

# ALL THE DIFFERENT YOU



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# All The Different Yous

50 simple techniques for getting creative inspiration on tap

## Introduction

All creative people have experienced them. The times when the inspiration is simply not flowing and you cannot see the way ahead with a creative project.

It might be design, film, music, literature, art, cooking, or anything else that requires imagination as its primary ingredient. But the problem is the same one across all these creative disciplines.

Many of the solutions are also common, or relevant, to numerous different fields of work. You just need to adapt them to your own specific context.

The saying goes that there is no such thing as bad weather, only unprepared hikers. Well, similarly, there is no such thing as a bad art project or creative idea, only an unfocused or restless artist who temporarily lacks the creative vision to complete the work.

We all suffer from confirmation bias to some degree and this type of bias is the enemy of creativity and originality. Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favour and recall information in a way that confirms or support's one's prior beliefs or values. In creative fields, confirmation bias often leads to closed-mindedness and a 'karaoke culture' of uninspired copying. This is a situation in which following expectations and tradition laid out by other people is more important than actually developing our own creative tools and methods just like our forebears did. It's everywhere. Indeed, you may spot confirmation bias lurking somewhere in most creative blocks you encounter.

This short guide aims to be a quick reference for those looking to smash the creative blocks and move forward. The appearance of the 'creative block' is indeed a very real problem. But it's a problem that should be positively embraced, like getting out of bed on a cold, dark morning. We must retrain ourselves to enjoy it when we first notice the block moving towards us, and then – using the following techniques – squeeze the block so tight that it shatters and we can move forward unimpeded and create something wonderful!

## The different yous

The title given to this guide reflects the fact that creativity is about making contact not just with other people, such as those in our audience, but also with other versions of ourselves. A version that plays trumpet instead of violin. A version born in Germany instead of Australia. A version born in 1780 instead of 1980. A future version living in Cornwall in the year 2055. We can 'contact' these other versions of ourselves by conducting what philosophers call thought experiments to imagine other possible worlds.

If we can use our imagination and these particular techniques to consider how all these other potential versions of ourselves might approach our particular creative project in the 'parallel universes' they inhabit, then we can vastly increase the number of creative options that are open to us right in front of our eyes but which, due to a lack of imagination, we never even recognized existed before. We need only to widen the scope of who we think we are, to include all these other versions of ourselves! All these 'different yous'.

Many different lateral thinking techniques involving role-playing have been used to stimulate creative and solve problems over the decades. Edward de Bono's 'Six Thinking Hats' is one of the most famous, yet there are certainly more than six different yous. There are thousands out there in parallel universes.

All you need to decide is which different yous you want to get in touch with for your particular project scenario. Which of the different yous are likely to help the most? Make a shortlist of the ones you want to call on to help you in your creative project.

Some are useful for every creative decision in every single project you could conceivably be working on, but they all have their time and place!

So here are some tried and tested techniques for getting in touch with many of the different yous! Some techniques here are highly amusing or even extreme, so proceed with some caution at first. For most artists the work itself is always more important than a little bit of short-term discomfort or temporary negative issues related to a small number of the more outlandish techniques.

## **Technique #1 – Going for a really long walk**

Have you ever noticed how getting away from your workspace, even just for five minutes, helps you to re-engage with the task when you return? Temporarily putting the project out of your mind can be very valuable indeed. The celebrated English Lake District poet William Wordsworth walked thousands of miles, finding it to be a great source of creative inspiration. Indeed, a long walk in a natural environment such as in a forest, up a mountain or by a river is widely reported to work the best, but even going to the gym or getting some other form of physical exercise usually helps. This surely has a lot to do with our subconscious, and how it has been mixed up a bit with new stimuli. After our walk or our work-out, we find our subconscious has been setting a new scene inside our heads. Watching a compelling film works in a similar way.

The different you: One with tired muscles but a refreshed mind!

## **Technique #2 – What would Dave do?**

Of course, Dave can be a friend or anyone you know. This technique is all about imagining someone else and their perspective. It's like phoning a friend. Of course, you can actually phone a friend, or simply just imagine what they might do. Intellectual empathy is the term given to imagining one's self in the place of another in order to understand the person. But in this case we are doing it in order to understand the creative possibilities that lay ahead of us based on the perspectives, either real or imagined, held by other people.

The different you: You as Dave!

