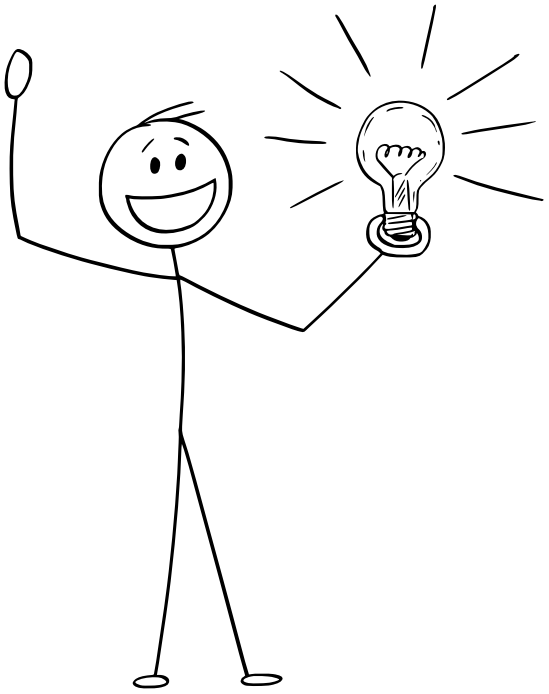
10 Mental Models to Supercharge Your Creative Thinking

Proven tools to help you generate better ideas



42 courses

Whether pitching a campaign, writing a brief, or staring at a blank page, these 10 mental models will help you break out of stale thinking and find surprising, original solutions. Borrowed from fields as diverse as nuclear physics, Zen Buddhism and aeronautical engineering, think of them as little helpers for your creative brain.

What are 'Mental Models'?

Most of your thinking happens on autopilot.

In other words, you don't think consciously about why you make decisions.

The reason is that conscious processing is energy-intensive, so your brain 'automates' as much of your day-to-day thinking as possible.

This method works well but can make you prone to misjudgements under certain circumstances.

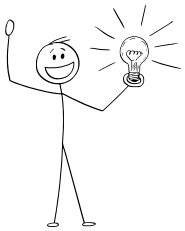
'Mental models' are frameworks that force you to think more consciously about how to solve complex problems or make difficult decisions.

The investing guru Charlie Munger first coined the term in a speech at the University of Southern California's Business School in 1994.

There are many well-known ones, but you can gain an edge from knowing a few key ones from various disciplines, including physics, biology, maths and engineering,

Nevertheless, it's essential to recognise that no single model is a cure-all.
In the words of the statistician George Box, *"All models are wrong, but some are useful"*.

Instead, they are tools to help structure your thinking and overcome blind spots.



Why are 'Mental Models' helpful for creative thinking?

We tend to default to what we already know when coming up with ideas. If something has worked well in the past, our instinct is to repeat the same formula.

However, complex creative challenges require unconventional approaches.

Mental models allow you to access the more 'creative' part of your brain where breakthrough ideas are more likely to happen.

Below are ten mental models that you can use to tackle your next creative problem.

1. Critical Mass 

"When an idea reaches critical mass there is no stopping the shift its presence will induce." - ***Marianne Williamson***

Critical mass' describes a state when the smallest mass of fissionable material can sustain a nuclear chain reaction.

A crude analogy would be lighting a fire.

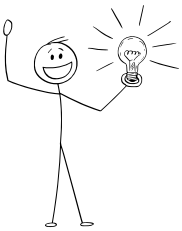
To get it going, you need a certain amount of combustible material to ignite it; otherwise, it dies out.

It's the same with your creative ideas.

They must reach a 'critical mass' to spread amongst a large enough audience.

To achieve this, you must package your ideas to be easily understood and shared.

Oh, and a large media spend or celebrity/influencer endorsement to help give it momentum doesn't hurt...👇



The 2014 campaign to raise awareness for ALS (Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) is a good example.

This disease causes progressive degeneration of nerve cells in the spinal cord and brain.

There is no cure, so sufferers progressively become more disabled and then die.

The team behind the campaign devised a highly creative solution; they created the ice bucket challenge.

It involved filming yourself pouring ice-cold water over your head and then challenging someone you knew to undertake the same task.

In this instance, the creators could show their friends (and others) how daring and fun they were through social media clips.

The campaign quickly took on a life of its own, further helped by the involvement of people like Donald Trump, Ben Affleck, Justin Bieber, Meghan Markle and many others.

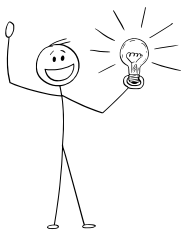
Ideas will not succeed on merit whether you want to believe it or not.

It's not the best one that wins, but the one that is best communicated.

If your idea doesn't reach critical mass, it will eventually die out.

