

Search for Challenges

Chapter 5 presented an overview of the four stages of creative thinking. In this chapter, we take a closer look at the first stage: searching for challenges. You'll learn that curiosity plays a central role in creativity and that most people begin life with considerable curiosity but lose it in childhood. Most important, you will learn six helpful techniques for *regaining* your curiosity and applying it in your everyday life.

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The question, however, is answerable. People fail to think of new ideas because they are mentally *reactive* rather than active. That is, they go through each day unimaginatively, oblivious of problems and issues until someone else solves them, unaware of opportunities until other people transform them into achievements. At that point, they spend a few moments envying the other person for her or his "luck" and then slip back into their daily routine, never realizing that, as Robert P. Crawford observed, "Luck is often simply a sensing of an opportunity—an opportunity that is there for all of us to see."

It is one thing to possess thinking skills and quite another to use them in everyday situations. By the end of this course, you will undoubtedly have mastered the various skills of creative and critical thinking. Yet that mastery will be meaningless if you have not also developed the desire to use those skills and a heightened sensitivity to the challenges and opportunities that surround you. This chapter assists you in this development.

by taxing the rich and funding “entitlement” programs for the poor. The clear implication is that the people receiving the benefit have a *right* to it. Opponents of such “redistribution” point to an argument made by American economist Henry over 60 years ago in his book *Economics in One Lesson*. He argued that though government should “create and enforce a framework of law that prohibits force and fraud,” it should never attempt to redistribute wealth because, as he demonstrates, such actions make matters worse. Research this issue and decide whether government redistribution of wealth is a sound idea. Be prepared to demonstrate your understanding of both sides.

- 5.6. The revolution in communications technology has changed the way people conduct both the personal and business relationships. For countless centuries, people communicated through face-to-face conversation. The philosopher Montaigne described that activity as “the most fruitful and natural exercise for our mind.” But over the last century, radio and TV, computers, cell phones, iPods, and iPads have greatly diminished it. Many people spend considerably more time texting and tweeting than in conversing and when they do find time to talk, it is usually over the phone. Is the decline of face-to-face conversation having any harmful effects on relationships? If so, are those effects more than compensated by the convenience of other forms of communication? Research these questions and decide. (A research tip for students under age 30: As part of your research, talk to some people over age 60.)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF CURIOSITY

Curiosity, useful in every stage of thinking, is indispensable in the first stage—searching for challenges. Curiosity is not a quality reserved for the gifted few; virtually every child is boundlessly curious. A researcher once recorded all the *why* questions asked by a child slightly under five years of age over a four-day period.

He also took note of which questions the mother answered and which, when unanswered, the child repeated. In all, forty *why* questions were recorded.

In some cases, the child's curiosity was aroused by the mother's direction to do something. For example, when the child was told to put her toys away or smooth out the throw rug or to hurry when she was moving too slowly, she asked *why*?

But in many cases, the little girl's curiosity burst forth without prompting. Here are some examples of the subjects that led her to ask "Why, Mother?"

1. A footstool
2. A bed
3. Eating cookies
4. An apron
5. Eyebrows
6. A watering pot
7. Orange juice
8. A bird on the windowsill
9. The mother's hair style
10. How to put on a bathrobe
11. Things purchased in the store
12. The proper way to sit in a chair
13. Baking utensils
14. Opening a window
15. Losing games graciously

In a number of cases, the mother's answer to one *why* question prompted the girl to ask another.

Some of the questions, of course, were no doubt asked simply to get her mother's attention. But judging from both the content of the question and the child's expression when asking it, the researcher concluded that 13 of the 40 questions were genuine expressions of curiosity. Considering that the list contained only *why* questions, and omitted *how*, *where*, *who*, and *when* questions (which also express curiosity), it is clear how marvelous a child's curiosity is.