## **Technique #3 – If Dave had this problem, what advice would you give?**

Assuming Dave is a friend you genuinely want to help, and he is the one working on your project and facing these very same difficulties, what would you say to him? Hopefully you can also use the same advice for yourself. Stop what you are doing and close your eyes for a moment. Think deeply about Dave and his creative predicament. Try to channel feelings of empathy and human warmth for a good friend and indeed for all of humanity. Visualize yourself sincerely offering your best ideas to motivate and encourage Dave to take a step closer to completing his important creative project. Make a note of your advice and try it out yourself.

The different you: You as Dave's personal advisor.

## **Technique #4 – What would you do if you were on your deathbed?**

There are certain times in life when we can separate the important from the trivial much more easily. Imagine seeing your creative problem from the perspective of your future self with only a few days left to live on this planet.

The different you: The you at the very end of life, hopefully with a heightened sense of what is really vital.

## **Technique #5 – Pick a card, any card**

Try using cryptic or poetic lateral thinking prompt cards. Perhaps the most famous set of cards is the Oblique Strategies published by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt. Typically, each card in a creative prompt collection has a written instruction on it, although images such as cartoons can also be used with success. Written examples from the Oblique Strategies include ‘abandon normal instruments’, ‘emphasize differences’ and ‘give way to your worst impulse’. These ‘instructions’ can vary widely from specific and easily-implemented suggestions to allegorical phrases which are sufficiently vague enough for every person to understand something completely different from the same ‘instruction’. It all depends on you and your context. Pick a card at random, read the sentence or look at the image, and use it in any way you see fit to move forward with your project. You can even make a set of such cards yourself. The more cards, the better.

The different you: The one following unusual creative instructions.

## **Technique #6 – Get completely bladdered**

The use of alcohol tends to increase enthusiasm, at least in the short-term, and has therefore been used as a source of inspiration for centuries. Wrestle with John Barleycorn and see what happens! If you don’t like alcohol or are opposed to it, consider a safe, legal, herbal alternative. Chamomile tea is a great way to relax before sleep and users often report having vivid and inspiring dreams.

The different you: The you that has been thrown in some bizarre direction by John Barleycorn (or one of his pals)!

## **Technique #7 – Follow the advice of the dice**

The 1971 novel *The Dice Man* tells the story of a psychiatrist who bases his daily decisions on the rolling of a die. He first writes down six options, one for each face of the die. Then he rolls. Then he must follow the option based on which side of the die is facing up. Note that it would be irresponsible of us not to point out the importance of following the law when coming up with your six options. It may at first appear as if we are being guided by the wind but in actual fact we remain entirely in control of the six options we list before rolling.

It is fascinating to reflect on our emotions after rolling, particularly when our emotions are incredibly positive, as though the die chose the best option for us! In ancient Greece, the Stoics believed that free will was merely the feeling we have when our desires coincide with what has been determined for us.

The different you: The incredibly reckless version of you!

## **Technique #8 – Create a routine or schedule and follow it**

Don't just wait for inspiration to arrive at the place in which you are working. You must put in place guidelines that actively increase the chances of you finding it. If you want to catch fish, you need to be there on the side of the canal, with a rod and a line in your hand, not still lying in bed just thinking about the taste of the fish. Some people work better at different times of the day. Some folk get their best work done before lunch time, whereas others find the later in the day, the better. Find what works best for you and accept that like everyone else you will be bored at times and cross out or delete a lot of work before being satisfied. It's all part of the process.

The different you: The highly-disciplined version.

## **Technique #9 – Use a notebook, and take it everywhere with you**

So many good ideas are lost simply because we forget to write them down! Even if they don't seem relevant now it's best if you don't cross them out but instead keep them for a later date. A seemingly throwaway comment or note today might take on new resonance next week, next month or next year. Leave Post-it notes all over your workspace. Make lists, even if they make little sense to anyone else or even to yourself! When on the move, record audio on your phone when you have a brainwave.

The different you: The version that has lots and lots of old ideas to draw on.

## **Technique #10 – Rearrange your workspace**

A tidy room makes for a tidy mind, and a newly-rearranged workspace makes for newly-arranged creative synapses in the brain. Re-order the external and you may very well find that the internal has been re-ordered in a beneficial way too.

The different you: The version of you that is into inner feng shui!

## **Technique #11 – Play like a child**

Get into a childlike mode of playing, without worrying too much about analysis, goals or targets. If you have young children then this is easy as you can join in with their own activities. Otherwise, channel a kindergarten version of yourself in order to reconnect with youthful enthusiasm and enjoyment for an hour or two. Play with a bouncing ball or complete a jigsaw puzzle. Then get back to work!

The different you: The version that is barely out of nappies!

