



Brainstorm - 8 Rules

Why

Brainstorming is a great way to generate a lot of ideas that you would not be able to generate by just sitting down with a pen and paper. The intention of brainstorming is to leverage the collective thinking of the group, by engaging with each other, listening, and building on other ideas.

Conducting a brainstorm also creates a distinct segment of time when you intentionally turn up the generative part of your brain and turn down the evaluative part. Brainstorming is the most frequently practiced form of ideation.

Here, you'll learn the best practices from the very best experts from d.school and IDEO as well of the father of the Brainstorming technique, Alex Osborn. The following are some rules, principles, and suggestions so you can make brainstorming sessions much more user-oriented, effective, innovative – and fun.

When

You can use brainstorming throughout any design or work process, of course, to generate ideas for design solutions, but also any time you are trying to generate ideas, such as planning where to do empathy work, or thinking about product and services related to your project.

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8 Rules

1 | Set a time limit

d.school emphasises that the facilitator has to be intentional about setting aside a period when your team will be in “brainstorm mode”. In this time frame, it’s the sole goal to come up with as many ideas as possible, and during this period judgements of those ideas are prohibited. Typically, a Brainstorm will take around 15-60 minutes. It can be shorter or longer, depending on the difficulty of the problem and the motivation and experience of the group.

Best practice tip:

“Invest energy into a short period of time, such as 15 or 30 minutes of high engagement. Get in front of a whiteboard or around a table, but take an active posture of standing or sitting upright. Get close together.”

– d.school, Bootcamp Bootleg

2 | Start with a problem statement, Point of View, How Might We questions, a plan or a goal – and stay focused on the topic

Alex Osborn, the father of the Brainstorming technique, emphasises that brainstorming sessions should always address a specific question or problem statement (also called a Point of View) as sessions addressing multiple questions are inefficient. Begin with a good problem statement or question. Design Thinkers and other ideation specialists have further developed this approach into the art of framing problem statements via methods.

Specifically, these are “How Might We” questions.

Best practice tip:

“Write down clearly what you are brainstorming. Using a ‘How Might We’ (HMW) question is a great way to frame a brainstorm (e.g. HMW give each shopper a personal checkout experience?).”

– d.school, Bootcamp Bootleg

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3 | **Defer judgement or criticism, including non-verbal**

The facilitator should always set a positive, unthreatening tone and tell participants to reserve criticism for a later critical stage in the ideation process. A Brainstorming session is not the time and the place to evaluate ideas, and you should avoid executional details. It's crucial that participants are feeling confident by being in a safe environment so they have no fear of being judged by others when they put forward wild ideas. You should create equal opportunities for all participants. The best ideas often come from practitioners, students, and people who dare to think differently – and not necessarily only from the highly skilled and experienced managers.

“Have playful rules: Critiquing or debating ideas can quickly sap the energy of a session. Many IDEO conference rooms have brainstorming rules stenciled in 6-inch-high letters on the walls; for example, ‘Go for quantity,’ ‘Encourage wild ideas,’ ‘Defer judgment,’ or ‘One conversation at a time.’”

– IDEO, *The IDEO Difference*

Best practice tip:

The facilitator should suspend judgement. This way, participants will feel free to generate unusual ideas. As a facilitator, you will find that it can even be a great idea to prohibit the word “no”. You’ll be surprised to see how effective this tool is and how it helps open up minds and creates a collaborative, curious, and friendly ideation environment. And you’ll find that it’s pretty fun too when team members have to initially say “yes” to even the weirdest ideas. Giving out half-thought-out ideas or strange suggestions is normally not socially accepted, is socially frowned on and leads to people holding back in normal situations. Brainstorming deliberately gives permission to be “stupid” and “child-like”.

“Creative spaces don't judge. They let the ideas flow, so that people can build on each other and foster great ideas. You never know where a good idea is going to come from, the key is make everyone feel like they can say the idea on their mind and allow others to build on it.”

– OpenIDEO, *7 Tips on Better Brainstorming*

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4 Encourage weird, wacky, and wild ideas

These new ways of thinking might give you better solutions.

"It is easier to tone down a wild idea than to think up a new one."

– Alex Osborn, the father of the Brainstorming technique

"Wild ideas can often give rise to creative leaps. In thinking about ideas that are wacky or out there we tend to think about what we really want without the constraints of technology or materials. We can then take those magical possibilities and perhaps invent new technologies to deliver them."

– OpenIDEO, 7 Tips on Better Brainstorming

5 Aim for quantity

Aim for as many new ideas as possible. The assumption is that the greater the number of ideas you generate, the bigger your chance is of producing a radical and effective solution. Brainstorming celebrates the maxim *"quantity breeds quality"*.