HOW CURIOSITY IS LOST

Unfortunately, many children who at age four bombarded their parents with questions have lost their curiosity by age 18. How this happens is clear enough, at least in broad overview. Their parents grow weary of answering and begin to discourage questions. “Don’t ask so many questions,” they scold. And they warn, “Curiosity killed the cat.” Then the children enter school and find the teacher has little time to answer. There are too many other boys and girls in the room, the schedule must be followed and the material covered, and time is short.

Nor are parents and teachers the only agents suppressing curiosity. The various media contribute to the problem. Most television programming aims to entertain the audience rather than inform them or explore complex issues with them, thereby fostering a passive spectator mentality. (Curiosity is, by definition, an *active* response to life.)

The publishing industry seldom serves curiosity much better. Popular magazines stimulate morbid curiosity about intimate details of celebrities’ lives rather than healthy curiosity about the challenges of life. And book publishers tend to be more interested in books that entertain rather than stimulate thought. Diet and bodybuilding books are marketed with an enthusiasm that used to be reserved for literary classics. Even so-called self-improvement books, which might be expected to emphasize developing important qualities of mind, frequently offer little more than advice on dressing well or playing office politics or inflicting oneself on others.

Thus, the suppression of curiosity begins in childhood and continues indefinitely. The result is that most people lose the habit of raising meaningful questions about the world around them.

REGAINING YOUR CURIOSITY

At first thought, it may seem impossible to regain your childhood curiosity. Yet it is possible. Many people have done so. The first step is to realize that lack of interest and the tendency to take everything for granted are not natural, but acquired, characteristics; in other words, that lack of curiosity is a bad habit that can be broken.

A number of years ago, as a young industrial engineer, I had the privilege of working for a man who realized this and shared his realization with his subordinates. The first day I arrived on the job, this man, the chief industrial engineer, gave me these instructions: “For the next week I want you to do nothing but walk around the plant (a large mail-order company), question everything you see, and keep a record of your questions. Screen nothing out; record even the silliest and most obvious questions. At the end of each day I’d like to meet with you for half an hour and have you share those questions with me.” At first I thought the direction strange. “What good can come from this?” I wondered. But I obeyed. I walked through the various departments—shipping and receiving, accounting, merchandising, order filling—and I wrote down my questions.

As the week passed, my list grew, and each day’s conversation with the chief engineer increased my understanding of my assignment. He wanted me (and every

other new engineer) to develop a special work style: to see things with heightened curiosity as if through a child's eyes, so that I might think more effectively about what I saw. "What is being done in this operation? Is it all necessary? If so, in what other ways might it be done? Are any of those ways simpler, quicker, safer, more economical? Who is doing it? Could a less highly paid employee do it? How might the work of several people be reduced to the work of one? Is it done at the right time, in the best place, with the most appropriate materials and equipment?" The four years I spent as an engineer were filled with such questions—and the answers saved the company tens of thousands of dollars. Yet they all proceeded from that first strange lesson in regaining my curiosity.

Anyone can regain his or her curiosity in much the same way that atrophied muscles can be rebuilt—by appropriate exercise. In the case of curiosity, the payoff is not merely in personal satisfaction but also in increased career effectiveness. A curious person is able to understand and solve many of life's problems before others have moved beyond grumbling about them.

SIX HELPFUL TECHNIQUES

Fortunately, it isn't necessary to pretend you are a child again and go about asking a child's kind of questions. (If you were to try it, your friends would probably report you to the campus psychologist.) Nor is it necessary to adopt an industrial engineer's approach; though this approach works well in the right context, it might not fit your situation. There is a better approach, which fits a wide variety of situations. It includes six specific techniques.

1. Be observant.
2. Look for the imperfections in things.
3. Note your own and others' dissatisfactions.
4. Search for causes.
5. Be sensitive to implications.
6. Recognize the opportunity in controversy.

Be Observant

Some people are oblivious of what is going on around them. They are so involved in their own internal reverie that they miss much of what is happening. Subtle hints are wasted on them; they never really learn much from experience. How can they? They aren't really in touch with the external world.

Even if you are not such a person, chances are your powers of observation can stand improvement. Here's a little test to help you decide how observant you are.

