

Design Thinking: Idea Generation Warm Up Activities

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| AUTHOR | ASU Work+ |
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Idea generation activities can be short lessons in curiosity and opportunities to introduce participants to the true nature of brainstorming and design thinking. These activities can help participants lean into the uncomfortability of problem-solving and solution creation where initially, no idea during the generative stage is bad, logistics and details are not yet relevant, and the goal is quantity and out of the box thinking rather than quality and feasibility.

Crazy 8's

Goal: Create rapid idea iterations of a potential solution to a chosen problem by considering different approaches and letting go of perfection.

1. Provide participants with a prompt for a chosen problem or ask participants to consider their own chosen problem to consider throughout the activity
2. Give each participant a sheet of paper and have participants fold the paper to result in 8 even boxes
3. Participants will have one minute per box to consider solutions for the chosen or selected problem by drawing, doodling, listing, writing, etc. out the first solution they think of
4. Set the timer for one minute and allow participants to complete the first round of solution generation. Urge participants to think quickly and limit judgment as they will only have one minute per box.
5. Once one minute is up, tell participants to move on to the next box and reset time to one minute
6. Repeat the process until all boxes are filled, calling "Next!" after each minute lapses
7. By the end of the exercise, participants will have a grid with drawings, writings, or ideas for 8 different solutions to the chosen or prompted problem

Yes, But/Yes, And

Goal: Inspired by improv comedy, this activity helps people remain in a generative mindset by coming up with lots of ideas before deciding which one works best and shows the detriment of limited thinking.

How it works:

1. Tell a story as a group or in one on one groups. It can be helpful to start with a theme such as planning a birthday party or thinking about a future vacation
2. To begin, the leader starts the story with one sentence, like "I am planning a birthday party and it's going to be at the park"
3. The next person continues the story by saying "yes, but" and provides an addition to the story such as "yes, but if it rains it will be moved inside"
4. The story is continued by switching off each sentence and ensuring each trade off begins with the transition "yes, but..."

5. Carry out the “yes, but” until you come back to the first person or based on an allotted time
6. Then, begin again in the same fashion with the same prompt now using the transitional phrase “yes, and” to build off of each other and continue the story instead of “yes, but”
7. At the conclusion of the second go around now using “yes, and”, discuss as a group how the two storytelling experiences differed and what they noticed in the process

“Oh Good”

Goal: Supporting participants in reimagining an experience while acknowledging they cannot parallel evaluate and generate ideas at the same time.

How it works:

1. Have participants pair up and “gift” one good thing they have with them today to their partner
2. The receiver will say “oh good” and describe why they need or like that item
3. Then, have each participant “gift” one bad thing they have with them and the receiver will again say “oh good” and share why they want or need that bad thing

Nine Whys

Goal: For participants to gain interrogative candor by asking ‘why’ and ultimately getting a clear understanding of not only why they are gathering but what the purpose of the meeting is by demonstrating curiosity.

How it works:

1. Have participants pair up
2. One participant will ask the following prompt: “What do you do when working on _____ (the subject matter or challenge at hand or you can provide a random topic for all groups to use)? Please make a short list of activities involved.”
3. After listening to the list of steps and activities from their partner, the prompting participants will then ask “Why is that important to you?”
4. After listening again, the prompting participant will continue to ask “Why?” and listen to their partner’s response, asking “Why” up to nine times or until they can go no deeper into the subject because they reached the fundamental purpose of the work or the foundational why of the prompt

Quick Ideas

Goal: To generate as many ideas as possible, quickly. Focus on quantity over quality here! Participants will work individually to come up with as many initial ideas as possible in eight minutes to work through the idea block or to warm participants up for deep, in-depth idea generation to come.

How it works:

1. Share a challenge with participants – either one already chosen through the process by participants or selected by you for the sake of the activity. Ensure everyone is aligned with the challenge and fully understands it.
2. Provide participants with stacks of sticky notes and pens or markers

3. Set the timer for 15 minutes and ask participants to come up with as many quick ideas or considerations as they can
4. When the timer goes off, ask the participants to stick their ideas to a wall without presentation or context and all at the same time

Assumptions Envelope

Goal: Surface concerns, release tension, and encourage participants to come in with an open mind.

How it works:

1. Before you kick off a sprint, project, or brainstorming meeting, ask everyone to write down their assumptions, preconceived notions, or ideas limiting their idea generation on slips of paper you provide
2. As the facilitator, you can ask folks to share out one of theirs, you can read off some anonymously, or choose to not have them shared out at all
3. Collect all of the slips of paper into an envelope to signify everyone is putting the assumptions, notions, and limitations away for the duration of your time together

Round Robin

Goal: Ensure every voice in the room is heard by building on each others contributions

How it works:

1. Let the team reflect back on the challenge or problem you're all trying to solve. You can allow questions at this stage, but nip any circular discussions in the bud! The goals here is to make sure the team is aligned on the challenge, not to tweak the formulation of the problem or come up with a new one.
2. Set a timer for a couple of minutes and let all your participants silently note down their initial ideas on a (digital) sticky note. The exercise is done in the together alone mode, so no discussions or idea sharing should be taking place at this point!
3. Once everyone has jotted down their idea, have each person pass their idea to the person next to them.
4. Now that your participants have exchanged their sticky notes, set the timer for another couple of minutes and let your group come up with another round of ideas. Tell your attendees to use the ideas of their team members as inspiration for their new idea.
5. Once everyone's ready, tell them to pass on their new idea to their neighbor. Repeat the steps until a good amount of ideas has been gathered for your challenge.

