

# Creative Thinking

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Before reading beyond this paragraph, take a moment, grab a sheet of paper, and draw a point and label it "A." Draw a second point and label it "B." Now connect Point A to Point B and then set this aside for later. We will come back to what you just did later in this chapter.

Most of us have a narrow understanding of creative thinking. We think being creative means coming up with something unorthodox or unusual. We think that creative people are only those who test, poke, and prod boundaries: people such as risk-takers, innovators, and prominent artists. This can lead many of us to think that creativity is not for them. Being asked to think creatively can make us anxious or full of self-doubt. But we are all born creative thinkers. Children are naturally unorthodox, unusual, boundary-testers, and boundary-breakers. One moment they may be scrawling a sky with crayons and paper, the next off in an imaginary world, the next humming a new song all their own. So, it is an immutable fact that you yourself are a born creative thinker. Let's scrap the idea that creative thinking takes some special talent and isn't something for all of us.

I'd like to offer you a different perspective. To begin, let's imagine an average day. When you woke up, you decided upon an outfit. For many of us this is a hasty decision, but maybe you thought it through and laid out your choices the night before. Later, after standing in a ten-minute line at the campus cafeteria, you finally got to place your order. You stay alert in class, and when your professor asks a question, you decide to overcome your apprehension and volunteer an answer. As evening settles in, you make choices about who you want to hang out with and what you want to do. Finally (and as you are a college student, I will be realistic) you pick a time somewhere between what advice columnists would consider reasonable and sunrise to call it a day and try to sleep. You may think that

this has been a boring and uncreative day. You haven't danced or painted. You haven't performed on stage or composed a sonnet. You probably think the selfie you spent a while composing "doesn't count" as art. But that's not true. Throughout the course of this ordinary day, you have been constantly creative. Creative thinking is not something limited to the arts: creative thinking happens any time your decisions make a change in your life. It's where the word itself come from. To create change is to be creative.

Creative thinking is a process of choices that lead to change. The change may manifest in our inner life, such as when we let our minds drift (of course, never during class) and wander into daydreams that reshape our reality. But creative thinking also happens when we brainstorm the beginning sentence of an essay or actually sit at a computer and type a sentence. Creative thinking happens at the supermarket, when we choose the right color of toothbrush that will stand out from our roommates'. Creative thinking can happen without our consciously realizing it, like when we decide to name our character in a video game (without analyzing how we came up with it), or when we decide what steps to use to solve a math equation (without noticing we ran through other scenarios and rejected them for being too complex or inefficient). Creative thinking even happens when, as you just did, we imagine a fairly boring day. Did you imagine a favorite outfit, a particular meal, or a specific class and professor? I'd wager you did.

At the beginning of this chapter, you also connected Point A to Point B. How? Where did you decide to place the points on the paper? Did you draw a line to connect them? Did you use a pencil? A pen? Did you draw a straight line? Was it solid or dotted or dashed? Did you find some other way to tackle the premise? Did you fold the paper? Did you cut one out and glue it to the other? Did you do it in your mind? Did you bother to do it at all? Notice how many choices are at play in the simple matter of connecting two dots. My simple prompt opened up all those possibilities. Which possibilities you see leads to your choices, and your choices create a change in what you either drew on that paper or didn't. Creative thinking is what we do when we see possibilities, make choices, and change the world.

Now that you are a bit more familiar with your own creative thinking process, I will use the remaining parts of this chapter to give you some tools that can help you feel more comfortable with your creativity so that you can wield your creative thinking more efficiently and freely.

### **Uniqueness**

Like it or not, everyone is different. Creative thinking is ultimately an individualized process. All your experiences, psychology, upbringing, and biology create a crock-pot of subconsciousness for your ideas and choices. You will form your own connections. You see the world from your own unique perspective. You will cause your own ripples in the world that only you could make. And you will always have a stake in what you create. Try not to be afraid of that. You are unique by virtue of being yourself. Embrace it.

