

In Chapter Three of his book “Hot-Wiring Your Creative Process” Curt Cloninger examines four methods you can employ at various stages of the design process to get unstuck and bypass the mire of indecision, stagnation, and inertia. Here is the excerpt from this chapter.

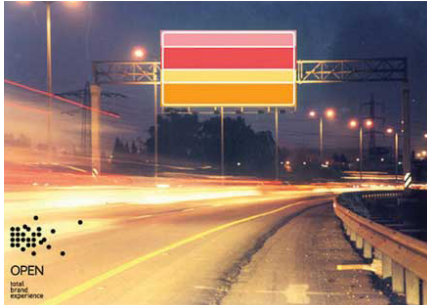
(http://www.digital-web.com/articles/four_ways_to_bypass_inertia)

Method One: Exploratory Sketching

Guidelines for Exploratory Sketching

How do you prepare your mind for this type of sketching? One school of thought says that your first idea is probably your best idea; another says it's probably your worst. Those who say you should trust your first instinct are optimistic about the human

Example One: Designer Michal Levy's sketches for the identity of open graphic design studio.



Example Two: Chuck Green's sketches for a helicopter transport company—Metro Aviation. (http://www.ideabook.com/tutorials/logo_design/stepbystep_logo.html)

spirit. Those who say you should doubt your first instinct have probably taught freshman design students. Having seen my share of similar first-try solutions to similar design problems over the years, I tend to believe that your first idea is probably not your strongest. If it fell right into your lap, it probably fell into everybody else's lap too. If you agree with this logic, you'll want to purge your mind of obvious solutions before you start. Simply write down the first few ideas that immediately come to mind and set them aside. If they are actually brilliant and much better than your subsequent ideas, you can always return to them later.

2. Launch from Words

New media designer Hillman Curtis suggests a process called targeting the theme. After you've researched the project, write down ten words or phrases that best sum up the theme of the project. They can be words like beneficial or phrases like happy go lucky. Then draw a three-ringed target and put one word from your list in the center, one in the second ring, and a third in the outer ring. Just like a pop music lyric, a design project should only be about one theme. The secondary and tertiary themes shed light on the primary theme.

Building on Curtis's concept, you can begin exploratory sketching by riffing off of these three words or phrases. As you visually think them, sketch loosely and abstractly—figures, shapes, diagrams, connections. At this stage, feel free to mix words and images. Just make sure that you are not putting down all words.

After you've sketched a while from your three key words, try paraphrasing them to generate a new direction. For example, happy go lucky and carefree mean almost the same thing, but each phrase has subtle nuances that can lead down very different visual paths. Happy go lucky may suggest a smile, a four-leaf clover, a cartwheel, or a dance, whereas carefree may suggest sleeping, relaxing, floating, burdens falling away. Change the phrase to devil may care and head down an entirely different path. Get out a thesaurus and explore synonyms. Translate your key words into slang phrases and colloquialisms. Slang is usually much richer with visual overtone.

You can also remix your thematic key words for a new exploratory-sketching launch by turning your original ten words into adjectives. Then come up with ten nouns derived from these adjectives. For instance, if the adjective is playful, you might choose the noun children. If another adjective is solid, you might choose the noun tank. Once you've come up with ten corresponding nouns, mix and match the original adjectives with the new nouns, and launch an exploratory-sketching session from each pair. Along the same lines, graphic design innovator Stefan Sagmeister sometimes thumbs through his old sketchbooks looking for previous ideas that he can apply to a current project. His reasoning is: When an idea comes from completely beyond the parameters of a current project, it can spark a novel and interesting approach. In Sagmeister's strategy, no matter where you begin your exploratory sketching, you can usually relate it to your current project, and often with refreshing results.

Sketch Laterally (But Stay Grounded)

Edward de Bono famously coined the now ubiquitous phrase lateral thinking. It basically means: Don't fix on a single solution too soon. Early in your design phase, explore wide rather than deep. Come up with several possible solutions to a given problem before fixing on one and developing it vertically into a finished design. The obvious advantage of lateral thinking is that it lets you compare the merits of various solutions before committing to one. A less obvious advantage is that it allows you to



Example Three: Jacob Cass's sketches for a UKE Chocolate Gift Baskets company logo. (<http://justcreativedesign.com/2009/02/04/the-logo-design-process-from-start-to-finish>)

synthesize multiple solutions into an even better solution. A third advantage is that one idea can lead to another. When you sketch laterally, you don't have a specific agenda for where your sketching explorations should lead. Later in the process, when the time does come to evaluate, it will be much easier to reel in crazy ideas than to extend tame, lame, safe ideas.

Sketch with Intuitive Tools

The specific tools you use for sketching are a matter of personal preference. The goal is to choose tools that are intuitive to you, tools that don't place a technical barrier between your thinking and your sketching. Don't use the computer for exploratory sketching. Even with a responsive pen pad, there is currently too much of an interface barrier between your head, your hand, and the digital image that results. Focusing on pressure settings and keystroke shortcuts interferes with the kind of spatial, intuitive thinking that exploratory sketching seeks to promote.