1. Does your instructor wear a wedding band?
2. What color are your mother's eyes?
3. How many gas stations are there in your hometown (or neighborhood)?

4. How many steps are there on your front porch at home (or on the stairway to your apartment)?
5. How many churches are there in your hometown (or neighborhood)? What denominations are they?
6. Are there any trees in your best friend's yard? If so, how many? Are there any flowers? If so, what kind?
7. What color are the walls in your old high school hangout?
8. Can you describe your high school's band uniforms in detail? Can you describe the athletic uniforms (any sport)?

Most people are surprised at how little they know about supposedly familiar people, places, and things. You've probably heard the stories about people who have lived in a city or town all their lives, yet can't give directions to a stranger. The reason is that they travel the same route over and over in a daze, automatically, like robots.

Begin looking at and listening to people, places, and things more closely. Try to pick up details you'd ordinarily miss. See how people behave. For example, next time you are in the cafeteria or dining hall, watch people's actions. Note how many enter alone. Compare the way those alone and those with others behave. How at ease do those alone seem? Do they seem more or less relaxed? Do they seem nervous as they look for a table? What clues do they give about their feelings?

When you are sitting in a group of people discussing something, note the mannerisms of the group. What speech patterns are repeated? How do they look at one another? Do certain people tend to dominate? If so, in what ways? How does their behavior affect the others?

What clues do you get from people you pass in the hall (students, professors, administrators) about their states of mind? How courteous are people to one another? Do people look and speak differently to those they especially like? What manner betrays their attitude?

What excuses do people give for their behavior? How many of your friends accept responsibility as easily as they give it to others? When your friends go to parties, do their personalities seem to change in any way? Do they behave very differently from when they are in the company of professors? What are your friends' prejudices? How do they reveal them (other than by telling you directly)?

The types of observations you can make about people could be extended indefinitely. But remember, too, not just to be observant about other people. Observe yourself as well: the way you act and the broad or subtle clues you give about your attitudes and values.

Look for the Imperfections in Things

This advice will seem at first to contradict what most parents teach their children. "Don't expect things to be perfect," they say. "Learn to accept things as they are and be happy they aren't worse." But there is no real contradiction. Seeking imperfections does not mean being chronically dissatisfied, a complainer about life. It means realizing where improvements can be made.

Research suggests that productive thinkers and creative people have a keen sense of imperfection and that this sense is one of the sources of their achievement. They recognize that all ideas, systems, processes, concepts, and tools are inventions and therefore open to improvement.²

In some cases, creative people go out of their way to find imperfections. Walter Chrysler, for example, the mechanical genius who founded Chrysler Corporation, was just a young railroad mechanic on a meager salary when he saved enough money to buy a Pierce Arrow automobile. It cost \$5,000, at that time a huge sum of money. His purpose was not to drive around and play the big shot but to take the car apart bolt by bolt—to see what parts and assembly design he could improve.³

Look around you at any manufactured object: the classroom blackboard and desks, your bed, your clothes, your car, the library's cataloging system, the rules governing your favorite sport, our democratic system of government. All of these in their present form evolved from earlier inventions. And every step in their evolution was an attempt to overcome imperfection. Consider the broad development of two inventions.

Artificial Lighting

The torch
The candle
The oil lamp
The electric lamp
The battery-powered lamp
The fluorescent lamp
The flashlight

Writing Implements

The hammer and chisel
The stylus
The quill pen
The fountain pen
The ballpoint pen
The felt-tip pen
The hard-point flowing pen

More important than the evolution to the present is evolution beyond the present. Everything is still imperfect. There is literally no need to curse the darkness: You can invent a new kind of light.

Note Your Own and Others' Dissatisfactions

Each day brings its share of disappointments and frustrations. There's no way to avoid them. But there is a way to capitalize on them. The common responses to such experiences, of course, are anger, resentment, and anxiety. Though these responses are understandable, many people wallow in them, letting dissatisfaction ruin their days.

