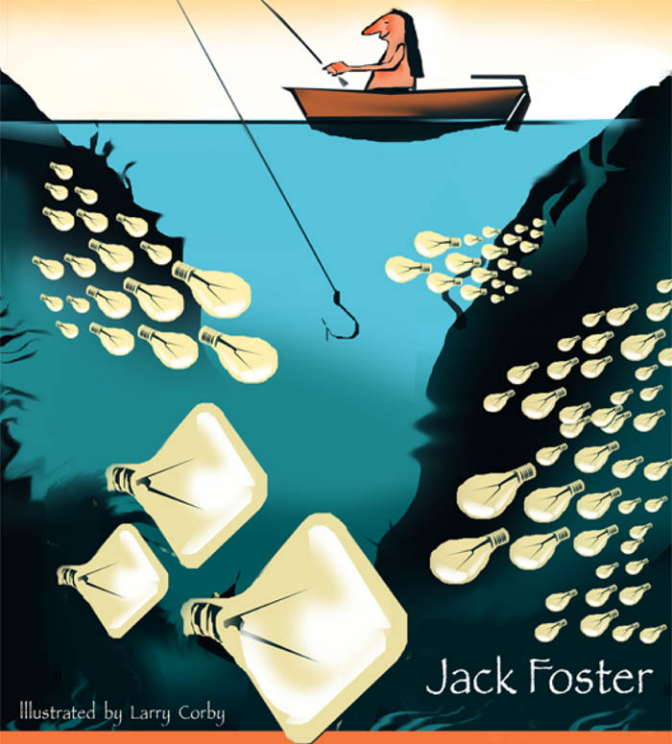
HOW TO GET IDEAS



Jack Foster

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An Excerpt From

How to Get Ideas

by Jack Foster
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Preface

For seven years I helped teach a 16-week class on advertising at the University of Southern California. The class was sponsored by the AAAA—American Association of Advertising Agencies—and was designed to give young people in advertising agencies an overview of the profession they had chosen.

One teacher talked about account management. One teacher talked about media and research. And I talked about creating advertising.

I talked about ads and commercials, about direct mail and outdoor advertising, about what makes good headlines and convincing body copy, about the use of music and jingles and product demonstrations and testimonials, about benefits and type selection and target audiences and copy points and subheads and strategy and teasers and coupons and free-standing inserts and psychographics and on and on and on.

And at the end of the first year I asked the graduates what I should have talked about but didn't.

"Ideas," they said. "You told us that every ad and every commercial should start with an idea," one of them wrote, "but you never told us what an idea was or how to get one."

Well.

So for the next six years I tried to talk about ideas and how to get them.

Not just advertising ideas. Ideas of all kinds.

After all, only a few of the people I taught were charged with coming up with ideas for ads and commercials; most were account executives and media planners and researchers, not writers and art directors. But all of them—just like you and everybody else in business and in government, in school and at home, be they beginners or veterans—need to know how to get ideas.

Why?

First, new ideas are the wheels of progress. Without them, stagnation reigns.

Whether you're a designer dreaming of another world, an engineer working on a new kind of structure, an executive charged with developing a fresh business concept, an advertiser seeking a breakthrough way to sell your product, a fifth-grade teacher trying to plan a memorable school assembly program, or a volunteer looking for a new way to sell the same old raffle tickets, your ability to generate good ideas is critical to your success.

Second, 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 can't do.

Third, we live in an age so awash with information that at times we feel drowned in it, an age that demands a constant stream of new ideas if it is to reach its potential and realize its destiny.

That's because information's real value—aside from helping you understand things better—comes

only when it is combined with other information to form new ideas: ideas that solve problems, ideas that help people, ideas that save and fix and create things, ideas that make things better and cheaper and more useful, ideas that enlighten and invigorate and inspire and enrich and embolden.

If you don't use this fortune of information to create such ideas, you waste it.

In short, there's never been a time in all of history when ideas were so needed or so valuable.

The first edition of this book contains most of what I told my students about ideas.

This second edition:

- Contains two new chapters—5, Rejoice in Failure, and 8, Team Up with Energy—that were suggested by friends and by teachers and students who used the first edition as a textbook.
- Updates some of the examples and references and quotations to make the book more current.
- Is reorganized to make more clear the two parts of the book—*Part I: Ten Ways to Idea-Condition Your Mind,* and *Part II: A Five-Step Method for Producing Ideas.*

Introduction

What Is an Idea?