Pencil Questions

Goal: Introduce idea generation through the use of a common object and spark curiosity by incorporating question asking.

How it works:

1. Divide your group up into pairs
2. Give every group a pencil or project an image of a pencil
3. Prompt everyone to come up with as many questions as they can about the pencil in 30 seconds. Request

the goal of at least 10 questions with no judgment – the wilder the better.

4. After the allotted time, share out loud the questions with the larger group

List It Out

Goal: Allow for brainstorming and idea generation for all learning types without having to shout out ideas by providing individual working time and begin to allow space to defer judgment or criticism of ideas.

How it works:

1. Choose a topic as random as you'd like such as how to make driving more enjoyable, things people bring to an airport, things people do in a kitchen
2. Give participants 3 to 5 minutes to list out everything they can think of without talking to others
3. When time is done, share out to the room and allow everyone to share at least one response or idea

Mash Up

Goal: To remind participants many great new ideas come from existing ones without allowing it to limit creativity or innovation.

How it works:

1. Come up with two different random topics such as items found in a junk drawer and items found at a hardware store
2. Provide participants with a sheet of paper and ask them to fold the paper in half hot dog style
3. Introduce one of two idea topics to your participants and give participants 3 minutes to write as many items or ideas as they can
4. Have participants flip over their paper to the blank other half and introduce the second topic and have participants write as many items or ideas as they can for this second theme in 3 minutes
5. Ask participants to unfold their paper and in small groups share out their ideas
6. Participants are then to pair up one item from each list to come up with a new idea that incorporates both items together
7. Share out combined item ideas to large group

Paper Airplanes

Goal: To kick off a meeting, especially if participants don't know each other or work together closely, and dive into idea generation through one on one interpersonal relationship building.

How it works:

1. Offer participants paper (consider offering different colored paper for added fun) and ask them to write their name and a challenge they are currently facing or working on onto the piece of paper
2. Everyone folds their paper into a paper airplane and shoots them across the room
3. All participants pick up an airplane at random and write down a few possible solutions to the provided

challenge (may even include silly or off the wall solutions)

4. Find the person whose airplane you picked up and share your ideas back with them

100 Ideas

Goal: To gather as many ideas as possible in a short period of time by encouraging free thinking, creative problem-solving, and pushing beyond obvious solutions.

How it works:

1. Choose a topic or problem by selecting a specific area or challenge you or your participants want to generate ideas about. This can be related to the challenge of the sprint or can be a random topic for a true ice breaker activity.
2. Set the group expectations of quantity over quality and no judgment or filter during the activity
3. Set a time limit ranging anywhere from 5 to 30 minutes or longer
4. Grab a physical piece of paper and a pen, use a computer, or a white board and designate an idea tracker (best if this is one of the facilitators and not an idea contributor)
5. Begin writing down ideas related to the chosen topic or problem as they are shared out
6. Encourage participants to let their mind flow freely and simply record any thoughts they share
7. Keep going until you reach 100 ideas or run out of time
8. Push your participants to keep generating ideas if they hit a lull but there is still time on the clock and encourage them to name the obvious and go beyond that to be more creative, unique, and out of the box
9. When time is up, review the ideas
10. If this activity is used to jumpstart the sprint by using a prompt that is a true challenge, begin to refine and evaluate the list looking for patterns, connections, or standout concepts that could be further explored or developed

Visual Telephone

Goal: To support participants in thinking visually and help them get unstuck at any point of the design thinking process. This activity helps participants get to know each other while practicing the skill of visual interpretation.

How it works:

1. Break your participants into groups of at least 3 and provide each individual in the group with piece of paper and pen
2. Each member of the group will write one sentence (silly or serious) on the top of their piece of paper
3. Fold the top of the paper to hide the sentence that was written and pass the paper to the person in their group on their right
4. Have them unfold the paper they received to be able to read the written sentence
5. Ask participants to draw a picture of what they see on this piece of paper
6. Fold their paper again to hide the sentence at the top and then fold it again to hide the picture they drew

below it

7. Pass the piece of paper to their right again with both the sentence and the drawing covered
8. When the participant receives their new paper, unfold the paper you received to reveal only the picture, not the sentence
9. Ask participants to now write a new sentence below their received drawing, describing what they see
10. Fold the paper three times to now hide the first sentence, the picture, and the last sentence they wrote
11. Pass their paper to the right
12. Unfold the paper they received to reveal only the last sentence written
13. Have participants draw a picture based on the sentence they read
14. Fold the paper four times and pass to their right
15. Repeat this process until the participant receives the original paper they started with
16. Ask participants to unfold their original paper and see how much the story changed through the process

Worst Possible Idea/Reverse Brainstorming

Goal: By thinking of the worst possible solution to a problem, participants will use this inverted search process to be released from their limitations, boost their confidence, and stoke their creativity to example ideas, challenge assumptions, and gain insights from each other towards truly great ideas.

How it works:

1. Begin with a prompt, theme, or challenge
2. Ask participants to share out as many bad ideas as possible for a designated amount of time
3. After gathering all the bad ideas, next ask participants to list all the properties of those terrible ideas
4. Discuss what makes the worst of these so bad
5. Then, begin asking participants what the opposite of the worst attribute would be
6. Challenge participants to substitute something else in place of the worst attribute
7. Consider mixing and matching the various awful ideas to see what happens

Resources Shared From

[Effective Ideation Exercises & How to Use Them](#)

[10 Activities to Generate Better Ideas](#)

[The Best Design Thinking Exercises for Each Phase of a Project](#)

[10 Brainstorming Techniques for Developing New Ideas](#)