Things to consider when applying this model:

1. Is your idea simple and easy to explain to anybody?
2. What are the different ways to get your idea out there?
3. Is there a way to incentivise people to share your idea?



2. Exploration vs Exploitation 

"In the end, exploitation pays your salary while exploration pays your pension. Companies that survive do both". ***- Steve Blank***

The concept of 'exploration vs. exploitation' has its roots in computer science, particularly within decision-making strategies.

In evolutionary biology, where this concept also plays a critical role, it's akin to the strategies animals use in foraging.

For example, a bird can either continue to visit known food sources (exploitation) or search for new ones (exploration); it's about balancing the familiar with the unknown to survive.

This model has since entered various domains, including psychology, economics, and business strategy.

In these fields, it's applied to the tension between optimising existing assets, products, or strategies (exploitation) and investing in new areas (exploration).

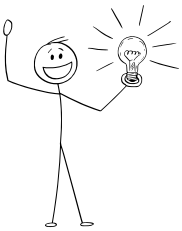
In a business context, you might think of exploitation as refining and improving your current offerings, while exploration is like R&D or entering new markets.

A similar problem occurs with creative thinking.

Given that any new idea is just a combination of existing ideas, you must gather as many as possible.

This condition requires you to read, watch and listen widely. You have to fill your idea bucket before you can pour from it.

However, you must commit to making your ideas a reality at some point...👇



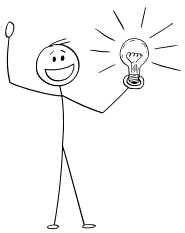
It’s easy to confuse gathering information with work, but an idea only has value when you execute it.

Think of the potential money to be made from all the unfinished books, advertising concepts and business plans lurking in dusty drawers.

Don’t let your next brilliant idea become one of them.

Things to consider when applying this model:

1. Limit how much material you take in before starting a new project.
2. Don’t wait for the perfect circumstances to get started. As the well-known sportswear apparel company says, ‘Just Do It’.
3. Move your ideas beyond the conceptual stage. Write down your ideas or build a low-fidelity prototype. Whatever it is, make it real.



3. Beginner's Mind 

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few". ***- Shunryu Suzuki***

The concept of 'Beginner's Mind' stems from the Zen Buddhist term 'Shoshin,' which, you've guessed it, translates to 'beginner's mind.'

The influential book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki (a respected Zen master) helped to popularise the term in the West.

Shoshin refers to an attitude of openness and lack of preconceptions when studying a subject, even at an advanced level, just as a beginner would.

The idea is to maintain a sense of curiosity and humility, no matter how much expertise you have in a given area.

In the context of creativity, this concept suggests that by approaching your work with the open-mindedness of a beginner, regardless of your level of knowledge, you can see beyond your ingrained patterns and preconceived notions.

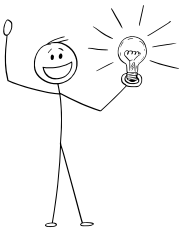
Channelling your inner newbie allows you to approach problems with fresh eyes.

You might stumble upon insights that experts, burdened by their knowledge, might overlook.

For example, when the advertising executive Sir John Hegarty (co-founder of BBH) toured the Audi factory in Germany in the early 1980s, he spotted a faded poster on a wall.

It was an old ad with "Vorsprung durch Technik" written on it.

Hegarty had no idea what they meant (it translates as 'staying ahead with technology'), but the words had stirred a well of curiosity inside him...👇



Later, back in his agency in London, trying to think of a campaign line for Audi UK, the phrase returned to him.

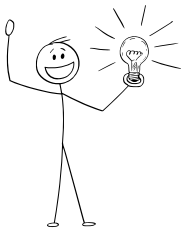
It worked because it helped the brand capitalise on Germany's reputation for technical expertise, and the slogan became so successful that it entered the British vocabulary.

Reflecting on the campaign's popularity, Hegarty said, *"This is the incidental nature of creativity, looking, watching, hearing stuff and it all goes in."*

Remember to leave your assumptions at the door and look at everything like a child seeing it for the first time.

Things to consider when applying this model:

1. Ask as many questions as you can. Resist the urge to self-censor.
2. Observe how young children play and interact with their environment.
3. Practice mindfulness to engage your brain with the world around you. Notice the sounds, colours, textures, and shapes.



4. Framing 

"*None of us see the world as it is but as we are, as our frames of reference, or maps, define the territory". -* ***Stephen Covey***

James Webb-Young was a successful American advertising executive.

He received many accolades during his career, including the Advertising Man of the Year Award in 1946.

Webb-Young also found time to write one of the most enduring books on the creative process.

When he retired, he bought an apple farm in the mountains of New Mexico.

The orchard was several hundred acres in size, which was more than enough for him to top up his retirement income.

What Webb-Young didn't realise is that the high altitude meant hailstones would regularly fall and damage the surface of his crop.