6 Build on each others' ideas

As suggested by the slogan "1+1=3", Brainstorming stimulates the building of ideas by a process of association. Embrace the most out-of-the-box notions and build, build, build. Be positive and build on the ideas of others. Brainstorming works well when participants use each other's ideas to trigger their own thinking. Our minds are highly associative. One thought easily triggers another. When we use the thoughts of others, then these will stop us getting trapped by our own thinking structures.

Best practice tip:

Try to say and encourage others to say "and" instead of "but". It takes practice, but this little trick works surprisingly well.

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7 | **Be visual**

Best practice tip:

At IDEO, they encourage you to use coloured markers to write on Post-its and put them on the wall—or sketch your idea. Nothing gets an idea across faster than drawing it. It doesn't matter how terrible of a sketcher you are! It's all about the idea behind your sketch. And d.school has two great ideas for you:

“There are at least two ways to capture the ideas of a brainstorming:

- 1. Scribe: the scribe legibly and visually captures on the board ideas that team members call out. It is very important to capture every idea, regardless of your own feelings about each idea.*
- 2. All-in: Each person will write down each of his or her ideas as they come, and verbally share it with the group. It is great to do this with post-it notes, so you can write your idea and then stick it on the board.”*

– d.school, Bootcamp Bootleg

8 | **One conversation at a time**

Listen to each other and elaborate on each other's ideas. Don't get obsessed with your own ideas. You're here to ideate together. When all team members have presented their ideas, you can select the best ideas, which you can continue to build and elaborate on in other ideation sessions. There are various methods you can use such as “Post-it Voting”, “Four Categories”, “Bingo Selection”, “Six Thinking Hats”, and “Now Wow How Matrix”.

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Should Your Team Brainstorm as a Group or as Individuals?

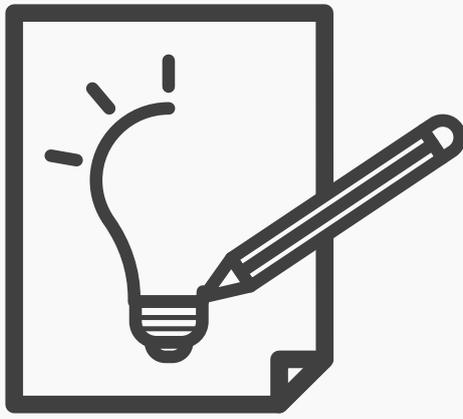
We recommend that you use the Brainstorming method along with Brainwriting, Brainwalking, and Braindumping.

Best practice:

Switching between the two modes of individual and collective ideation sessions can be seamless—and highly productive. Alex Osborn's 1950s classic *Applied Imagination* gave advice that is still relevant: Creativity comes from a blend of individual and collective ideation.

Brainstorming (group sessions) has three siblings which you should get to know: **Braindumping (individual sessions)**, **Brainwriting (a mix of individual and group sessions)** and **Brainwalking (another mix of individual and group sessions)**.

It's often a good idea to do individual ideation sessions like braindumping, brainwriting and brainwalking before *and* after brainstorming group sessions.



Brainwrite

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What

Brainwriting is a technique where participants write ideas onto cards and then pass their idea cards on to the next person, moving those cards around the group in a circle as participants build on the ideas of others. Participants perform this technique in complete silence—and they are forced to build on, instead of criticise, other participants' ideas. The cycle can be repeated multiple times and can be applied to chunks of the problem being addressed, depending on the need.

Why

The beauty of brainwriting is that it levels the playing field immediately, and it removes many of the obstacles of group brainstorming. With traditional verbal brainstorming, the number of ideas which can be expressed at once is limited, and the time it takes to get through a number of ideas is much longer, which results in many participants forgetting or becoming confused while others shout out ideas. This is especially so for those who are shy or introverted or who may be at a disadvantage due to being less senior or unfamiliar with the specialisations being discussed.

Brainwriting is an excellent starting point for ideation sessions, and can serve as a means to maximise the initial braindump, or as a way to refocus if other ideation methods go haywire. Before the chaos of group ideation muddles people's thinking, help them get their initial thoughts out in the open with an introductory brainwriting session and use the results later to build on further with other techniques.

Best practice: How

- If you are the facilitator, you'll brief ideation participants upfront on the problem statement, goals and important user insights from previous research and findings.
- Encourage participants to jot down ideas on their idea cards for 3-5 minutes before passing on their ideas when you make the call.

