

# HOW TO GET IDEAS



WRITTEN BY  
JACK FOSTER

ILLUSTRATED BY  
LARRY CORBY

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY LARRY CORBY



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To the three best ideas

I ever had—

my wife, Nancy,  
and my sons, Mark and Tim.

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# PREFACE

For seven years I helped teach a 16-week class on advertising at the University of Southern California. The class was sponsored by the AAAA—American Association of Advertising Agencies—and was designed to give young people in advertising agencies an overview of the profession they had chosen.

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One teacher talked about account management. One teacher talked about media and research. And I talked about creating advertising.

I talked about ads and commercials, about direct mail and outdoor advertising, about what makes good headlines and convincing body copy, about the use of music and jingles and product demonstrations and testimonials, about benefits and type selection and target audiences and copy points and subheads and strategy and teasers and coupons and free-standing inserts and psychographics and on and on and on.



And at the end of the first year I asked the graduates what I should have talked about but didn't.

"Ideas," they said. "You told us that every ad and every commercial should start with an idea," one of them wrote, "but you never told us what an idea was or how to get one."

Well.

So for the next six years I tried to talk about ideas and how to get them.

Not just advertising ideas. Ideas of all kinds.

x After all, only a few of the people I taught were charged with coming up with ideas for ads and commercials; most were account executives and media planners and researchers, not writers and art directors. But all of them—just like you and everybody else in business and in government, in school and at home, be they beginners or veterans—need to know how to get ideas.

Why?

First, new ideas are the wheels of progress. Without them, stagnation reigns.

Whether you're a designer dreaming of another world, an engineer working on a new kind of structure, an executive charged with developing a fresh business concept, an advertiser seeking a breakthrough way to sell your product, a fifth-grade

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## PREFACE

teacher trying to plan a memorable school assembly program, or a volunteer looking for a new way to sell the same old raffle tickets, your ability to generate good ideas is critical to your success.

Second, computer systems are doing much of the mundane work you used to do, thereby (in theory at least) freeing you up—and indeed, requiring you—to do the creative work those systems can't do.

Third, you live in what many call “The Information Age”—an age that demands a constant stream of new ideas if it is to reach its potential and realize its destiny.

x*i*

That's because information's real value—aside from helping you understand things better—comes only when it is combined with other information to form new ideas: ideas that solve problems, ideas that help people, ideas that save and fix and create things, ideas that make things better and cheaper and more useful, ideas that enlighten and invigorate and inspire and enrich and embolden.

If you don't use this fortune of information to create such ideas, you waste it.

In short, there's never been a time in all of history when ideas were so needed or so valuable.

This book contains most of what I told my students about ideas.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I learned something about ideas from just about everybody I ever taught or worked with. Any attempt to remember and name them all would fail. A sincere, but sweeping “Thank you, everyone” must therefore suffice. xiii

Special thanks go to Tom Pflimlin, whose many suggestions helped me improve the first version of this work; to Steven Piersanti and his staff, whose enthusiasm and knowledge and skill helped me transform a rough manuscript into a finished book; and to my family, whose faith sustains me.



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INTRODUCTION

AN EASY-TO-FOLLOW  
ROAD MAP

1

More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.

—*Woody Allen*

When they said Canada, I thought it would be up in the mountains somewhere.

—*Marilyn Monroe*

Where am I? I'm in a phone booth at the corner of Walk and Don't Walk.

—*Unknown*

**M**y brother writes editorials for a major newspaper. I write advertising for a major advertising agency. Neither of us understands how the other does what he does.

“How can you write editorials on 20 different subjects that your readers are interested in?” I ask.

2 “How do you get the ideas?”

“How can you write 20 different commercials about a Sunkist orange?” he asks. “How do you get the ideas?”

Actually we both probably use the same techniques without knowing it. After all, everybody I know of who analyzes ideas pretty much agrees on the procedures you must follow to get them.

In *A Technique for Producing Ideas*, James Webb Young describes a five-step method for producing ideas.

First, the mind must “gather its raw materials.” In advertising, these materials include “specific knowledge about products and people [and] general knowledge about life and events.”

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## INTRODUCTION

Second, the mind goes through a “process of masticating those materials.”

Third, “You drop the whole subject and put the problem out of your mind as completely as you can.”

Fourth, “Out of nowhere the idea will appear.”

Fifth, you “take your little newborn idea out into the world of reality” and see how it fares.

Helmholtz, the German philosopher, said he used three steps to get new thoughts.

The first was “Preparation,” the time during which he investigated the problem “in all directions” (Young’s second step).

The second was “Incubation,” when he didn’t think consciously about the problem at all (Young’s third step).

The third was “Illumination,” when “happy ideas come unexpectedly without effort, like an inspiration” (Young’s fourth step).

Moshe F. Rubinstein, a specialist in scientific problem solving at the University of California, says that there are four distinct stages to problem solving.

Stage one: Preparation. You go over the elements of the problem and study their relationships (Young’s first and second steps).

Stage two: Incubation. Unless you've been able to solve the problem quickly, you sleep on it. You may be frustrated at this stage because you haven't been able to find an answer and don't see how you're going to (Young's third step).

Stage three: Inspiration. You feel a spark of excitement as a solution, or a possible path to one, suddenly appears (Young's fourth step).

Stage four: Verification. You check the solution to see if it really works (Young's fifth step).