Starting today, take note of the dissatisfactions you feel, like your resentment when your professors' sneak quizzes catch you unaware or when your younger sister orders you around to make herself look important. Notice, too, your irritation when your car refuses to start at the most inopportune moment and your impatience at having to stand in line at the supermarket. Also, when you converse with other people, listen carefully for their expressions of dissatisfaction, even the minor ones that are mentioned only briefly in passing.

Instead of surrendering yourself to your own feelings of dissatisfaction or plunging into other people's laments, pause and remind yourself that viewed positively, every dissatisfaction is a signal that some need is not being met. In other words, regard the situation not merely as a nuisance but also as a challenge to your ingenuity, and consider how the situation can best be improved.

A good example of how dissatisfaction can be used to produce creative ideas is consumer activist Ralph Nader's proposal for a new measure of the state of the economy. Disturbed over the fact that the gross national product focuses on things (notably production) instead of on people, Nader proposed recording how many people are being fed rather than how much food is being produced, and how many people have shelter rather than how many houses are being constructed.⁴

Search for Causes

The people who make breakthroughs and achieve insights are those who wonder. And their wondering extends to the *causes* of things: how they got to be the way they are and how they work.

For example, it was known for years that the disease known as *anthrax* remained in the soil indefinitely. However, that process was a puzzle to scientists. Then one day, while visiting a farm, Louis Pasteur's curiosity was aroused. He observed that one patch of soil was a different color than the soil around it. When he asked the farmer about it, the farmer explained that he had buried some sick sheep there the previous year. Pasteur wondered why that should make a difference. So he examined the soil more closely, noticed worm castings, and theorized that worms bored deep into the earth and carried the anthrax spores up with them. His later laboratory experiments proved him right.⁵

Similarly, diabetes might still be a mystery if it weren't for the curiosity of a research assistant engaged in unrelated research. When he noticed flies gathering around the urine of one dog used in an experiment, he wondered what in that dog's urine would attract flies. His search for the cause ultimately led to the understanding and control of diabetes.⁶

The key to searching for causes is to be alert to any significant situation or event you cannot explain satisfactorily. One especially good time to practice this alertness is while reading the news or watching it on television. For example, if you read the report of the man who killed his wife in a dispute over a penny on Valentine's Day, your curiosity would be aroused. (Legally separated, they were meeting to discuss their property division. She refused to give him a valuable Indian-head penny, and he shot her to death.)⁷ "What makes a person lose his or her sense of priorities?" you might wonder and thus identify a challenging problem about human behavior. (For more information on causation, turn back to Chapter 2.)

Be Sensitive to Implications

As a child you probably enjoyed throwing pebbles in a still pond and watching the ripples reach out farther and farther until they touched the shore. Through those ripples, the tiniest pebble exerts an influence out of all proportion to its size. So it is with ideas. Every discovery, every invention, every new perspective or interpretation makes an impact whose extent is seldom fully realized at first.

Good thinkers usually recognize that impact before others because they are sensitive to implications. Several examples will illustrate this sensitivity.

In August 1981, the Kinsey Institute released a study of homosexuality that challenged the traditional theories about its cause. The researchers concluded that homosexuality seemed to derive from a deep-seated predisposition that may be biological.⁸ The report immediately stirred controversy, so no careful thinker would leap to the conclusion that it was the final word in the matter. Yet a person sensitive to implications would quickly realize that if the report were to be proved correct—if homosexuality is determined by biology—homosexuality couldn't fairly be considered immoral behavior because homosexuals have little or no choice in the matter.

Some years ago, research suggested that in about one-third of all cases, shyness is caused by a genetic predisposition rather than by environmental factors, and that in those cases it is especially difficult to overcome.⁹ The person sensitive to implications would consider how shyness affects performance and immediately think of school and career. That would raise, among other questions, the question of whether it is fair to judge students on class participation and whether career guidance should be offered at much earlier ages than at present.

