

Artists and inventors
aren't really more creative than
the rest of us. They just know....

THE GUESTS had arrived, and the wine was warm. Once again, I'd forgotten to refrigerate it. "Don't worry," a friend said, "I can chill it for you right away."

Five minutes later she emerged from the kitchen with the wine perfectly cooled. She was reluctant to reveal her secret, but when we threatened to report her for witchcraft, she relented.

"Easy," she said. "I poured the wine in a plastic bag and then dipped it in ice water. After a few swishes, the wine was cold. The hard part was getting it back into the bottle. I couldn't find a funnel, so I made a cone with wax paper."

My guests applauded. "How wonderful if we could all be that clever," one remarked.

A decade of re-

How to Get a Great Idea

By ROBERT ERSTEN

search has convinced me we *can*. What separates the average person from Edison, Picasso or even Shakespeare isn't creative capacity—it's the ability to tap that capacity by encouraging creative impulses and then acting upon them. Most of us seldom achieve our creative potential. I think I know why, and that I can help unlock this reservoir of ideas hiding within every one of us.

I saw this at its most basic in laboratory research with pigeons. In experiments a few years ago, I rewarded pigeons with food for climbing onto a small box and pecking a toy banana suspended above their heads. Then I taught them to push the box on the ground. Finally I confronted each pigeon with a problem. The banana was suspended out of reach, and the box was placed about 18 inches from a point directly beneath it.

In this situation a pigeon behaves much as we would: At first it looks confused, walking back and forth and stretching toward the banana. After a minute or two, it starts to push the box, stopping at just the right spot, then climbs on the box and pecks the banana.

If a pigeon can do that, just think of the possibilities for the rest of us. One puzzle I've watched students tackle is retrieving a ping-pong ball that has fallen to the bottom of a sealed, vertical drainpipe. The tools at their disposal are either too short

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to reach the ball or too wide to fit into the pipe, which is also too narrow to reach into by hand. At last some students make the connection: drainpipe=water=floating. They pour water down the hole, and the ball floats to the top.

These and many other experiments with both pigeons and people suggest concrete ways of enhancing creativity in all of us. Here are the best techniques:

Capture the fleeting. A good idea is like a rabbit. It runs by so fast that sometimes you see only its ears or tail. To capture it, you must be ready. Creative people are always poised, and that may be the only difference between us and them.

Poet Amy Lowell wrote of the urgency with which she captured new ideas. "Whatever I am doing, I lay it aside and attend to the ar-riving poem," she wrote. Like many other writers, Lowell sought paper and pencil when she saw a good idea coming. I enter new ideas into a pocket computer. Anything—even a napkin—will do.

In a letter to a friend in 1821, Ludwig van Beethoven recounted how he thought of a beautiful canon while dozing in a carriage. "But scarcely did I awake when away flew the canon," he wrote, "and I could not recall any part of it." Fortunately—for Beethoven and for us—the next day in the same carriage, the canon came back to him, and *this* time he captured it in writing.

When a good idea comes your way, jot it down—on your arm if



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necessary. Not every idea will have value, of course. The point is to capture first and evaluate later.

Daydream. Surrealist painter Salvador Dali tapped his creative potential by lying on a sofa, holding a spoon. Just as he drifted off to sleep, Dali would drop the spoon onto a plate on the floor. The sound startled him awake, and he would immediately sketch the images he had envisioned in that fertile world of semi-sleep.

Everyone experiences this strange transitional state, and everyone can take advantage of it. Try Dali's trick, or just allow yourself to daydream. For many, the "three b's"—bed, bath and bus—are conducive. There, and anywhere else you can be with your thoughts undisturbed, you'll find that ideas bubble to the surface almost unbidden.

Seek challenges. When you're stuck behind a locked door, every behavior that's ever gotten you free turns up quickly: you may push or pull on the knob, bang the door—even shout for help. Scientists call the recurrence of old behaviors in a challenging situation *resurgence*. The more behaviors that resurge, the greater the number of possible interconnections, and the more likely that new ideas will occur.

Try inviting friends and business associates from different spheres of your life to a party. Bring people of two or three generations together. This will get you thinking in new ways.

Edwin Land, one of America's most prolific inventors, credited his

three-year-old daughter with the idea that led to the Polaroid camera. On a visit to Santa Fe in 1943, she asked why she couldn't see the picture he had just taken. During the next hour, as Land walked around Santa Fe, all he had learned about chemistry came together, with amazing results. Said Land: "The camera and the film became clear to me. In my mind they were so real that I spent several hours describing them."

Put new and crazy items—like kids' toys—on your desk. Keep clay or Silly Putty in your top drawer, and mold it when you're working on a sticky problem. Turn pictures upside down or sideways. The more diverse the stimulation we receive, the more rapidly the mind spins out new ideas.

Expand your world. Many breakthroughs in science, engineering and the arts blend ideas from different fields. Consider "The Two-String Problem." Two widely separated strings hang from a ceiling. Even though you can't reach both at once, is it possible to tie their ends together, using only a pair of pliers?

One college student found the solution almost immediately. He tied the pliers to one string and set it in motion like a pendulum. As it swung back and forth, he walked quickly to the other string and drew it as far forward as it would reach. Then he caught the swinging string when it passed near him and tied the two ends.

Asked how he had solved the problem, the student explained he

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had just come from a physics class on pendulum motion. What he had learned in one context transferred to a completely different one.

This principle works outside the lab as well. A friend told me how she gets her two boys to divide a cupcake exactly in half. "I tell them that one will do the cutting and the other will select whichever half he wants. The first child always cuts straight down the middle so he won't get cheated."

I asked how she came up with this wonderful idea. "I saw a TV program on international negotiation," she said.

Rubbermaid, Inc., recently expanded its product line to include office furniture manufactured using the same blow-molding technique that the company uses to produce small plastic items for the home. Bud

Hellman, a former Rubbermaid executive, came up with the idea while touring a Rubbermaid plant where picnic coolers are manufactured. "If top management hadn't encouraged us to look at other technologies in the company," says Chuck Hassel, another Rubbermaid executive, "none of this would have happened."

To enhance your creativity, learn something new. If you're a banker, take up tap dancing. If you're a nurse, try a course in mythology. Read a book on a subject you know little about. Change your daily newspaper. The new will interconnect with the old in novel and potentially fascinating ways. Becoming more creative is really just a matter of paying attention to that endless flow of ideas you generate, and learning to capture and act upon the new that's within you.

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REPRINTED FROM THE DECEMBER 1992 ISSUE OF READER'S DIGEST
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