Whatever materials you use, they should be as cheap as reasonably possible. Choose inexpensive newsprint over heavy watercolor paper. Choose good, serviceable pens but not top-of-the-line pens. You are going for quantity, not masterpiece quality. Think of your materials as practical and disposable—simply tools to get the sketching job done. Perhaps you have a fetish for exquisite art supplies. Get over it when it comes to this kind of sketching. Unless you are phenomenally wealthy, expensive materials inhibit risk-taking in exploratory sketching.

Sketch Spatially

Rather than sketching sequentially, page by page in a notebook, do your exploratory sketching on large rolls of newsprint. This allows you to think spatially rather than linearly. Ideas are able to branch, loop backward, and continue forward in a holistic fashion. During a single sketching run, you will have immediate visual access to all that has gone before, and you will be able to draw inferences and see connections on the fly—something you couldn't do flipping back and forth through pages of a notebook.

Sketch Fast and Continuously

Limit your exploratory-sketching runs to anywhere between 5 and 15 minutes. This will focus you and keep you attentive as you sketch. It will also remove the pressure of having to come up with a good idea. As you sketch, don't think of yourself as a creator, an ingenious problem solver, or even a great drawer. Those roles place an undue burden on you to come up with something immediately clever. They tempt you to shortcut the exploratory process.

Sketch Perpetually

Regardless of how good your drawing skills are, you can always improve them. Carry a pocket sketchbook with you everywhere. Instead of explaining your ideas and thoughts verbally (to coworkers, your spouse, your kids), practice explaining your ideas by sketching them. You are allowed to use words but only in conjunction with your sketches. This exercise will eventually drive your friends and loved ones insane, so you may want to practice it for limited periods of time.

Evaluate and Integrate

Once you have enough raw sketching to evaluate and integrate, it's time to switch



thinking modes. You are no longer exploring, sketching anything that comes to mind. You are now evaluating, reeling things back in, and synthesizing them. You are not evaluating the aesthetic quality of the sketches—you are evaluating the potential usefulness of the forms and ideas they represent. And you are looking for forms and ideas that can be combined in interesting ways. Once you have evaluated and grouped your sketches, it's time to integrate them. You are trying to come up with synergies—combinations that are more than merely the sum of their parts. Roukes suggests several synectic trigger mechanisms or ways of integrating disparate source material in hopes of triggering interesting results: subtract, repeat, combine, add, transfer, empathize, animate, superimpose, change scale, substitute, fragment, isolate, distort, disguise, contradict, parody, prevaricate, analogize, hybridize, metamorphose, symbolize, mythologize, fantasize.

Conceptual Goals of Evaluation and Integration

What are you trying to achieve in the evaluation/integration phase? You are gearing up for a second round of exploratory sketching. You are trying to amass interesting, provocative, and relevant starting points that will lead to even more fruitful sketching explorations. With this goal in mind, the following approaches to evaluation and integration are crucial:

Look for raw potential, not finished perfection.

Look for things that can be combined.

Allow your results to redefine your understanding of the problem

Method Two: Time-Limited Designing

Time-limited designing, a technique developed by Stefan Sagmeister, pushes you to transition from creative brief to polished mock-up in a very limited time, rather than easing into the process gradually. In this sense, it may seem the exact opposite of exploratory sketching. But your goal is not to shortcut the creative process and come up with a finished product quickly. Your goal is to design within extreme constraints in order to generate unique results. If you do your best work at the last minute (or, in this case, 30 minutes to 3 hours), this is a way to simulate the deadline experience without putting your project in actual jeopardy.

For most people, time-limited designing is more like a professional growth exercise than an actual tool for coming up with finished work. But you may discover that your time-limited designs are actually usable. Place your three-hour mock-up alongside one that took you much longer to develop, show both to a design critic you trust, and ask her which is better. If she can't tell the difference (or if she likes the time-limited design better), you may be onto something. An improvisational boldness and bravura can enter your design when you are faced with strict time limitations. Design becomes less like a problem-solving intellectual exercise and more like a jazz performance. As such, time-limited designing is particularly appropriate for concert posters and CD covers, where the spirit of a performance is visually communicated.

Method Three: Scope Plumbing

Scope plumbing is a simple project management strategy that you employ at the very beginning of the development phase. It boils down to an equation: breadth + depth = scope. If you know how wide your project is overall and how deep it is at an average

point, then you know its scope. Scope plumbing doesn't really get you unstuck as much as it prevents you from getting very stuck further down the road. Scope plumbing varies from medium to medium. Take video production as an example. Let's say you have to produce a 30-second commercial spot. You've storyboarded it, scripted it, booked your locations, and you're ready to start shooting. The general wisdom is to shoot all your footage, then edit it, then add visual effects, then add the sound track. Scope plumbing says to first choose a representative 5 seconds of the commercial and take it through the entire production phase.