### **New for You**

One day the neurons in your brain will unexpectedly fire, two dots will connect, and you will see new possibilities and new choices you didn't see before. These "eureka" moments are elating. You may feel as if you may have discovered something brand new—some wholly new theorem, invention, idea, or connection. And then you may well find out your new idea has already been done. When this happens, don't be discouraged. You still created, and you still discovered something new. Many of the greatest ideas in this world must be found and re-found and then re-found again. The very act of discovery is creative, and such moments further open the world to us. Seek them out.

### **Boundaries**

Limitations and boundaries are not the enemies of creative thought; quite the contrary, they are often necessary. Constraint can hone a process and refine a final project. It can push us to find unconventional solutions or open door to fresh perspectives and possibilities. No matter how constricting a project may seem, there will always be an infinite amount of freedom within it. Rather looking at rules like a prison, think of them as part of a game: they help you play and help you know play well.

## **Instinct**

“Off the cuff” and “going with your gut” —these are phrases that suggest that instinct means letting our primal, uncensored natures burst forth. But there is much more to instinct than that. When a basketball player uses instinct to grab a ball out of the air, that instinct is a response earned through hours of practice. When an artist knows exactly what color paint to choose to represent the sun dancing on the water, that instinct comes from hours of practice and mistakes. Your creative instinct is something you have honed and can continue to hone through your own experience. If your responses don’t come naturally, don’t give up. Despite what you might think, instinct is something you can refine.

## **Structure**

Ask most artists and they’ll tell you that structure is a key part of their creative process. This is often about creating a physical space where they can experience flow or ease—maybe limiting clutter or distractions or drinking a cup of their favorite tea before they sit down to work—but it can also be about working at a certain time of day or in a certain series of steps. These structures can be another form of constraints that help creative thinking open up. We have all have the experience of staring at an aisle full of similar products and feeling stuck with no idea which to choose. This “choice paralysis” — the fear and apprehension we feel when confronted with too many possibilities—is an obstacle to creative thought. You may well feel the same when you stare at a blank white screen, the cursor blinking, not knowing how to begin an essay. Structure and process offer a means to combat this issue. Structures include rehearsals, outlines, notes, and drafts. You may be tempted to think of them as unnecessary extra steps, but they are more like waypoints that help you take the journey safely without getting overwhelmed.

## **Manifest is Best**

Creative thinking can, of course, take place entirely within our minds. But it is an easy trap to convince ourselves that “thinking” is in itself progress. It can make us feel as though we are moving forward with a project when nothing is happening. In fact, as we

weigh more and more abstract options, we may find ourselves further and further from our goals and lose sight of how to get back. Break yourself of the habit of “brainstorming” entirely within your own head. Act. The more you manifest your creative thinking, the easier it will get. Sketch, diagram, doodle, move, run, write, perform, speak. Sometimes, the most important part of creative thinking isn’t the thinking but the creating.

### **Critical and Analytical Thought**

You may find that as you’re trying to think creatively, your inner critic has quite a lot to say. That’s okay. Creative thinking doesn’t mean abandoning other forms of thinking. We need critical and analytical thought to help us understand and evaluate our creative choices. Otherwise, we would be left with completely divergent, instinctual thoughts and actions. Choosing to wear flip-flops in January snow rarely seems like the best choice after a few steps, and typing whatever comes into your head rarely results in an essay or assignment that fit the criteria stated in the syllabus. Creative thinking means making new ideas and opening up new questions but is supported best when evaluating those connections and analyzing how our questions fit with what we know. We need creative, critical, analytical thought together.

### **Ending**

You may have heard the quote, “Art is never finished, only abandoned.” While we aren’t sure who said it (perhaps Leonardo DaVinci, perhaps Pablo Picasso), we do know it is true. The more you engage in the creative thinking process, the more you make your creativity manifest, the more possibilities you will see open up around you. More to do, more to refine, more to explore. However, the painter finally has to set down his brush, you will finally have to turn in your assignments. At that moment, please remember ...<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This unfinished last line is the springboard for an Action Step prompt called “The Abandoned Chapter,” which you can find in the module “Reading and Thinking like a College Student.”