At about the same time, another study demonstrated that some people have a genetic predisposition to commit crimes and that measurements of brain waves, heart rates, and the skin's electrical properties can predict the onset of criminal behavior as early as 10 years in advance. The study also made clear that it is possible to overcome such a predisposition and avoid criminal behavior.¹⁰ One serious implication was immediately recognized by the legal profession: whether testing for evidence of criminal tendencies (in the schools, for example) would constitute a violation of the test subjects' rights.

One final example: Several decades ago, the Georgia Supreme Court decided that a convicted murderer engaging in a hunger strike while in prison had a legal right to starve himself to death.¹¹ One interesting, if subtle, implication of this decision concerns the question of suicide. Traditionally, suicide has been considered a crime. (Technically, a person attempting suicide and failing can be legally charged for the attempt.) The Georgia decision implied that one has a right to take one's own life, thereby challenging the tradition. Following that court ruling, euthanasia activist Dr. Jack Kevorkian, also known as "Dr. Death," became famous (and was successfully prosecuted) for assisting people to commit suicide.

Recognize the Opportunity in Controversy

Many people do little more than rant and rave when a controversial issue is mentioned, rambling on about the wisdom of their side and damning those who disagree. They miss the real opportunity in controversy: the opportunity to be adventurous, explore new perspectives, and enrich their understanding.

What, after all, is a controversial issue? It is a matter about which informed people disagree—not just any people, but *informed* people. If such people disagree, there must be some basis for disagreement. Either the facts are open to more than a single interpretation, or there are two or more competing values, each making a persuasive demand for endorsement.

Therefore, *it is probable that neither side in a controversy possesses the total truth, that each side has a part of it.* Is each side 50 percent right, or is the ratio 51:49,

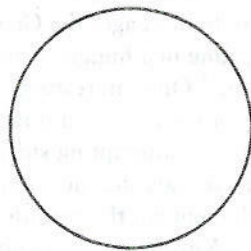
60:40, or perhaps 99:1? What does the latest evidence suggest? Have I perhaps been mistaken in my views? In these questions lie the challenge and the opportunity.

Mistakes, after all, are common, even about issues regarded as settled once and for all. For example, until recently, most scientists agreed that the age of the universe is 20 million years. The available data supported that view, and the matter was considered closed. Then a team of astronomers produced new data that suggested that the universe is really closer to 10 billion years old.¹² The controversy was alive again—and with it the adventure.



WARM-UP EXERCISES

- 6.1. Most high school athletic teams have rather predictable, uncreative, and sometimes offensive names: Bulldogs, Indians, Warriors, and so on. Think of as many creative names as you can for high school teams, names you have never heard used before. Be sure to guard against setting unconscious restrictions on your thinking and to resist the temptation to settle for too few ideas.
- 6.2. List as many ideas as you can for new products or services—that is, products or services that do not now exist but for which there is a need.
- 6.3. Divide the circle below into as many parts as you can, using four straight lines.



APPLICATIONS

- 6.1. Spend some time in the dining hall, snack bar, or some other place where people congregate, and listen carefully to their conversations. (Do the same with conversations you are participating in and with conversations you hear on the radio or see on television.) Note all the things people complain about, including procedures, policies, other people's actions, tools, and machines (cars, washing machines, and so on); note, too, the nature of their complaints. Keep a record of your findings.
- 6.2. Visit a general department store (Wal-Mart, for example) and browse in every department, looking for items whose design could be improved. Make a list of those items. Add to that list any items, from a shoehorn to a toaster, whose imperfections you have had personal experience with.

- 6.3.** Think of as many experiences as you can that caused you to be dissatisfied or frustrated, experiences that posed a challenge to your ingenuity but that you were too irritated to see. Describe the experiences and state the challenges you now see.

Note: To make seeking out challenges a habit you use every day, continue to do Applications 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3 each day for the rest of the term, in addition to your other assignments. Set aside a special notebook for this use, and make your daily entries in journal fashion. (Consult your instructor for special format directions.)