I know the answer. The answer lies within the heart of all mankind! What, the answer is twelve? I think I'm in the wrong building.

Charles Schultz

I was gratified to be able to answer promptly, and I did. I said I didn't know.

Mark Twain

If love is the answer, could you please rephrase the question?

Lily Tomlin

Before we figure out how to get ideas we must discuss what ideas are, for if we don't know what things are it's difficult to figure out how to get more of them.

The only trouble is: How do you define an idea?

A. E. Housman said: "I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat, but both of us recognize the object by the symptoms which it produces in us." Beauty is like that too. So are things like quality and love.

And so, of course, is an idea. When we're in the presence of one we know it, we feel it; something inside us recognizes it. But just try to define one.

Look in dictionaries and you'll find everything from: "That which exists in the mind, potentially or actually, as a product of mental activity, such as a thought or knowledge," to "The highest category: the complete and final product of reason," to "A transcendent entity that is a real pattern of which existing things are imperfect representations."

A lot of good that does you.

The difficulty is stated perfectly by Marvin Minsky in *The Society of Mind*:

> Only in logic and mathematics do definitions ever capture concepts perfectly. . . . You can know what a tiger is without defining it. You may define a tiger, yet know scarcely anything about it.

If you ask people for a definition, however, you get better answers, answers that come pretty close to capturing both the concept and the thing itself.

Here are some answers I got from my coworkers and from my students at the University of Southern California and the University of California at Los Angeles:

> It's something that's so obvious that after someone tells you about it you wonder why you didn't think of it yourself.

> An idea encompasses all aspects of a situation and makes it simple. It ties up all the loose ends into one neat knot. That knot is called an idea.

> It is an immediately understood representation of something universally known or accepted, but conveyed in a novel, unique, or unexpected way.

> Something new that can't be seen from what preceded it.

> It's that flash of insight that lets you see things in a new light, that unites two seemingly disparate thoughts into one new concept.
>
> An idea synthesizes the complex into the startlingly simple.

It seems to me that these definitions (actually, they're more descriptions than definitions, but no matter—they get to the essence of it) give you a better feel for this elusive thing called an idea, for they talk about synthesis and problems and insights and obviousness.

The one that I like the best, though, and the one that is the basis of this book, is this one from James Webb Young:

> An idea is nothing more nor less than a new combination of old elements.

There are two reasons I like it so much.

First, it practically tells you how to get an idea for it says that getting an idea is like creating a recipe for a new dish. All you have to do is take some ingredients you already know about and combine them in a new way. It's as simple as that.

Not only is it simple, it doesn't take a genius to do

it. Nor does it take a rocket scientist or a Nobel Prize winner or a world-famous artist or a poet laureate or an advertising hotshot or a Pulitzer Prize winner or a first-class inventor.

"To my mind," wrote the scientist and philosopher Jacob Bronowski, "it is a mistake to think of creative activity as something unusual."

Ordinary people get good ideas everyday. Every day they create and invent and discover things. Every day they figure out different ways to repair cars and sinks and doors, to fix dinners, to increase sales, to save money, to teach their children, to reduce costs, to increase production, to write memos and proposals, to make things better or easier or cheaper—the list goes on and on.

Second, I like it because it zeros in on what I believe is the key to getting ideas, namely, combining things. Indeed, everything I've ever read about ideas talks about combining or linkage or juxtaposition or synthesis or association.

"It is obvious," wrote Jacques Hadamard, "that invention or discovery, be it in mathematics or anywhere else, takes place by combining ideas. . . . The Latin verb *cogito*, for 'to think,' etymologically means 'to shake together.' St. Augustine had already noticed that and had observed that *intelligo* means 'to select among.'"

"When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work," wrote T. S. Eliot, "it is constantly amalgamating disparate experiences. The ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes."

"A man becomes creative," wrote Bronowski, "whether he is an artist or a scientist, when he finds a new unity in the variety of nature. He does so by finding a likeness between things which were not thought alike before. . . . The creative mind is a mind that looks for unexpected likenesses."

Or listen to Robert Frost: "What is an idea? If you remember only one thing I've said, remember that an idea is a feat of association."

Or Francis H. Cartier: "There is only one way in which a person acquires a new idea: by the combination or association of two or more ideas he already has into a new juxtaposition in such a manner as to discover a relationship among them of which he was not previously aware."

Nicholas Negroponte agrees: "Where do good new ideas come from? That's simple—from differences. Creativity comes from unlikely juxtapositions."