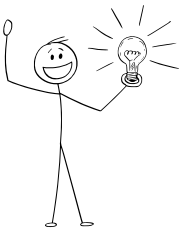
Apple merchants weren't interested in selling them as they appeared substandard.

Thinking creatively, he decided to sell the apples at a premium via mail order.

He described the unattractive pits in the apples as 'dimples' and used the line 'Not pitted by hailstones but dimpled by the heavens.'

This proof of the apples' high-altitude provenance turned an apparent shortcoming into a unique benefit.

This remarkable story illustrates the concept of 'framing'...👇



It’s the idea that the same product attribute (in this case, the dents in the apple) can be desirable or unpleasant, depending on how you frame it.

Framing is frequently used in advertising to make products more appealing.

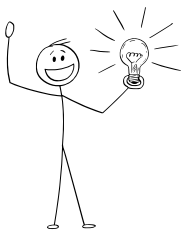
For example, dairy companies advertise their yoghurt as 90% fat-free.

This description sounds better than 10% fat, even though they are the same.

And Absolut, the Swedish vodka, became the first premium brand in the category by borrowing from the world of high-end art in its advertising.

By featuring its distinctive bottle in various artistic and imaginative contexts, it ‘framed’ itself as a spirit *and* a piece of modern art, evoking a sense of sophistication.

With this in mind, how might you ‘frame’ your ideas to make them more appealing?



5. Six Thinking Hats 

"We may have a perfectly adequate way of doing something, but that does not mean there cannot be a better way." ***- Edward De Bono***

As individuals, we are prone to similar thinking patterns. Unsurprisingly, we don't all think in the same way.

So, facing a challenge that requires us to be resourceful and think differently can leave us a bit hamstrung. The reason is that to be an effective problem solver, you need to think differently.

Dr. Edward De Bono, who died in 2021, was one of the world's greatest thinkers.

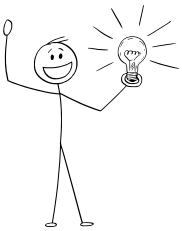
He dedicated his life to teaching people 'how' to think rather than 'what' to think.

His 'Six Thinking Hats' technique is a role-playing method whereby a group debates a problem by adopting different 'hats'.

Each 'hat' requires the person to respond to the problem from a particular perspective.

They are as follows:

1. White Hat - Facts
2. Red Hat - Emotions
3. Yellow Hat - Benefits
4. Green Hat - Ideas
5. Blue Hat - Planning
6. Black Hat - Judgement

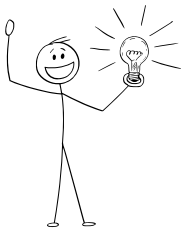


Each person adopts the mentality of their given hat and applies its 'lens' to the problem at hand. As you go around the table, you will gather six perspectives on the same problem.

At the end of this exercise, you'll find that you've magically created a new list of possible solutions to your original problem - you've learned to think differently.

Sometimes, you need to adopt a different mindset to generate a breakthrough.

And the 'Six Hats' exercise is a helpful tool to nudge you into doing just that.



6. S.C.A.M.P.E.R. Method 

"If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." - ***Wayne Dyer***

In 1971, educational expert Bob Eberle described the term S.C.A.M.P.E.R. in his book Games for Imagination Development.

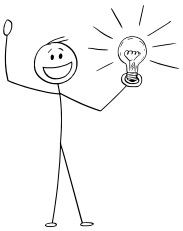
Much like the Six Thinking Hats, this model is a toolbox for creative problem-solving.

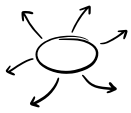
The acronym stands for the following:

- Substitute
- Combine
- Adapt
- Modify
- Put to another use
- Eliminate (or Minimise)
- Reverse (or Rearrange)

Each of these words serves as a prompt to explore new possibilities by asking questions that apply to the prompt to a problem or product you are trying to improve upon or create.

It's incredibly handy for when you're feeling stuck.



7. Mind Mapping 

"The mind map will change your life". ***- Tony Buzan***

Our brains often need guidance to collect and organise their most inspiring thoughts.

Enter Tony Buzan.

Tony spent his working life thinking about the brain and how we can get the most out of it, writing several best-selling books on memory, speed reading and creativity.

He also developed something called the 'Mind Mapping' technique.

It's a simple but effective way to encourage your mind to consider multiple options when searching for solutions.

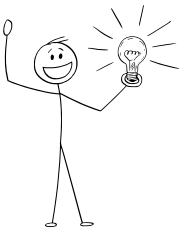
Begin by drawing an image at the centre of a large piece of paper and then create separate 'branches' of terms that relate to it.

Topics of lesser importance are shown as 'twigs' of the relevant branch.

In a short video, Tony explains why this technique is so effective.