Full-fledged scope plumbing is not always feasible—say, if you've got a single day to shoot your footage and your location is 400 miles from your studio. But once you have shot all your footage, you can apply a modified version of scope plumbing even with these limitations. Scope plumbing makes sense for complex projects like corporate identity, book design, and large-scale Web site design. It is less helpful for producing a small run of 50 T-shirts. Yet even then, it's common wisdom to do a single test print, observe the results, and modify your design accordingly before you rush headlong into printing all 50 shirts.

Method Four: Oblique Strategizing

In 1975 musician/producer Brian Eno and painter Peter Schmidt printed a pack of cards called Oblique Strategies: Over One Hundred Worthwhile Dilemmas. The word oblique literally means “slanting or inclined—neither parallel nor perpendicular nor right-angular.” On each card was printed a brief creative strategy developed by Eno or Schmidt. The strategies themselves are oblique, and they suggest ways in which an artist may approach the creative process from a more oblique, less direct perspective. There are several ways to use the cards, but the most common is to work on a project until you get stuck, draw a card, and apply that strategy to your current situation.

In a 1980 radio interview, Eno explained, “If you're in a panic, you tend to take the head-on approach because it seems to be the one that's going to yield the best results. Of course, that often isn't the case—it's just the most obvious and apparently reliable method. The function of the Oblique Strategies was, initially, to serve as a series of prompts which said, ‘Don't forget that you could adopt this [alternative] attitude.’”

The cards themselves are a work in progress. At the time of this writing, five editions have been published, each a bit different. The first three editions included a few blank cards so that users could add their own strategies. With each new edition, some cards were added, others removed, and others reworded. You can buy the cards at: <http://www.enoshop.co.uk>

Using the Cards

The cards come with the following instructions from Eno and Schmidt: “[These cards] 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.” Used in the latter manner, the cards incorporate an element of chance. I divide Eno/Schmidt's Oblique Strategies into four main categories: formalist (about



The fifth edition of oblique strategies by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt. Each card contains a different strategy for overcoming your current creative dilemma. (<http://www.enoshop.co.uk>)

structure), procedural (about process), attitudinal (about your mental outlook), and contradictory (about opposite extremes). Here is a sampling of Oblique Strategies subdivided into these four categories.

Formalist:

- A line has two sides.
- Assemble some of the elements in a group and treat the group.
- Decorate, decorate.
- Instead of changing the thing, change the world around it.
- Take away the important parts.

Procedural:

- Faced with a choice, do both.
- Go to an extreme, move back to a more comfortable place.
- Make an exhaustive list of everything you might do and do the last thing on the list.
- List the qualities it has. List those you'd like.
- Slow preparation, fast execution.

Attitudinal:

- Question the heroic approach.
- Disciplined self-indulgence.
- Emphasize the flaws.
- Discover your formulas and abandon them.
- Honor thy error as a secret intention.

Contradictory:

- Change ambiguities to specifics. / Change specifics to ambiguities.
- Destroy nothing. / Destroy the most important thing.
- Do something boring. / Do something sudden, destructive, and unpredictable.
- How would someone else do it? / How would you have done it?
- Make what's perfect more human. / Mechanize something idiosyncratic.

Not all Oblique Strategies fit into these four categories. For example, one of my favorite strategies demands a category of its own: Call your mother and ask her what to do.

Don't Knock It Till you Try It

All of these methods—oblique strategizing, scope plumbing, time-limited designing, and exploratory sketching—take some getting used to. If you try them just once and give up on them, you really haven't given them a fair shot. New processes and tools can be awkward at first, but once you get past the initial learning curve, they can make you more productive and creative.

Don't try to evaluate the effectiveness of these methods in the midst of using them. Instead, commit to a method and let it run its course, then look back and assess its effectiveness. All of these methods will need some fine-tuning and customizing before they suit your particular media and working practice.

At the same time, if you decide a method isn't working for you, shelve it. Perhaps you'll encounter a future project for which it is better suited. The more methods you have at your disposal, the more versatile you are, and the more likely you are to arrive at consistently elegant solutions for a variety of design problems.

EXERCISE:

Design and name a new accessory for kids to use on bicycles. (there are no wrong ideas and designs)

You have 5 minutes to come up with as many ideas as you can. You can invite your classmates, friends and/or family to brainstorm with you.

As you work on your accessory development, try each one of the Four Ways to Bypass Inertia explained by Curt Cloninger.

Present the stages and the outcome of your design process.

For each one of the four methods, describe the following:

- How did you use this method?
- For how long?
- What was the outcome/result?
- Is this method helping you get your creative juices flowing? Is it helping you accomplish desired design results?

To submit your sketches to the discussion board, select Enable HTML Creator button and choose Insert Image.

If you have any questions such as “should I do this or that?” the answer is “yes.” For questions wanting specific information, the answer is “I don’t know.”