## **Technique #12 – Just do the absolute minimum to finish it**

Is it ready yet? Maybe. Perhaps it is indeed already finished! Is it acceptable in its current form? Possibly. The work you do is of an extremely high quality, so people should already be enthused about what you have created.

The different you: The ultra-arrogant you with the creative Midas touch!

## **Technique #13 – Break it down into smaller parts**

Sometimes the creative task seems just too large to deal with. We can make it more manageable by listing the creative steps required and then work on each one in turn instead of staring up at the immensity of the project.

The different you: The version that is less overwhelmed by the task ahead!

## **Technique #14 – Turn the distractions off**

There are many different types of distractions. It might be noise where you work. It might be a negative voice in your head telling you that you will never finish the project or that it doesn't matter anyway. It might be your phone or internet use as you check notifications every two minutes. Switch them all off!

The different you: The version of you in a tranquil, unbothered state.

## **Technique #15 – The yes sayers!**

Many of you will have seen the film Yes Man starring Jim Carrey. There is undoubtedly an important creative lesson to be learnt from unbridled positivity of the protagonist. Just go along with whatever the first idea is that pops into your head. Just say yes to everything and see where it leads you. Look in the mirror and say 'yes' to yourself repeatedly. You can always backtrack on things later, but leave the 'wiser', critical voices to one side for at least one or two days.

The different you: Supremely positive, upbeat, and quite possibly naïve!

## **Technique #16 – Reduce the number or scope of your tools**

As Can's bass player and producer Holger Czukay once said, 'restriction is the great mother of inventive performance'. So cut down the number of creative options open to you. If you're an artist, choose just three colours to work with, or two brushes. If you're a guitar player, take three of the six strings off your instrument, or tune all your strings to the same note! Or write a song that only requires two chords. The 'reduced' options are almost endless.

The different you: Ultra-minimalist and creatively streamlined.

## **Technique #17 – Channel the Country X version of you**

How would you approach this creative problem if you were German? Or Nigerian? Yes, this may be based on cultural stereotypes, but trying to think through the lens of a foreign culture may open up some new creative approaches.

The different you: The German or Nigerian or Country X version.



## **Technique #18 – Channel the city / desert / village version of you**

This is similar and related to Technique #17. If you live in a city, channel the version of you that lives in a desert or a small village on the coast or up in the mountains. How would that changed environment change your creative perception?

The different you: The city or desert or village version.

## **Technique #19 – Channel the 1780 version of you**

Similar to Techniques #17 and #18. Imagine you were born in 1780. How might you have approached your creative project back then? What creative tools would have been available? Who would the work have been for? Which prevailing ideas may have helped to shape the creative work? How would the success of the project have been determined?

The different you: The version born over 200 years ago.

## **Technique #20 – Go on an extended holiday**

Similar to Technique #1, but more extreme. Put your tools down, turn your computer off, and head off somewhere for a week or two at minimum. Forget about the project completely. Come back afterwards and see it anew, afresh, as though you were seeing it for the first time.

The different you: The care-free you with no interest in deadlines.

## **Technique #21 – Go ultra-primitive and shun modern technology**

If you're a percussion player, only use pots and pans from your kitchen. If you're a painter, use only one colour and your hands, a quill or a straw. Use a candle instead of electricity for your workspace light source. Use the simplest, earthiest tools you can possibly use to get the job done.

The different you: The Luddite you.

## **Technique #22 – Re-write the rules**

Whatever the rules are governing your project, you need to re-write them from scratch. Rip up the rule book and start again. Indeed, in certain cases you may need to start the project again from the very beginning. Try to justify each element that helps determine the finished outcome. What is the title? How long in duration or large in size must the work be? What are the ‘ingredients’, what are the ‘tools’, and how can they best be used? What is the budget? When is the deadline? Where is it being made? Who has a say in this project? What, when, where, who, how and why? Don’t be shy!

The different you: The independent rebel!

## **Technique #23 – Use your dreams as inspiration**

Keep a pen and notepad next to your bed and write down your dreams. Keep a dream diary. Use your entries as inspiration.

The different you: The dreamer.

## **Technique #24 – Bird’s eye view**

Imagine you are having an out-of-body experience, looking down on the creative scene from above, like a bird hovering near the ceiling. How does this alter your impressions of what you ought to do next?

The different you: The detached version with wings!

## **Technique #25 – Sleep deprivation**

Most practitioners advise ample rest and sleep in order to create your best work. Most of the time this is good advice. But you can also find rich pickings at the other end of the spectrum too. Stay up all night, forget the project, tidy your room, do the washing, watch a film or listen to some music, and then re-engage with your creative project at dawn and see what develops.

