

# Increasing Creativity

## **Ideas on tap**

When given a new assignment, many designers or illustrators will sit at their drawing tables or favorite chair and think hard until they come up with an idea. The novices will take that idea and run with it, often only to find out later in the process that the particular idea was lacking in some way. Typically, those beginners will just forge ahead philosophically thinking, “you win some, you lose some.”

How sad. How unnecessary.

Other designers or illustrators—the ones we read about in design or illustration journals—seem never to strike out at the plate. They seem to only bat home runs. They don’t seem to be saying to themselves, “Gee, can-I-come-up-with-an-idea?” Instead they seem to be saying, “which-of-these-great-ideas-do-I-have-to-discard.”

What special genius do they have?

Or is there a special creative skill that they’ve learned which perhaps others can learn—with practice?

Actually, they do have several special creative skills, but we’ll just talk about one here.

Brad Holland, undoubtedly one of the most prolific conceptual illustrators of our age, commented in a lecture on his prize-winning illustration, “Usually when I’m giving a lecture and showing my work, some little old lady asks me, ‘where do you get your ideas?’ I answer [sarcastically], ‘I subscribe to an idea service out of Iowa.’”

What the little old lady didn’t grasp is that generating ideas is what Brad Holland does, it’s what sets him apart from “mere painters” and entitles him to the higher title of illustrator.

Illustration is more than creating a pretty picture or just decorating a piece of design. An illustrator’s job is to solve a visual problem for a client or for a designer who is working on behalf of a client.

## **Inspiration vs. Perspiration**

The ancient Greeks believed that goddesses called the Muses were responsible for creativity. They thought a great idea came to a person when a muse alighted upon the shoulder. Modern artistic mentality is only a little less quaint in its ideas. The notion of the artist as a Bohemian, wild soul is very widespread. According to this widespread notion, if an artist isn’t going to be unkempt and unsociable, then he/she must at least be driven and unpredictable, ready to follow the modern successor to the muses at a moment’s notice.

Thomas Edison, certainly a great genius of our age, said, “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.” Some will counter, “But who wants sweaty ideas?”

Mostly when it is suggested that ideas are the result of work and discipline, such words are given lip service, but there remains in many the gut conviction that creativity is some indefinable mystical process that not only can’t be examined, but shouldn’t be, lest the magical spell be broken and the individual banished outside the ethereal realm of creativity.

## **Creativity and Constraints**

The novice and the amateur usually equate true creativity with the lack of limitations, the absence of rules. Unfortunate for them, true creativity is not manifested unless there are constraints.

There are always constraints in creative problems. It is just a fact of life. Working within the restrictions of budget, deadline, media are always there. When a composer creates a marvelous new piece of music the same 8 notes were used that have been around for millennia. When a poet or lyricist comes up with a turn of phrase that expresses something better than anyone ever did before, no new words have to be invented. When a painter captures an image that in turn captures the hearts or imaginations of thousands, no new colors are required. Just the new application of the medium in a way never accomplished before.

Creativity is the ability to solve problems. Problems, by their nature, have limitations. The more limitations there are, the greater creativity needed to achieve a working solution.

Two techniques to boost solving problem capacity, or creativity, are offered here.

## **Give Ideas a Good Home**

Many artists and illustrators draw in sketchbooks. I use sketchbooks to record conceptual ideas. I have quite a stack of sketchbooks by now. When I am ready to create an illustration to solve a client’s problem, I go through my sketchbooks and look through the ideas I’ve already had. Sometimes I find just the solution I need in an existing sketch. But even if I don’t find a ready-made solution in my sketchbooks, reviewing the sketchbooks helps me to come up with new ideas to solve the problem. I consider the sketchbooks a shortcut to a solution-making frame of mind.

Brad Holland has been an avid sketcher for decades, both to note conceptual ideas as well as just to capture images. He mines his sketchbook for images to use again, even though the context may be different. For instance, Holland once made a profile sketch of his “dumb brother-in-law” during a poker game. Holland has used this sketch for at least three different illustrations. Holland believes that an image once sketched, it is engraved on the memory in a unique way. By using a previously sketched image, an artist is then free to concentrate on additional qualities, taking the image to new levels.

Still, the ingrained notion of inspiration coming from outside is hard to shake. So, even if you are the kind of person who finds appeal in the mystic notion of muses, consider this: give an idea a good home or it will go somewhere else. Record your ideas.

### **The Back Burner**

My father used to be a head chef at a resort in Maine. One of the dishes he invariably received compliments on was his Chicken Imperial. People raved about it. He made it by buying some old stewing hens which he threw into a giant pot with a few onions and left it to simmer on the large stove's back burner for a couple of days. After that, the two chunks of breast meat came off the birds as units, which he wrapped and froze. The remainder of the meat was used for chicken salad. The broth was left on the back burner and rendered down to a very flavorful gravy. This was packaged in appropriate portions and frozen also. When someone ordered Chicken Imperial, a portion of meat and a portion of gravy were micro-waved and, voila! Chicken Imperial. Many gourmets said it was the best Chicken Imperial they had ever tasted.

The special ingredient was time. Not thyme, but time.

Time can be a crucial element in creative endeavors as well. I have asked my students if they have ever come up with a superior creative solution after they have submitted their projects, or so late in the project that they could not switch to the superior idea. Almost every student has had that happen. Most professional designers have experienced that as well.

What they were experiencing was the brain's "back burner."

When you undertake a problem directly and deeply, you engage your cerebral cortex, of course, your conscious mind. But you also engage your subconscious mind. The more strenuously the conscious mind works on a particular challenge, the more likely the subconscious will also be stirred into its more deliberate labor. After the conscious mind has put the problem aside or even decided on a course of action, the subconscious mind will continue to work on the puzzle.

Albert Einstein once said, "As one grows older, one sees the impossibility of imposing your will on the chaos with brute force. But if you are patient, there may come that moment when, while eating an apple, the solution presents itself politely and says, 'Here I am!'"

Unfortunately, you can't rush the brain's back burner. It takes time. Cooking that chicken on a higher heat for a shorter time just doesn't get the same results.

So one important solution is to get fully engaged in your problems as soon as you can, not as late as you can to meet the deadline. If you don't get immersed in the problems early, you can't employ the back burner, or at least not in time to do you any good. And that's a shame, because it's free and usually gives you better ideas on solving a problem than your first efforts.

Creativity is not luck, nor is it the goddesses breathing ideas into you. It is work, but it involves skills which may be acquired, improved and honed to fine working order.

Approached intelligently, creative problem solving can be the most satisfying kind of work.

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