Better Brainstorms
How to have more productive brainstorming sessions

Start with these four ground rules

1. Defer judgment
Allow all ideas to come onto the board
Save analysis and evaluation for later

2. Go for quantity - lots of ideas
Push for fluency - lots of different ideas
Reach for flexibility - lots of different ideas

3. Get radical
Encourage wild, crazy, stupid ideas
It’s easier to tone down than pump up

4. Leapfrog
Build on others’ ideas
Let yours go freely into the mix and take on a life of their own

Frame the question in generative terms
• A well posed question sparks ideas immediately on hearing
• A “how to?” will inspire more readily than a ‘why?’
• A less effective question stalls when the first response is, “what does that mean?”

Run structured ideation sessions for product teams
Include stakeholders and crossfunctional teams
Schedule half-day to two-day sessions
Format:
• Background briefing: users, context, goals, constraints
• Break into small groups (6-10) with facilitators
• Ideas on Postits; Postits on board
• 40-60 minutes of facilitated brainstorm
• Cluster Postits on poster boards
• Participants pick promising ideas & form xfunc teams around them
• Each team develops a concept and product story
• Stories presented to entire group in storyboard format

Give a framework for product stories
• User
Identify the user, based on the target user group
• Context
Describe context or situation in which the problem exists
• Problem
Describe an incident or condition that motivates the use of the solution
• Solution
Show how they access and use the solution to address their need
• Outcome
Describe the outcome of the situation - the payoff, the problem solved, the happy user

Watch for side effects of better brainstorms
• People feel empowered when their ideas are heard.
• Teams find a different way of relating to their project.
They see where other ideas are coming from.
• People discover a different way of relating to each other.
They gain experience in constructive collaboration.

Sources
— Your Creative Power (Abridged). Purdue University Press, 1999
Dufour, Dave. Fifty Phrases That Kill Creativity
creativememes.dufourcreative.com/?page_id=22
Patnak, Dev. The Ebb and Flow of Ideation
Photo of Alex Osborn:
www.creativeducactionfoundaion.org/?page_id=289

The origins of brainstorming
Brainstorming was defined in 1939 by Alex Osborn at the advertising firm BBDO. He saw that his creative teams were most productive when they followed four ground rules. He coined the term brainstorming, since the process felt like “storming a problem in a commando fashion.”
See more of Osborn’s ideas in Your Creative Power, and Applied Imagination.

Fifty Phrases that Kill Creativity
Daniel Dufour

1. Our place is different.
2. We tried that before.
3. It costs too much.
4. That’s not my job.
5. They’re too busy to do that.
6. We don’t have the time.
7. Not enough help.
8. It’s too radical a change.
9. The staff will never buy it.
10. It’s against company policy.
11. The union will scream.
12. That will run up our overhead.
13. We don’t have the authority.
14. Let’s get back to reality.
15. That’s not our problem.
16. I don’t like the idea.
17. I’m not saying you’re wrong but...
18. You’re two years ahead of your time.
19. Now’s not the right time.
20. It isn’t in the budget.
22. Good thought, but impractical.
23. Let’s give it more thought.
24. We’ll be the laughingstock of the industry.
25. Not that again.
26. Where’d you dig that one up?
27. We did alright without it before.
28. It’s never been tried.
29. Let’s put that on the back burner for now.
30. Let’s form a committee.
31. It won’t work in our place.
32. The executive committee will never go for it.
33. I don’t see the connection.
34. Let’s all sleep on it.
35. It can’t be done.
36. It’s too much trouble to change.
37. It wasn’t pay for itself.
38. It’s impossible.
39. I know a person who tried it and got fired.
40. We’ve always done it this way.
41. We’d lose money in the long run.
42. Don’t rock the boat.
43. That’s what we can expect from the staff.
44. Has anyone else ever tried it?
45. Let’s look into it further.
46. We’ll have to answer to the stockholders.
47. Quit dreaming.
48. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.
49. That’s too much ivory tower.
50. It’s too much work.

Checklist for Transforming Ideas
Alex Osborn

Put to other uses?
New ways to use as is?
Other uses if modified?
Adapt?
What else is like this?
What other idea does this suggest?
Does the past offer parallels?
What could I copy?
Whom could I emulate?
Modify?
New twist?
Change meaning, motion?
Other shapes?
Magnify?
What to add?
More time?
Greater frequency?
Stronger?
Higher?
Longer?
Extra Value?
Plus ingredient?
Duplicated?
Multiply?
Exaggerate?
Mindly?
What to subtract?
Smaller?
Condensed?
Miniature?
Lower?
Shorter?
Lighter?
Out?
Streamline?
Split up?
Understate?
Combine?
How about a blend, an alloy?
Combine units?
Combine purposes?
Combine appeals?
Combine ideas?

B E E R
L I Q U I D
D R E N C H

“...Out of a hundred ideas, the first sixty ideas produced five that were actually new or different, the next twenty produced nothing but laughter, and ideas right to a hundred produced another ten that were amazing. Thankfully, we didn’t give up when the well ran dry around idea number sixty.”
— Dev Patnak, Jump The Ebb and Flow of Ideation

Gayle Curtis
IA Summit 2010
Find this poster at gaylec curtis.com/laventure

More journalistic than stenographic

Stories presented to entire group in storyboard format

Outline

SAY YES TO MORE IDEAS

SAY LOTS OF IDEAS

GO WILD UP

MASH

Set up the session
• Get everybody to agree to play
“Let’s brainstorm!” — “Yeah!”
• Have a facilitator
“What else...?”
• Record the ideas
More journalistic than stenographic
• Time box
Define the play period

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- Dev Patnak, Jump The Ebb and Flow of Ideation

Fifty Phrases That Kill Creativity

- Alex Osborn, Your Creative Power, New York, 1949
- Daniel Dufour, Fifty Phrases That Kill Creativity, 1999
- C. Scribner’s Sons, 1953