And Arthur Koestler wrote an entire book, *The Act of Creation*, based on "the thesis that creative originality does not mean creating or originating a system of ideas out of nothing but rather out of a combination of well-established patterns of thought—by a process of cross-fertilization." Koestler calls this process "bisociation."

"The creative act," he explained, ". . . uncovers, selects, reshuffles, combines, synthesizes already existing facts, ideas, faculties, skills."

"Feats of association," "unexpected likenesses," "new wholes," "shake together" then "select among," "new (or unlikely) juxtapositions," "bisociations"—however they phrase it, they're all saying pretty much what James Webb Young said:

> An idea is nothing more nor less
> than a new combination of old elements.

Now that we know what ideas are, we must devise a method for getting them.

Happily enough, many such methods have already been devised. And—even more happily—these methods are quite similar.

In *A Technique for Producing Ideas*, James Webb Young describes a five-step method for producing ideas.

First, the mind must "gather its raw materials." In advertising, these materials include "specific knowledge about products and people [and] general knowledge about life and events."

Second, the mind goes through a "process of masticating those materials."

Third, "You drop the whole subject and put the problem out of your mind as completely as you can."

Fourth, "Out of nowhere the idea will appear."

Fifth, you "take your little newborn idea out into the world of reality" and see how it fares.

Hermann von Helmholtz, the German philosopher, said he used three steps to get new thoughts.

The first was "Preparation," the time during which he investigated the problem "in all directions" (Young's second step).

The second was "Incubation," when he didn't think consciously about the problem at all (Young's third step).

The third was "Illumination," when "happy ideas come unexpectedly without effort, like an inspiration" (Young's fourth step).

Moshe F. Rubinstein, a specialist in scientific problem solving at the University of California, says that there are four distinct stages to problem solving.

Stage one: Preparation. You go over the elements

of the problem and study their relationships (Young's first and second steps).

Stage two: Incubation. Unless you've been able to solve the problem quickly, you sleep on it. You may be frustrated at this stage because you haven't been able to find an answer and don't see how you're going to (Young's third step).

Stage three: Inspiration. You feel a spark of excitement as a solution, or a possible path to one, suddenly appears (Young's fourth step).

Stage four: Verification. You check the solution to see if it really works (Young's fifth step).

In *Predator of the Universe: The Human Mind*, Charles S. Wakefield says there "is a series of [five] mental stages that identify the creative act."

First, "is an awareness of the problem."

Second, "comes a defining of the problem."

Third, "comes a saturation in the problem and the factual data surrounding it" (Young's first and second steps).

Fourth, "comes the period of incubation and surface calm" (Young's third step).

Fifth, comes "the explosion—the mental insight, the sudden leap beyond logic, beyond the usual stepping-stones to normal solutions" (Young's fourth step).

Ah, but even though they all generally agree on the steps you must take to get an idea, none of them talks

much about the condition you must be in to climb those steps. And if you're not in condition, it doesn't make any difference if you know the steps; you'll never get the ideas that you're capable of getting.

For telling most people how to get an idea is a little like telling a first grader to find x when $x + 9 = 2x + 4$, or like telling a person with weak legs how to high jump. Just as you must know algebra before you can solve an equation, and just as you must have strong legs before you can high jump, so you must condition your mind before you can get an idea.

The first ten chapters make up Part I of this book. They discuss *Ten Ways to Idea-Condition Your Mind.* You may read them in any order.

1. Have Fun
2. Be More Like a Child
3. Become Idea-Prone
4. Visualize Success
5. Rejoice in Failure
6. Get More Inputs
7. Screw Up Your Courage
8. Team Up with Energy
9. Rethink Your Thinking
10. Learn How to Combine

The last five chapters make up Part II of this book.

