

24 WAYS to impress your friends

Good Ideas Grow on Paper

The Standardistas

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Great designers have one thing in common: their design process is centred on ideas; ideas that are more often than not developed on paper. Though it's often tempting to take the path of least resistance, turning to the computer in the headlong rush to complete a project (often in the face of formidable client pressure), resist the urge and – for a truly great idea – start first on paper.

The path of least resistance is often characterised by cliché and overused techniques – one per cent noise, `border-radius`, `text-shadow` – the usual suspects – techniques that are ten-a-penny at the gallery sites. Whilst all are useful, and technique and craft are important, great design isn't about technique alone – it's about technique in the service of good ideas.

But how do we generate those ideas?

Inspiration can certainly come to you out of the blue. When working as a designer in a role which often consists of incubating good ideas, however, idly waiting for the time-honoured lightbulb to appear above your head just isn't good enough. We need to establish an environment where we tip the odds of getting good ideas in our favour.

So, when faced with the blank canvas, what do we do to unlock the proverbial tidal wave of creativity? Fear not. We're about to share with you a couple of stalwart techniques that will stand you in good stead when you need that good idea, in the face of the pressure of yet another looming deadline.

Get the process right

Where do ideas come from? In many cases they come from anywhere but the screen. Hence, our first commandment is to close the lid of your computer and, for a change, work on paper. It might seem strange, it might also seem like a distraction, but – trust us – the time invested here will more than pay off.

Idea generation should be a process of rapid iteration, sketching and thinking aloud, all processes best undertaken in more fast paced, analogue media. Our tool of choice is the Sharpie and Flip Chart Combo®, intentionally low resolution to encourage lo-fi idea generation. In short, your tools should be designed not to be precious, but to quickly process your thoughts. Ideas can be expressed with a thick line marker or by drawing with a stick in the sand; it's the ideas that matter, not the medium.

Input>Synthesise>Output

Ideas don't materialise in a vacuum. Without constant input, the outputs will inevitably remain the same. As such, it's essential to maintain an inquisitive mind, ensuring a steady flow of new triggers and stimuli that enable your thinking to evolve.

What every designer brings to the table is their prior experience and unique knowledge. It should come as no surprise to discover that a tried and tested method of increasing that knowledge is, believe it or not, to read – often and widely. The best and most nuanced ideas come after many years of priming the brain with an array of diverse material, a point made recently in Jessica Hische's aptly named [Why You Should Know Your Shit](https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://www.flickr.com/photos/jessicahische/5075734049/lightbox/) [<https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://www.flickr.com/photos/jessicahische/5075734049/lightbox/>].

One of the best ways of synthesising the knowledge you accumulate is to write. The act of writing facilitates your thinking and stores the pieces of the jigsaw you'll one day return to. You don't have to write a book or a well-articulated article; a scribbled note in the margin will suffice in facilitating the process of digestion.

As with writing, we implore you to make sketching an essential part of your digestion process. More immediate than writing, sketching has the power to put yet unformed ideas down on paper, giving you an insight into the fantastic conceptions you're more often than not still incubating.

Our second commandment is a practical one: always carry a sketchbook and a pen. Although it seems that the very best ideas are scribbled on the back of a beer mat or a wine-stained napkin, always carrying your 'thinking utensils' should be as natural as not leaving the house without your phone, wallet, keys or pants.

Further, the more you use your sketchbook, the less precious you'll find yourself becoming. Sketching isn't about being an excellent draughtsman, it's about synthesising and processing your thoughts and ideas, as Jason Santa Maria summarises nicely in his article [Pretty Sketchy](https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://jasonsantamaria.com/articles/pretty-sketchy/) [<https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://jasonsantamaria.com/articles/pretty-sketchy/>]:

Sketchbooks are not about being a good artist, they're about being a good thinker.

Jason Santa Maria

The sketchbook and pen should become your trusted tools in your task to constantly survey the world around you. As Paul Smith says, [You Can Find Inspiration in Anything](https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0500284458/standardista-21) [https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0500284458/standardista-21]; close the lid, look beyond the computer; there's a whole world of inspiration out there.

Learn to love old dusty buildings

So, how do you learn? How do you push beyond the predictable world pre-filtered by Mr Google? The answer lies in establishing a habit of exploring the wonderful worlds of museums and libraries, dusty old buildings that repay repeated visits.

Once the primary repositories of thought and endless sources of inspiration, these institutions are now often passed over for the quick fix of a Google search or Wikipedia by you, the designer, chained to a desk and manacled to a MacBook. Whilst others might frown, we urge you to get away from your desk and take an eye-opening stroll through the knowledge-filled corridors of yore (and don't forget to bring your sketchbook).

Here you'll find ideas aplenty, ideas that will set you apart from your peers, who remain ever-reliant on the same old digital sources.

The idea generation toolbox

Now that we've established the importance of getting the process and the context right, it's time to meet the idea generation toolbox: a series of tools and techniques that can be applied singularly or in combination to solve the perennial problem of the blank canvas.