Things to consider when applying this model:

1. Examine some of your existing beliefs. Could you write down three arguments for adopting a contrarian view of them?
2. Deliberately seek out opposing opinions.
3. Search for opinions, ideas and beliefs from other cultures. What do they tell you about your own?



8. Inversion 

'Invert. Always invert.' - ***Carl Gustav Jacob Jacobi***

In one of Rory Sutherland's TED talks, he suggests a wonderfully counterintuitive idea for improving the Eurostar service.

Instead of spending £6 billion to make the Eurostar train between London and Paris 40 minutes faster (which they did), he proposes making the ride more enjoyable.

For example, having top models pour expensive champagne for guests would have the same, if not better, impact on passenger satisfaction—for far less money.

It's a great example of 'inversion' or turning a problem on its head.

This model comes from the mathematician Carl Gustav Jacob Jacobi, who used it to solve complex equations.

He realised these problems were easier to solve once you turned them upside down.

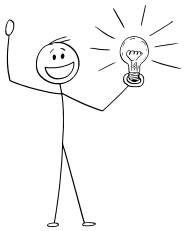
Complex problems are tricky to solve because they are resistant to straightforward solutions.

Inverting a problem forces you to look at it differently, which can unlock new solutions.

For example, when investing your money, think about how to avoid losing it all instead of trying to get rich.

Similarly, instead of trying to become happier, think about the things that make you unhappy and minimise them.

As Rory Sutherland says, *"The opposite of a good idea can be another good idea".*



9. The K.I.S.S. Principle

"I believe that things can be expressed very powerfully through simplicity". ***- Johann Johannsson***

De Beers 'A diamond is forever'. BMW 'The Ultimate Driving Machine'. Red Bull 'It Gives You Wings'.

These taglines are some of the most enduring of all time.

What's the reason for their success?

The short answer is that they convey a simple idea anyone can understand.

However, they are rare beasts because it's human nature to overcomplicate things.

We tend to make ideas more complex than necessary, which can be counterproductive when spreading them widely.

The K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple Stupid) principle has its roots in the U.S. Navy.

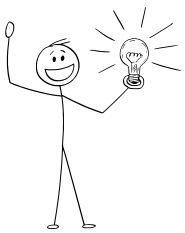
Engineer Kelly Johnson, working on aircraft design in the 1960s, is credited with coining the term.

He aimed to simplify the process of fixing planes so that an average mechanic with basic tools could fix them under combat conditions.

This engineering maxim also applies to your ideas. Simple ideas work best because:

1. Simple ideas are easier to execute (but not necessarily easier to come up with)
2. Simple ideas are more likely to be remembered
3. Simple ideas are straightforward to communicate

A clarifying question you can ask yourself to determine whether you've distilled your thinking as much as possible is, *'What can I take away from this idea while keeping it intact?'*



10. Cross-pollination 

"The cross pollination of disciplines is fundamental to truly revolutionary advances in our culture". - ***Neil DeGrasse Tyson***

'Cross-pollination' is a term from botany that refers to pollinating a flower or plant with pollen from another flower or plant.

Why do this?

Because it results in healthier offspring and new plant varieties.

It's a vital process for varying genetics, increasing diversity and adaptability to changing environments.

Similarly, borrowing ideas from different fields, cultures, or disciplines and applying them to your creative challenge increases the diversity of potential solutions.

One person who did this successfully was Owen Finlay Maclaren.

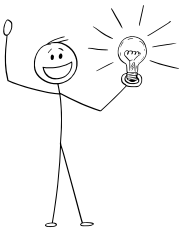
During WW2, he helped design the Supermarine Spitfire.

This flying machine had an advanced design, a novel elliptical wing shape, and a powerful V12 Rolls-Royce engine that reached a top speed of over 350 mph.

For a plane to move efficiently through the air, it must create as little 'drag' (the technical term for wind resistance) as possible.

It's why Maclaren designed the Spitfire's undercarriage to fold into the fuselage when it took off.

With no wheels, the air is free to pass uninterrupted...👇



In 1944, Maclaren retired from aeronautical engineering and founded a company making aircraft components.

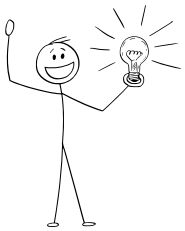
Almost twenty years later, when his daughter was visiting from Moscow with his first grandchild, he noticed how the bulky nature of conventional pushchairs made life difficult for parents.

Drawing on his experience with the Spitfire, he designed a prototype collapsible buggy in aluminium.

With further refinement, the result was his phenomenally successful folding buggy, which is still on sale today.

As the story of Maclaren's innovative buggy demonstrates, it's incredible what you can learn from areas entirely unrelated to your own.

So, when you're struggling with a creative challenge, it's a good idea to find out if other industries, fields, or cultures have solved a similar problem.



“A few big ideas across multiple disciplines carry 95% of the freight”.
- ***Charlie Munger***