

Creative Inspiration - How To Have It

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A look at creative inspiration - where it comes from, and how to have more.
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You probably like the idea of creative inspiration, that wonderful new idea that pops into you head without warning. The reality is that such bursts of creativity do happen. Einstein claimed he had great ideas come to him while he was shaving in the morning. And then there is the chemist Friedrich August Kekulé, who famously discovered the ring structure of benzene in a bizarre dream about a snake biting its tail. Here is how he described it:

{bot_wrgoogle}"I turned my chair to the fire and dozed. Again the atoms were flitting before my eyes. This time the smaller groups kept modestly in the background. My mental eye, rendered more acute by repeated visions of this kind, could now distinguish larger structures, of manifold conformation; long rows, sometimes more closely fitted together; all twining and twisting in snake-like motion. But look! What was that? One of the snakes had seized hold of its own, and the form whirled mockingly before my eyes. As if by a flash of lightning, I awoke."

He awoke, and he suddenly understood what the structure of the chemical benzene must be like. Of course, he had been studying the matter and thinking about it for a while. That is the important clue to how to have these creative inspirations yourself. The "aha" moment is only possible because of the work you put into something beforehand.

These creative insights don't come from nowhere, in other words. Kekulé was a chemist, after all, and not a plumber. Had he been a plumber, he might have had a dream about a whirlpool and awoke with an idea for a new type of flushing toilet. Your creative ideas come from your knowledge and your mental work with that knowledge. These aren't all it takes, of course, but they are necessary.

Knowledge, Work and Techniques Equals Creative Inspiration

Let's suppose you have spent the time gaining knowledge in an area. You have worked with that knowledge, thinking about its relation to other things you know, and the implications of it. Now what else can you do to have more creative ideas, to have one of those "aha" moments of creative inspiration? Train yourself to think more creatively, by using certain questions and techniques until they are habitual. Here are three to get you started.

1. Ask yourself what other perspectives might be useful. Better yet, just consider any other perspectives, without making assumptions about which might be useful. For example, suppose you design air-conditioning systems. You might think about them from the perspective of environmentalists, or electric companies, or the stores that sell them, or of course, the consumer that buys them. The first might lead to ideas for making them solar-powered. The second might lead to a design based on cooling water at night when electric rates are low, and using the water to cool the building during the day.
2. Mentally play with the attributes of things. A baby carriage, for example, has wheels, a handlebar that you push it with, a sun-cover, etc. If you play with these things you start to imagine things like a carriage that is pulled instead of pushed, or with skis instead of wheels, for use in the winter. Imagine bigger wheels, or two wheels instead of four. What new ideas come to mind?
3. Let your mind rest. After working with knowledge and trying to consciously think of new ideas, take a break. This is what chemist Friedrich August Kekulé was doing when he fell asleep in a chair and had his creative dream. Your conscious thinking can, at some point, get in the way of your creativity. So tell your unconscious mind that it is on its own, and take a nap or do something pleasant and mentally non-taxing, like taking a walk or listening to music. You just might get one of those classic "aha!" moments of creative inspiration.

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