The clean sheet of paper, numbing in its emptiness, can prove an insurmountable barrier to many a project, but the route beyond it involves just a few, well-considered steps. The route to a good idea lies in widening your pool of inspiration at the project outset. Let go and generate ideas quickly; it's critical to diverge before you converge – but how do we do this and what exactly do we mean by this?

The temptation is to pull something out of your well-worn box of tricks, something that you know from experience will do the job. We urge you, however, not to fall prey

to this desire. You can do better; better still, a few of you putting your minds together can do a lot better. By avoiding the path of least resistance, you can create something extraordinary.

Culturally, we value logical, linear thinking. Since the days of Plato and Aristotle, critical thinking, deduction and the pursuit of truth have been rewarded. To generate creative ideas, however, we need to start thinking sideways, making connections that don't necessarily follow logically. **Lateral thinking** [<https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://www.edwdebono.com/debono/lateral.html>], a phrase coined by Edward de Bono in 1967, aptly describes this very process:

With logic you start out with certain ingredients, just as in playing chess you start out with given pieces – lateral thinking is concerned not with playing with the existing pieces but with seeking to change those very pieces.

Edward de Bono

One of the easiest ways to start thinking laterally is to start with a **mind map** [https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/mind_map], a perfect tool for widening the scope of a project beyond the predictable and an ideal one for getting the context right for discovery.

Making connections

Mind maps can be used to generate, visualise and structure ideas. Arranged intuitively and classified around groupings, mind maps allow chance connections to be drawn across related groups of information, and are perfect for exposing alogical associations and unexpected relationships.

Get a number of people together in a room, equipped with the Sharpie and Flip Chart Combo®. Give yourself a limited amount of time – half an hour should prove more than enough – and you'll be surprised at the results a few well-chosen people can generate in a very short space of time. The key is to work fast, diverge and not inhibit thinking.

We've been embracing Tony Buzan's methods in our teaching for over a decade. His ideas on the power of **radiant thinking** [<https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://www.world-trans.org/essay/radiantthink.html>] and how this can be applied to mind maps, uncover the real power which lies in the human brain's ability to spot connections across a mapped out body of diverse knowledge.

Frank Chimero wrote about this recently in **How to Have an Idea** [<https://web.archive.org/>

[web/20231004025641/http://www.frankchimero.com/idea/](https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://www.frankchimero.com/idea/)], which beautifully illustrates Mr Buzan's theories, articulating the importance of the brain's ability to make abstract connections, finding unexpected pairings when a concept is mapped out on paper.

Once a topic is surveyed and a rich set of stimuli articulated, the next stage is to draw connections, pulling from opposite sides of the mind map. It's at this point, when defining alogical connections, that the truly interesting and unexpected ideas are often uncovered.

The curve ball

If you've followed our instructions so far, all being well, you should have a number of ideas. Good news: we have one last technique to throw into the mix. We like to call it 'the curve ball', that last minute 'something' that forces you to rethink and encourages you to address a problem from a different direction.

There are a number of ways of throwing in a curve ball – a short, sharp, unexpected impetus – but we have a firm favourite we think you'll appreciate. Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies* [<https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://www.rtqe.net/ObliqueStrategies/>] – subtitled 'Over One Hundred Worthwhile Dilemmas' – are the perfect creative tool for throwing in a spot of unpredictability. As Eno and Schmidt put it:

The Oblique Strategies can be used as a pack (a set of possibilities being continuously reviewed in the mind) or by drawing a single card from the shuffled pack when a dilemma occurs in a working situation. In this case the card is trusted even if its appropriateness is quite unclear. They are not final, as new ideas will present themselves, and others will become self-evident.

Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt

Simply pick a card and apply the strategy to the problem at hand. The key here, as with de Bono's techniques, is to embrace randomness and provocation to inspire lateral creative approaches.

To assist this process, you might wish to consult one of the many virtual decks of *Oblique Strategies* [<https://web.archive.org/web/20231004025641/http://webstandardistas.com/obliquestrategies/>] online.

Wrapping up

To summarise, it's tempting to see the route to the fastest satisfactory conclusion in a

computer when, in reality, that's the last place you should start. The tools we've introduced, far from time-consuming, are hyper-efficient, always at hand and, if you factor them into your workflow, the key to unlocking the ideas that set the great designers apart.

We wish you well on your quest in search of the perfect idea, now armed with the knowledge that the quest begins on paper.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In addition to their role as The Standardistas, Christopher Murphy and Nicklas Persson teach interactive design at the University of Ulster at Belfast, where they have been active in promoting a web standards-based curriculum.

As tweed-clad duo The Standardistas, they write regularly on standards-based web design and the importance of improving web design education. Their first book, which extols the virtues of A Web Standardistas' Approach, has received widespread praise for its practical and hands-on *modus operandi*.

In addition to speaking regularly at conferences worldwide, they run workshops and masterclasses, teaching the principles of design, both on and off the screen.

You might wish to follow @standardistas on Twitter for a daily dose of design inspiration.

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