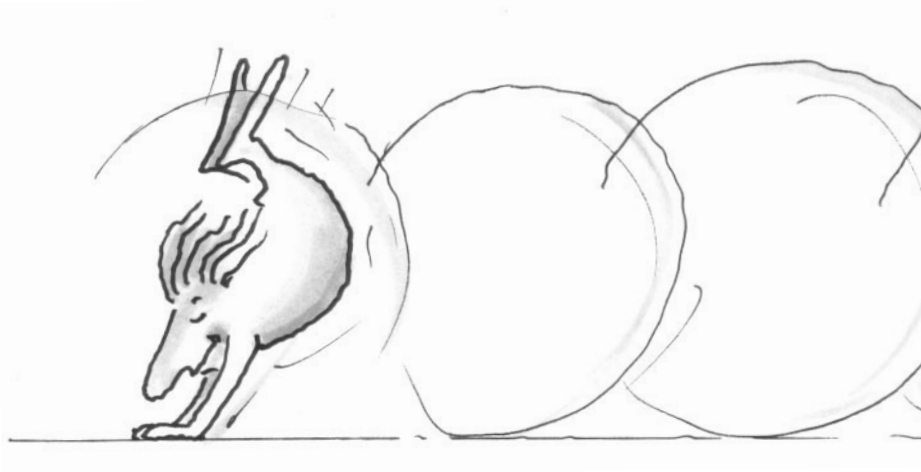
They talk about *A Five-Step Method for Producing Ideas* that *should* be taken in sequence. Although I use different words, I too generally agree with Young. (Two exceptions: I add one step to his—the need to define the problem; and I combine his third and fourth steps because they seem one step to me, not two.)

To some, my (and Young's) last step may not seem part of the process of getting an idea, but it truly is, for an idea is not an idea until something happens with it.

11. Define the Problem
12. Gather the Information
13. Search for the Idea
14. Forget about It
15. Put the Idea into Action

1.

Have Fun



He who laughs, lasts.

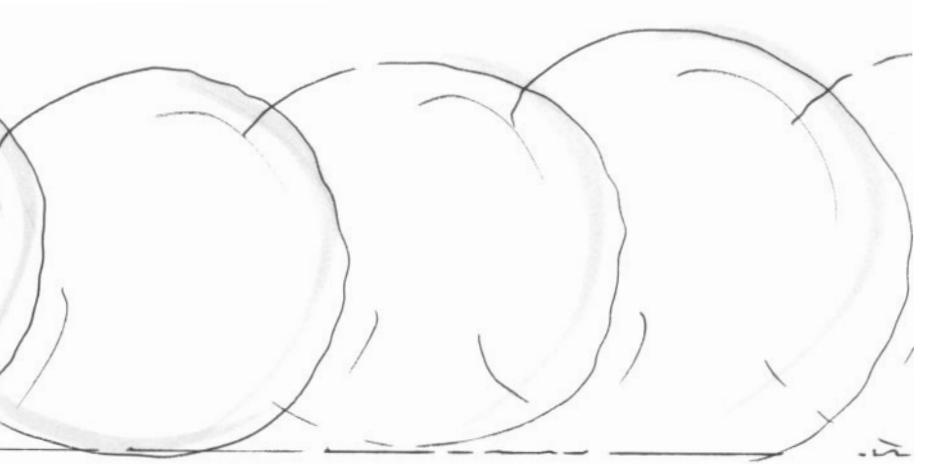
Mary Pettibone Poole

Sometimes when reading Goethe I have the paralyzing suspicion that he is trying to be funny.

Guy Davenport

Seriousness is the only refuge of the shallow.

Oscar Wilde



It's not by chance that I list having fun as my first suggestion on how to get your mind into idea-condition. Indeed, in my experience it might well be the most important one.

Here's why:

Usually in creative departments of advertising agencies a writer and an art director work together as a team on a project. In some departments and occasionally in the ones that I headed, three or four teams work on the same project.

When that happened in my departments, I always knew which team would come up with the best ideas, the best ads, the best television commercials, the best billboards.

It was the team that was having the most fun.

The ones with frowns and furrowed brows rarely got anything good.

The ones smiling and laughing almost always did.

Were they enjoying themselves because they were coming up with ideas? Or were they coming up with ideas because they were enjoying themselves?

The latter. No question about it.

After all, you know it's true with everything else—people who enjoy what they're doing, do it better. So why wouldn't it be true with people who have to come up with ideas?

"Make it fun to work at your agency," said David Ogilvy, the head of an advertising agency. "When people aren't having any fun they seldom produce good advertising."

Mr. Ogilvy did not have to limit his remarks to people in advertising agencies. The same could be said about anybody at any place who has to come up with an idea.

Oh, I know that creating advertising is a minor creative endeavor, and you might consider it folly to apply the lessons learned there to more weighty occupations. But people in other fields say the same thing about fun.

"Necessity may be the mother of invention," said Roger von Oech, "but play is certainly the father."

"Serious people have few ideas," said Paul Valéry. "People with ideas are never serious."

"The most exciting phrase to hear in science," said author and biochemist Isaac Asimov, "the one that heralds new discoveries, is not 'Eureka!' (I found it!), but 'That's funny . . . ' "

Indeed, it should come as no surprise that humor and all kinds of creativity are bedfellows.