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- Ideally, participants pass on idea cards 3-10 times depending on the problem statement and goals.
- This all happens silently and without any interference or communication.
- Encourage participants to push themselves for more ideas at least a couple of times, in the few minutes they have, in order to maximize the output and variation.
- You should stoke the session with encouragement and provide questions or statements which push participants to think outside of their comfort zones.
- The cycle can be repeated multiple times and can be applied to chunks of the problem being addressed, depending on the need.
- After ending the cycle, each participant will briefly verbally present the thoughts on the idea card he/she ends up with by the end of the cycle to the rest of the team—in order to spark new streams of thinking or combinations of ideas. If you were the facilitator, you would often be taking notes on a white board.
- When all team members have presented their idea cards, you can select the best ideas which you can continue to build and elaborate on in other ideation sessions. There are various methods you can use such as “Post-it Voting”, “Four Categories”, “Bingo Selection” and “Now Wow How Matrix”.

Use our idea card template!

On the next page, you'll find an empty idea card template that you can print out to use in your brainwriting sessions. Have a fruitful session—and more importantly, have fun while brainwriting!

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Brainwriting idea card

Problem statement / goals / user insights

Write your ideas here! Build on the ideas written down in the space below.



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Braindump – Individual Brainstorm

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Why

One of the best ways to progress to more advanced levels of ideation is to start by getting everything that's currently clogging the neural pathways out in the open and freeing up some cognitive space for other synapses, connections, and mixtures to get through. David Allen, author of the world famous *"Getting Things Done"* methodology, swears by the braindump as a means to free up mental energy and allow freethinking. Holding onto your own thoughts, unfinished tasks, or unexplored ideas creates mental blockages and prevents freethinking. Furthermore, Braindump is an amazing technique to help quiet employees get a voice.

Best practice: How

- If you were the facilitator, you'll brief ideation participants upfront on the problem statement, goals and important insights from previous research and findings.
- Then ask all participants to write down their ideas as they come.
- It's important that each participant does this individually – and silently.
- Provide participants with sheets of paper, idea cards or traditional Post-it notes. Sticky notes are great, because they allow people to write their ideas down individually – one idea per note.
- Give participants between 3 and 10 minutes to get ideas they have been thinking of off their chests.
- After reaching the time limit of approximately 3-10 minutes, each participant will say a few words about his or her ideas and stick them on a board or wall. You should avoid initial discussions about notes when team members are presenting them. Ideas that come out of early braindump sessions should be shared verbally with the entire team in order to spark new streams of thinking or combinations of ideas.
- While sticking the ideas up and presenting them, the group will also group duplicates together.

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- When all team members have presented their ideas, you can select the best ideas, which you can continue to build and elaborate on in other ideation sessions. There are various methods you can use such as “Post-it Voting”, “Four Categories”, “Bingo Selection”, “Six Thinking Hats”, and “Now Wow How Matrix”.





Brainwalk

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What

Brainwalking is very similar to brainwriting with one small but highly impactful difference. Instead of passing idea cards or notes from one participant to another, participants have to get up from their seats and move to another spot around the brainstorming table or even to another table altogether. Bryan Mattimore came up with this technique; he's a specialist in the art of ideation and facilitation. Mattimore has many years and thousands of sessions of experience conducting ideation sessions. In his book *Idea Stormers*, he describes brainwalking as the: 'single best technique to use to begin an ideation session'.

Why

Brainwalking gets people out of their seats, gets them moving, keeps energy levels up and mixes things up enough so that the group as a whole does not get stuck delving too long down the same one-way street, without a quick exit or U turn available. Brainstorming works best when it is easy to flip or to start from scratch.

Best practice: How

- If you are the facilitator, you'll brief ideation participants upfront on the problem statement, goals and important user insights from previous research and findings.
- Encourage participants to jot down ideas on their idea cards for 3-5 minutes.
- Then they should move on to the next seat or table to continue writing down their ideas on the other participant's idea card.
- Ideally, participants move to another seat or table 3-10 times depending on the problem statement and goals.
- This all happens silently and without any interference or communication.

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- Encourage participants to push themselves for more ideas at least a couple of times, in the few minutes they have, in order to maximize the output and variation.
- You should stoke the session with encouragement and provide questions or statements which push participants to think outside of their comfort zones.
- The cycle can be repeated multiple times and can be applied to chunks of the problem being addressed, depending on the need.
- After ending the cycle, each participant will briefly verbally present the thoughts on the idea card he/she ends up with by the end of the cycle to the rest of the team—in order to spark new streams of thinking or combinations of ideas. If you were the facilitator, you would often be taking notes on a white board.
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