- 6.4.** In each of the following situations, the causes of the behavior are not self-evident. Speculate about those causes, first listing as many possible explanations as you can think of and then deciding which explanation seems most reasonable in each case. Explain your choices.
- Many athletes who use anabolic steroids reportedly do so with full realization that such use may result in serious physical injury and even death.
 - Many people who have decided their parents' Jewish, Protestant, or Catholic faith is irrelevant to this age of science and technology have become devotees of belief systems that science long ago rejected as sheer superstition, systems such as astrology, tarot cards, and channeling (giving over one's body to beings from other spheres to receive enlightenment).
 - Three high school students doing research on shoplifting entered a large drugstore in an upper-middle-class neighborhood and, with the knowledge of the owner, walked up and down aisles, stuffing their pockets with large and small items: candy, magazines, watchbands, perfume, a hair dryer, and more. More than 100 shoppers were in the store, and at least 50 of them saw what was happening. Yet every one of the shoppers either walked away or turned his or her head.¹³
- 6.5.** Each of the following cases is (or could be viewed as) a controversy as defined in this chapter. Examine each carefully, decide whether you agree or disagree with the decision reached or action taken, and explain your view. In addition, identify any implications suggested by each case and any connections with other issues.
- Robert L. Race of Toddsville, New York, believed the state has no authority to require that everyone have a driver's license, so he turned in his license and publicly announced his intention to drive without it. In his view, driving is not a privilege but a right.¹⁴ Many would disagree with his view.
 - Anthony Broussard raped and murdered his girlfriend, then threw her body into a ravine. Later, before the crime was discovered by authorities, he bragged about it to friends and took some of them to the ravine to see the body. One friend, 16-year-old Kirk Rasmussen, kicked leaves over the body. After the crime

was discovered and Broussard was arrested, Rasmussen was charged with being an accessory after the fact. He was found guilty and sentenced to three years in a reformatory.¹⁵ Many would argue that Rasmussen's sentence was excessive. Some would say he shouldn't even have been charged.

- 6.6. Many elected officials support the issuing of National Identity Cards to all U.S. citizens. They believe such cards would be better than credit cards or drivers' licenses and would be an effective way of establishing one's identity in flying, making purchases, and offering proof of citizenship. Opponents offer a number of arguments against such cards, including that they would be redundant and pave the way for invasions of privacy. Research this issue, consider the evidence, and explain your conclusion and the thinking that led you to it. Be sure to anticipate and respond to possible objections to your view.
- 6.7. Few would deny that labor unions have made a number of positive contributions to American society. For example, they have improved workplace safety, raised workers' wages and benefits, and ensured fairer handling of disputes. Some believe that unions still have a vital role to play in maintaining those conditions. Others, however, believe that, especially in recent decades, labor unions have made it increasingly difficult for U.S. companies to compete in the world marketplace. People who hold this view believe that unions should be abolished or significantly altered in their structure and role. Research this issue, consider the various arguments, and decide which view is more reasonable. Then explain your conclusion and the thinking that led you to it, being sure to anticipate and respond to possible objections to your view.
- 6.8. Many Americans of every political persuasion are concerned by a number of events in recent years. For example, the U.S. Senate ignoring its obligation to create an annual budget for several years, Congress first urging banks to make risky loans and then blaming banks for the resulting fiscal crisis, the continuing effort to solve the debt problem by increasing spending, and the passing of legislation, notably the Affordable Care Act without first reading it. Those who are concerned by such examples consider them proof of declining leadership among government officials. Do you agree with their conclusion? If so, what action do you believe will solve the problem. Be sure to anticipate and answer likely objections to your ideas.
- 6.9. Fingerprints are not the only unique feature of an individual. So are iris patterns, heart rhythms, and people's gait. The science of biometrics is making it possible to use all these unique features as a way of tracking people, for example terrorists, or in finding missing people. Many applaud this development and cite numerous positive uses of the technology. Others, however, fear it will be used in ways that violate the right to privacy. Is such fear justified? Research the issue and decide.