After all, as Arthur Koestler pointed out, 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; the sudden left turn when you were expecting the road to go straight; a "bisociation" (as Koestler puts it), two frames of reference slamming together.

Just listen to how it works in humor:

"How can I believe in God," asked Woody Allen, "when just last week I got my tongue caught in the roller of an electric typewriter?"

"The race may not be to the swift nor the victory to the strong," said Damon Runyon, "but that's the way to bet."

"Shut up, he explained," wrote Ring Lardner.

In every case your mind is going one way when suddenly you are forced to change directions and—wonder of wonders—this new, unanticipated direction is perfectly logical. Something new is created, something that after the fact often seems obvious.

Ah, but that's exactly what an idea is too. The unexpected joining of two "old elements" to create a new whole that makes sense, "two matrices of thought" (as Koestler puts it) meeting at the pass.

Johannes Gutenberg put a coin punch and a wine press together and got a printing press.

Salvador Dalí put dreams and art together and got surrealism.

Someone put fire and food together and got cooking.

Sir Isaac Newton put the tides and the fall of an apple together and got gravity.

Charles Darwin put human disasters and the proliferation of species together and got natural selection.

Levi Hutchins put an alarm and a clock together and got an alarm clock.

Hyman L. Lipman put a pencil and an eraser together and got a pencil with an eraser.

Someone put a rag and a stick together and got a mop.

I once went for a job interview to an advertising agency in Chicago. As soon as I walked in I knew it would be a good place to work, a place where ideas would be bouncing off the ceiling. As I got off the elevator, there on the wall was this big official-looking framed sign:

> IN CASE OF EMERGENCY
>
> 1. Grab your coat
> 2. Get your hat
> 3. Leave your worries on the doorstep
> 4. Direct your feet to the sunny side of the street

There they were framed and hanging on the wall—"two matrices of thought" meeting at the pass, two frames of reference slamming together. Humor and creativity. It's difficult to have one without the other. The same is true for fun and ideas. And for enjoyment and performance.

Let me tell you a story:

When I started in advertising the writers and art directors dressed the way everybody in business dressed—the men wore suits and ties; the women, dresses or suits.

In the late sixties all that changed. People started dressing in sweaters and blue jeans and T-shirts and tennis shoes. I was running a creative department then and the *Los Angeles Times* asked me what I thought about people coming to work like that.

"I don't care if they come to work in their pajamas," I said, "as long as they get the work out."

Sure enough, the day after the article (with my quote) appeared, my entire department showed up in pajamas. It was great fun. The office rocked with laughter and joy.

More important, that day and the weeks that followed were some of the most productive times my department ever had. People were having fun, and the work got better.

Note again the cause and effect relationship: The fun came first; the better work, second. Having fun unleashes creativity. It is one of the seeds you plant to get ideas.

Realizing that, we started planting more of those seeds to make it fun to come to work. Perhaps a couple of them might work in your place, or will spark an idea for one that will work.

Meet in the Park. Our office was across the street from a park. Once a month or so we'd hold a department meeting there. (It's amazing how simply getting out of the office improved camaraderie and productivity.)

Family Day. Once a year, the kids came to see where mom and dad worked.

Darts. We put up a dart board in our conference room and played darts when we needed a break.

Who Is That? People brought in pictures of themselves when they were babies. We tacked all the pictures on a wall, numbered them, and everybody tried to guess who was who. The person who got the most right won a prize.

Cute/Homely Baby. Same as above, only we'd all vote on which baby was the cutest, which was the homeliest. Prizes, of course.

Arts and Crafts Fair. People sold (or just exhibited) things they or their families made at home.

Hallway Hockey. During lunch hour, we sometimes played hockey in the hallways with real hockey sticks, but with wads of paper for the puck.

Children's Art. Parents brought in their children's art work, labeled it, and hung it in the lobby.

Chili Off. The cooks in the department brought in pots of chili; we'd taste them and vote on a winner.

Dress-up Day. Every now and then we'd all come in dressed to the nines.

Potluck. Everybody brought in something, and we all sat down in the hallways and had lunch together.

"If it isn't fun, why do it?" says Jerry Greenfield of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream.

Tom J. Peters agrees: "The number one premise in business is that it need not be boring or dull," he wrote. "It ought to be fun. If it's not fun, you're wasting your life."

Don't waste yours. Have some fun.

And not so incidentally, come up with some ideas.

this material has been excerpted from

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