

GENERATING MANY IDEAS

BRAINSTORMING

The most famous, quite familiar method for generating many ideas, fast.

Duration	Preparation: up to 5 minutes Activity: 5–15 minutes plus discussion time
Physical requirements	One whiteboard or large paper sheet with pen, and enough space for everyone to stand or sit comfortably
Energy level	Medium to high
Facilitators	1
Participants	3–30
Expected output	Many ideas

Brainstorming⁰¹ (the term is often misused to describe all kinds of idea generation processes) is a specific group exercise which uses simple rules to help participants stay in a productive, nonjudgmental, highly divergent mode while producing many ideas.

Participants call out ideas which are written down on a board by a facilitator or scribe. This generates a pile of ideas quickly. Use brainstorming to find a starting point (or several starting points) for your work, to get to grips with the theme as a group, to widen the number of alternatives, or when you get stuck and need options.

Step-by-step guide

- 1 Make sure you are using the right method. Brainstorming will help the group quickly understand what the others are thinking and what the mood is around the subject, like “testing the water.” It’s also great when the group needs energy. If you want to generate more diverse ideas, and empower the less assertive group members, a quieter method like brainwriting might be better.

⁰¹ Osborn, A. F. (1963). *Applied Imagination*, 3rd ed. Scribner.



- 2** Look at your starting point for ideation and consider if and how you will bring previous knowledge into the room (for example, as a research wall or as key insights).
- 3** Invite the right people to work beside your core team for the exercise (this might include people who know the background, people with no preconceptions, experts, representatives of the implementation team, people who will deliver the service, users, management, etc.).
- 4** Prepare your group with information and arrange them comfortably. They should all be able to see the board. The scribe(s) will need good pens and a clear, fast hand.
- 5** Remind the group of Osborn's rules that they (a) refrain from criticism, (b) are open to wild or unusual ideas, (c) focus on quantity of ideas, and (d) build on the ideas of others.⁰¹
- 6** Show the theme or key question on a poster or projector. (You might do an engaging warm-up after this to distract the participants for a few minutes.)

- 7** In brainstorming, ask the group to shout out their ideas or answers. Write their words legibly on the board.
- 8** When all ideas are on display you can group them under whatever criteria the group prefer, discuss them, and/or begin a selection technique.

Method notes

- Brainstorming is a surprisingly difficult exercise to facilitate well, probably because it is often badly run and has developed a reputation for being a low-value activity for “when we run out of ideas.” It's also psychologically challenging and can be dominated by very assertive participants. If in doubt, go for brainwriting or another method.
- Stop before the exercise loses too much steam, but not at the first slowdown. The ideas which come when things get difficult can be especially interesting. Remind participants instead that wild or unusual ideas are welcome, and that ideas can be combined or reversed.

- If they are hesitant to suggest more radical ideas, call a pause and ask them to talk quietly with a neighbor. Give them a minute to think of wilder ideas or combinations, then return to the brainstorm. They will be less shy about calling out these “team” ideas.
- Try suspending Osborn's rules and allowing criticism sometimes. There is evidence⁰² that this leads to more and better ideas, but it will need a group who are past politics and are able to give and receive constructive criticism with a positive attitude.
- You can combine brainstorming and brainwriting easily. One very effective method is to do brainwriting in groups, share the results, then ask each participant to do some solo brainstorming (scribble down a lot of ideas). You then repeat the process a few times. ◀

⁰¹ It can be useful to do a “Yes, and...” warm-up before this exercise; or remind people of the concept if they know it already. See #TISDD 10.7.1, *Warm-ups*.

⁰² Nemeth, C. J., & Nemeth-Brown, B. (2003). “Better than Individuals? The Potential Benefits of Dissent and Diversity for Group Creativity.” In P. Paulus and B. Nijstad (eds.), *Group Creativity* (pp. 63-84). Oxford University Press.