The different you: The thoroughly knackered and possibly deranged version!

## **Technique #26 – Start with someone else’s artwork**

All great creative work is based to some degree on what has come before. Find a work in your field that you think is great. Record a new layer over it, paint over it, or cut the sentences up and re-arrange them to create a ‘second version’ or ‘remix’ of someone else’s work. Then go over it again a third or fourth time until nobody can see any link between the other person’s work and your own!

The different you: The well-meaning thief.

## **Technique #27 – Pretend that it’s finished even when it isn’t**

Delude yourself for a while. Imagine the creative work is finished and tell everyone it’s ready for release. Go out and celebrate in some way. Congratulate yourself. After a few days of gloating and enjoying this temporary denial of reality, apologize to others and explain it was just part of an experiment in seeking inspiration, and then get on with completing the work with a new feeling of humiliation and foolishness!

The different you: The humiliated liar - with a renewed sense of duty.

## **Technique #28 – Ask others for contributions for this stage of the work**

Get friends or colleagues to send over snippets, whether text, melody, fragments of painting, and incorporate them into your work before resuming without their assistance.

The different you: The well-meaning beggar.

## **Technique #29 – Study the atoms**

Zoom in to your work to a ‘molecular level’ and edit at that level. Look at it like an ant, not a human.

The different you: The scientist version with a microscope.

## **Technique #30 – Turn it the other way round**

Start from the back of your song or book, or make a ‘reversed’ version of your painting. Critics agree that ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’ is one of ‘The Beatles’ finest moments, with reversed recordings making it incredibly futuristic-sounding at the time and even today.

The different you: The back-to-front you.

## **Technique #31 – Free association and the cut-up**

Your conception of ‘you’ is just the tip of the iceberg of all the possible yous, with thousands of layers below our ordinary consciousness. Sometimes we need to do less conscious thinking rather than more. Open a notebook to an empty page and simply start writing with no quality control and as little conscious thought as possible. Keep going, letting the pen go wherever it wants, without questioning the meaning until much, much later.

Alternatively, open a book at a random page and point to a sentence with your eyes closed. Open your eyes, read it, and make notes about how it could possibly relate to your project and provide fuel with which to move forward. What has your subconscious offered up as part of this technique?

And finally, take a second sentence from a second book and try to relate or fit the two sentences together with each other, even using only parts of each sentence, such as the first half of the sentence from the first book and the second half from the sentence from the second book. David Bowie wrote many extraordinary sets of lyrics using this ‘cut-up’ technique in the 1970s.

The different you: The seemingly random you.

## **Technique #32 – A ‘wrong’ translation!**

Download an audio translation application and set it to be listening out for a specific foreign language when it records your voice. Speak about your creative problem in English, copy the foreign text the application produces and then translate it into English. Is it of any use? Alternatively, if you speak two languages well, choose the language that is not English and set the application to be listening for English words. Does the resulting text help you in some way? I once received ‘everyone knows that you know Winston Smith’ as an ‘English translation’ from Indonesian. Given that Winston Smith is the protagonist in George Orwell’s ‘1984’, this was a very artful ‘random’ sentence to be given.

The different you: The incorrectly translated but inspiring or amusing you.

### **Technique #33 – Double-dating!**

Stop putting this particular project on a pedestal. Start a new project and come back to this one later, or work on them both concurrently.

The different you: The two-timer!

### **Technique #34 – Fly blind!**

A bit like double-dating within just one project! Record over what you have without listening, paint blindfolded, edit a second version of your text without seeing where you are inserting your new work. Some of it may work wonderfully! Do the two universes connect in an interesting manner?

The different you: The version with half a mind in this world and half a mind in a different dimension entirely!

### **Technique #35 – Slow it down or speed it up or focus on just one part!**

Condense or extend, make faster or slower, larger or smaller, change the scale or the canvas size. Even allow yourself to focus in on one small part of what you have so far. This might be one chapter, one verse or one tiny portion of canvas. Disregard the surroundings and work exclusively on that portion.

The different you: The one living in a 'holy' part of the space-time continuum!

### **Technique #36 – Would you buy this thing?**

Imagine you are not the one making the creative work, but the one paying money to purchase it. What would you like to see done next on it?

The different you: The customer.

### **Technique #37 – Do something average and then improve on it**

Creative people are often terrified of doing any work that is not really high standard. And so the canvas remains blank. Actually, there is nothing wrong with doing something that you are not particularly enthusiastic about or proud of, but then editing it into something that you are enthusiastic about and proud of later. Stop being so self-indulgent and get to work! Refine it all later.