4

In *Predator of the Universe: The Human Mind*, Charles S. Wakefield says there "is a series of [five] mental stages that identify the creative act."

First, "is an awareness of the problem."

Second, "comes a defining of the problem."

Third, "comes a saturation in the problem and the factual data surrounding it" (Young's first and second steps).

Fourth, "comes the period of incubation and surface calm" (Young's third step).

Fifth, comes "the explosion—the mental insight, the sudden leap beyond logic, beyond the usual stepping-stones to normal solutions" (Young's fourth step).



Ah, but even though they all generally agree on the steps you must take to get an idea, none of them talks much about the condition you must be in to climb those steps. And if you're not in condition it doesn't make any difference if you know the steps; you'll never get the ideas that you're capable of getting.

For telling most people how to get an idea is a little like telling a first grader to find  $x$  when  $x + 1 = 2x + 4$ , or like telling a person with weak legs how to high jump. Just as you must know algebra before you can solve an equation, and just as you must have strong legs before you can high jump, so you must condition your mind before you can get an idea.

5

The first chapter of this book attempts to define an idea.

The next eight chapters tell you how to condition your mind. You may read them in any order.

2. Have Fun
3. Become Idea Prone
4. Set Your Mind on Goals
5. Be More like a Child
6. Get More Inputs
7. Screw up Your Courage
8. Rethink Your Thinking
9. Learn How to Combine

Of necessity, I talk about these things in sequence. But they all should be going on in your life at the same time, because getting your mind into idea-condition is not something you do and then stop. It is a lifetime activity; a job you never finish, a goal you never reach.

Chapters ten through fourteen talk about a procedure for getting ideas that *should* be taken in sequence.

6 Although I use different words, I generally agree with Young. (Two exceptions: I add one step to his—the need to define the problem; and I combine his third and fourth steps because they seem one step to me, not two.)

To some, my (and Young's) last step may not seem part of the process of getting an idea, but it truly is, for an idea is not an idea until something happens with it.

10. Define the Problem
11. Gather the Information
12. Search for the Idea
13. Forget about It
14. Put the Idea into Action

Before we begin, however, we must ask a question. And get an answer.



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1.

# WHAT IS AN IDEA?

I know the answer. The answer lies within the heart of all mankind! What, the answer is twelve? I think I'm in the wrong building.

—*Charles Schultz*

I was gratified to be able to answer promptly, and I did. I said I didn't know.

—*Mark Twain*

**B**efore we figure out how to get ideas we must discuss what ideas are, for if we don't know what things are it's difficult to figure out how to get more of them.

The only trouble is: How do you define an idea?

10 A. E. Housman said: "I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat, but both of us recognize the object by the symptoms which it produces in us." Beauty is like that too. So are things like quality and love.

And so, of course, is an idea. When we're in the presence of one we know it, we feel it; something inside us recognizes it. But just try to define one.

Look in dictionaries and you'll find everything from: "That which exists in the mind, potentially or actually, as a product of mental activity, such as a thought or knowledge," to "The highest category: the complete and final product of reason," to "A transcendent entity that is a real pattern of which existing things are imperfect representations."

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## WHAT IS AN IDEA?

A lot of good that does you.

The difficulty is stated perfectly by Marvin Minsky in *The Society of Mind*:

“Only in logic and mathematics do definitions ever capture concepts perfectly. . . . You can know what a tiger is without defining it. You may define a tiger, yet know scarcely anything about it.”

If you ask people for a definition, however, you get better answers, answers that come pretty close to capturing both the concept and the thing itself.

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Here are some answers I got from my coworkers and from my students at the University of Southern California and the University of California at Los Angeles:

It's something that's so obvious that after someone tells you about it you wonder why you didn't think of it yourself.

An idea encompasses all aspects of a situation and makes it simple. It ties up all the loose ends into one neat knot. That knot is called an idea.

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## WHAT IS AN IDEA?

It is an immediately understood representation of something universally known or accepted, but conveyed in a novel, unique, or unexpected way.

Something new that can't be seen from what preceded it.

It's that flash of insight that lets you see things in a new light, that unites two seemingly disparate thoughts into one new concept.

An idea synthesizes the complex into the startlingly simple.

It seems to me that these definitions (actually, they're more descriptions than definitions; but no matter—they get to the essence of it) give you a better feel for this elusive thing called an idea, for they talk about synthesis and problems and insights and obviousness.

The one that I like the best, though, and the one that is the basis of this book, is this one from James Webb Young:

An idea is nothing more nor less  
than a new combination of old  
elements.

There are two reasons I like it so much.

First, it practically tells you how to get an idea  
for it says that getting an idea is like creating a  
recipe for a new dish. All you have to do is take some  
ingredients you already know about and combine  
them in a new way. It's as simple as that.

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Not only is it simple, it doesn't take a genius to  
do it. Nor does it take a rocket scientist or a Nobel  
prize winner or a world-famous artist or a poet  
laureate or an advertising hotshot or a Pulitzer prize  
winner or a first-class inventor.

"To my mind," wrote J. Bronowski, "it is a mistake  
to think of creative activity as something unusual."

Ordinary people get good ideas everyday.  
Everyday they create and invent and discover things.  
Everyday they figure out different ways to repair  
cars and sinks and doors, to fix dinners, to increase  
sales, to save money, to teach their children, to  
reduce costs, to increase production, to write memos  
and proposals, to make things better or easier or  
cheaper—the list goes on and on.



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