

ADDING DEPTH AND DIVERSITY

IDEATION BASED ON ANALOGIES AND ASSOCIATION

Instead of trying to create ideas from nothing, translate and adapt existing solutions or look for links to random stimuli.

Duration	Preparation: if you need to prepare some good analogies in advance, this can take some hours. Alternatively, let the group find their own analogies (this is not easy), or use association to random input. Activity: 20–60 minutes
Physical requirements	Analogies might be presented as cards which you will need to produce; you will also need space to make notes
Energy level	Low to medium for analogies Medium, fun for associations
Facilitators	1
Participants	Teams of 3–7 people
Expected output	Ideas, insights, or new questions

Let's imagine you are faced with a new Problem A. You know that the familiar Problem B is essentially similar – or analogous – to Problem A. So, instead of thinking about Problem A, you look at existing or novel solutions to Problem B, and then adapt these solutions back to Problem A. Analogies let us adapt ideas which already exist, so this method can be a very useful kick-starter if the group is stuck. They can also make a difficult problem seem more manageable. They are especially valuable when good analogies can be prepared.⁰¹

Associations work in a similar way to analogies, but also help us reframe the problem and think about it in new ways. You could try to find associations with a randomly chosen word or image. If you were ideating on social media use, for example, you might randomly select a picture of a duck from a set. You might then ask yourself questions like “What kind of protective ‘feathers’ could cause social media to slip off a consumer, like water off a duck’s back?” “How could we help a consumer seem calm ‘above water’ while working hard to process social media ‘underwater?’” and so on.

⁰¹ Analogies are often drawn from nature – in this case, we talk about “biomimicry”

Step-by-step guide

- 1** 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).
- 2** 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.).
- 3** For analogies, skip to step 4. For random association, choose some random words, phrases, or images which will be useful. Open a book at random, or use one of the many random word and image generators online. Then skip to step 6.
- 4** Prepare your analogies. This is hard, but it gets easier with experience. The basic process is to reduce the challenge to its essential characteristics, try to separate it from its context, and use this as a starting point to look for similar contexts. For example, if you are

searching for innovative traffic flow solutions, you might boil this down to a need to “coordinate a smooth flow of elements in a complex system.”⁰¹ This would lead you to analogies like blood circulation, liquids engineering, plumbing, logistics, even finance. (And it might prompt you to invite doctors, engineers, plumbers, logisticians, or economists to your ideation session.)

To get there, ask yourself: Who, or which discipline, has already solved a similar problem? In what context would you experience similar challenges or situations? What does the challenge remind you of?

- 5** Select the best analogies. Think about how close each analogy is to the original challenge – in the traffic flow example, logistics would be a “near field” analogy, but medicine and finance would be “far.” For more novel ideas, it seems useful to use “far” analogies – even though they are tougher to work with and actually generate fewer ideas. Less common (and hence less familiar) analogies

also seem more helpful than common ones, so avoid analogies which the group have used too often before.

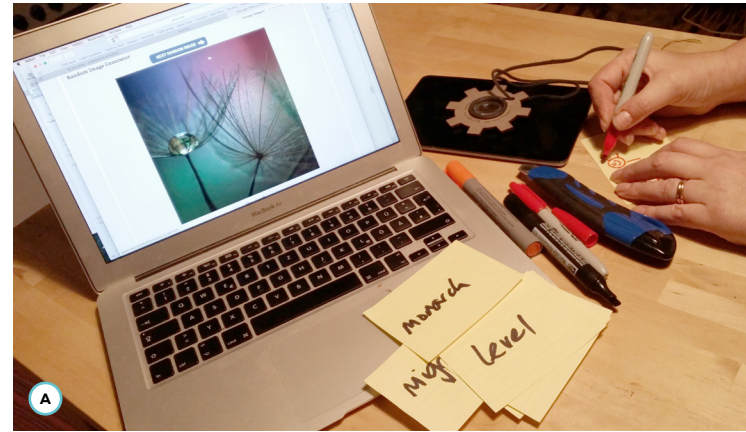
- 6** Set up in workable table-sized groups. Invite the groups to stop thinking about the initial challenge (perhaps run an intense warm-up to help them), and consider one of the analogies or associations instead. What does it suggest to them? How have similar problems been conquered there? For example, if the group are working on a service to help people consume social media responsibly, they might look at solutions around other types of overconsumption, like eating. Many of the principles of managed eating – reward systems, tracking the amount eaten – could be easily transferred to social media use. Make notes.
- 7** Repeat for other analogies or associations.
- 8** Now consider your notes in the context of the original challenge. Can the ideas and experience be translated? What ideas do they give you?
- 9** Take your (translated) ideas into an idea selection stage.

⁰¹ Example from Marion, P., Franke, N., & Schreier, M. (2014). “Sometimes the Best Ideas Come from Outside Your Industry,” at <https://hbr.org/2014/11/sometimes-the-best-ideas-come-from-outside-your-industry>.



Method notes

- If you are using other ideation methods as well, try them before you switch to analogies or associations. Most groups find it easier to work “closer to home” at first, before opening up.
- Some groups find it hard to take random associations seriously until they have experienced its successful use. Explain its pedigree⁰² as an ideation technique, or ask them to simply suspend judgment until after the exercise.
- If an association seems difficult, stick with it. Or build a chain of associations – *cake* leads to *baker* leads to *flour* leads to *flower* leads to *garden* leads to *summer* – and look at each one. ◀



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Random words or images can be used to diversify and unblock ideation. Use random word or image generators online, open a book at random, or make your own card sets.

⁰² De Bono E. (1992). *Serious Creativity Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Create New Ideas*. HarperCollins.