The different you: The version that is at least doing something!

## **Technique #38 – Bring the deadline forward**

As a student, how many times did you wait until the night before your deadline before feeling the urgency to even begin writing your essay? If you intended to get this project done by the end of next week, bring that deadline forward to the end of this week. Even if the end of this week happens to be tomorrow! Embrace the deadline. Embrace improvisation. Get on with it!

The different you: The panicked but alert version that has even less time than you originally anticipated.

## **Technique #39 – Meditate before every session**

Sometimes you are simply not in the right frame of mind to commence. Meditation can help, whether formal or informal. Consider thirty minutes or one hour of quiet, ego-less introspection before each creative session. If you are working in a team then have a short period of relaxed, argument-free, laid-back communication before beginning.

The different you: The really calm one.

## **Technique #40 – Focus on the pleasure of the process itself**

The avant-garde trumpet player Jon Hassell once said, 'I prefer to shoot the arrow and then paint the target around it.' Forget about the bull's eye at this stage and completely forget about the finished work for now. Think about how enjoyable it is to be in the pure magical act of creation with your tools.

The different you: The version that is having creative fun.

## **Technique #41 – Immerse yourself in other cultures**

To hell with the people who say you can only use ideas from your own culture and that borrowing from other cultures is somehow disrespectful. It is anything but. Culture is a huge, shared global compost heap and just as the traditional ideas from our own society may be used by others around the globe as inspiration, so too may we legitimately borrow ideas from other cultures and countries. Listen to some gamelan music from Java, study Japanese martial arts, try Tuvan throat singing. Find something that speaks to you and respectfully incorporate those ideas into your own worldview and work.

The different you: The wordly one.

## **Technique #42 – Stop thinking about what your customers want**

The opposite of Technique #36! Sometimes we focus too much on trying to please others with our work. Forget all that and make something that pleases you. Stop looking at other artists' work too. Focus on your own instead of comparing it with that of other people.

The different you: The self-respecting one.

## **Technique #43 – Look through some old photo albums**

The older photos, the better. See old images of yourself as a child and reflect. What would he or she want you to make? Can these photographs help you focus on what is important?

The different you: The philosophical one.

## **Technique #44 – Remind yourself how good you are**

Read one of your best reviews or re-engage with and appreciate your finest work to date. Know you can produce this level of quality again, and then some.

The different you: The positive one.

## **Technique #45 – Have a dance**

Have a quick dance! Simple as that. It doesn't matter who is watching, but let them join in if they want.

The different you: The energized, joyous version.

## **Technique #46 – Reward yourself**

Set a goal of finishing a certain amount of work today, and provide yourself with a reward if you complete it. It might be a bottle of wine or dinner at your favourite restaurant.

The different you: The bribed/motivated one.

### **Technique #47 – Get enough sleep**

Sleep enough for clarity of thought.

The different you: The healthy one.

### **Technique #48 – Describe your work using a different discipline**

Write a paragraph about your song, draw a quick painting or map of your novel, sing a song about your sculpture, and so on.

The different you: The one with multiple perspectives.

### **Technique #49 – Chat with a friend about it**

In Ancient Greece, Socrates used dialogue with others to tease out definitions and clarity and wisdom. Bounce ideas back and forth with a patient and open-minded friend, clarifying to your friend but also to yourself what you are doing and why. Verbalize what you are trying to achieve.

The different you: The one who can finally explain the creative work.

### **Technique #50 – Have a shower or a bath!**

Just as a tidy room can help achieve a tidy mind, so too can a clean body help the feeling of being rejuvenated and ready for serious work. Singing in the shower is a popular pastime, as the great acoustics, the private situation, the freedom from distraction and the warm water cascading down over you combine to put you in an expressive mood.

The different you: The fresh version!



## About the Author



Born in Ipswich, England in 1981 and studied Philosophy at King's College London. Creative Director of critically-acclaimed London-based band One More Grain, Co-founder of Gunung Bagging, the ultimate guide to the mountains and volcanoes of the Malay archipelago, tutor and curriculum designer in humanities and languages in Southeast Asia and the UK, and Director of Gunung.org, a leading training materials provider and consultancy on creative thinking, critical thinking, problem-solving and effective decision-making.

*“Quinn remains our best bet for a next-generation British cult figure likely to continue surprising us in 10, even 20, years...”*

**Stewart Lee in The Sunday Times, around 10, even 20, years ago**

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Cover photograph taken at Patung Seribu, a Buddhist temple on Bintan Island, Indonesia, by the author

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