

## Thinking Outside the Box

Helen Sword

**Question:** Can you suggest some strategies for thinking and writing ‘outside the box’ – that is, for bringing creative as well as critical energies to bear on my research?

**Keywords:** academic writing; research; creativity; critical thinking; multiple intelligences; lateral thinking

### Answer:

Academics are supposed to be innovative thinkers, yet sometimes we can feel as though the research process is crushing rather than unleashing our creativity. Julia Cameron (1992) notes that universities mostly train students to be critical, not creative – a real handicap when it comes to generating new ideas and new ways of doing things.

The following suggestions are designed to get you thinking about your research from unexpected and unusual angles. For best results, approach each exercise with an open mind and in a spirit of playfulness.

### *Free writing*

Peter Elbow (1981) advocates **free writing** as a quick and easy way of getting your creative juices flowing. Grab a pen and paper (some writers favour high quality fountain pens and attractively bound notebooks, others are not so fussy), settle yourself someplace where you will not be disturbed (a park bench or café would be ideal, but an office with the door closed works just fine too) and resolve to write without interruption for a predetermined amount of time. As you write, don’t allow your pen to leave the paper for more than a few seconds at a time. You may feel emotional barriers rising or falling and unexpected thoughts surging through your head. Whatever happens, your goal is to keep writing continuously until your time is up, without stopping to correct errors, read over what you have just written or polish your prose. Afterwards you can shape your words into something more coherent – or not. The process, not the product, is the point of the exercise.

Don’t know what to write about? Try the following:

- Write about all the ways in which your research arouses your passion, stokes your commitments and gives you pleasure.
- Write about the funny side, the absurd side or even the dark side of your research project.
- Write about the ways in which your family background and cultural values influence your research. Does your identity as a Māori or indigenous scholar find its way into your academic writing? If not, why not? How might you integrate your personal and professional identities more closely?
- Write a poem about your research – anything from a confessional rant about your scholarly struggles to a series of graceful haiku about your research subject.
- Choose an object that is meaningful to you – a waka, a kete, a bone carving – and write about how your research project resembles that object.
- Alternatively, ask a friend, relative, or small child to write down the name of an object for you – something specific enough that you can actually picture it, such as a fat wood pigeon or a pohutukawa blossom. Free-write about all the ways in which your research resembles that object.

Academics often talk about ‘writing up’ their research, as though putting words to paper were an afterthought to be taken care of once the ‘real’ research is done. These free writing exercises will remind you that writing itself is a generative act, an engine for innovative thinking.

### **Visual techniques**

Free drawing and free sculpting offer visual alternatives to free writing. Neuropsychologist Allan Paivio (1986) and others have documented that words and images are processed by the brain along entirely separate pathways. If you are primarily a visual or spatial thinker, drawing or sculpting can help you crystallise ideas that you find challenging to express in words. Conversely, if you are primarily a verbal thinker, visual techniques such as mind-mapping and colour-coding can shift you out of your textual comfort zone and inspire you to think in new ways.

- Draw a picture of your research as a tree, a river, a taniwha or whatever other metaphor comes to mind. As with the free-writing exercises described above, resolve to keep drawing for a set amount of time, even if you feel you have run out of time.
- Draw a blueprint of your research, with each section or chapter represented as a separate room. Does your ‘building’ resemble a classic New Zealand villa, with all the rooms opening off a central hallway? A railway cottage, in which one room leads directly to the next? An open-plan office? A shopping mall? A dark, formless cave?
- Draw a bird’s eye view of your research, with various aspects of your work (your topic, your main argument, your research subjects, your colleagues) depicted as features of the landscape. How would a traveller from another country journey through this landscape? Where are the obstacles: the patches of quicksand, the bridgeless river, the forking paths?
- Draw a mind-map of your research, starting with your central thesis or research question and working outward from there, arranging chapters or sections or supplementary questions like spokes radiating from a hub. For more detailed instructions on mind-mapping, see Tony Buzan’s *Mind Map Book* (1996) or any of the many computer programs that include mind-mapping software.
- Colour-code your research: for example, by going through each paragraph of an article or chapter and using coloured highlighters to signal connections between themes or ideas.

Use these visual exercises to gain insight into the structure – and structural weaknesses – of your work.

### **Other strategies for thinking ‘outside the box’**

Edward de Bono (1970) associates creativity with lateral thinking: a person’s ability to step sideways when everyone else is walking in a straight line or to solve problems by foraging in new places rather than by digging the same hole deeper. Search libraries, bookstores and the Web for creativity-themed books and websites that can help you stretch your mental muscles and develop your creative thinking skills. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Draw and write on **‘both sides of the brain’**. Neuropsychologists have determined that the left side of the human brain regulates logical, linear thinking, whereas the right side is associated with more intuitive, holistic modes of thought. Artist Betty Edwards (1979) and creative writer Henriette Anne Klauser (1986) suggest numerous exercises aimed at accessing that elusive ‘right brain’ mode.
- Tap into your **multiple intelligences**. Educator Howard Gardner (1983) has identified eight ‘intelligences’ that, he says, all humans possess to varying degrees: linguistic, spatial, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Western educational institutions traditionally teach to and test for only two of these domains of knowledge: linguistic (a facility for verbal expression and analysis) and logical-mathematical (a facility for logical, abstract thinking). Make a conscious effort to apply *all* your talents and skills to your research – for example, by

drawing on your ‘interpersonal intelligence’ to interact effectively with your research team.

- Gain fresh perspectives on your research by donning different “**thinking hats**.” Edward de Bono (1985) recommends that you look at any given problem or situation from six different viewpoints: the white hat (facts and figures); the red hat (emotions and feelings); the black hat (cautious and careful); the yellow hat (speculative-positive); the green hat (creative thinking); the blue hat (control of thinking).
- Cultivate **undisciplined thinking**:
  - Choose a text, picture or news item from outside your discipline – a literary quotation, a historical vignette, a whakataukī, a scientific phenomenon, a movie plot – and free-write about how you might incorporate that item into a presentation or publication about your research. What connections, however tenuous, can you draw?
  - Ask colleagues from outside your discipline to recommend work by the best and most accessible writers in their field. As you read, consider form as well as content: What strategies do these authors use to engage and inform their readers? Are those strategies different from the ones commonly used in your discipline? Can you spot any new techniques worth borrowing?
  - ‘Read like a butterfly, write like a bee’. Novelist Philip Pullman (2002) advises writers to read widely and voraciously, without necessarily worrying about whether a given book or article will be useful for a particular project.

‘Thinking outside the box’ is a strategy worth cultivating not just in your academic work but in all aspects of your life. Even – or especially! – if you don’t regard yourself as a very creative person, these exercises will prompt you to look around, open your mind and reflect critically on your research and writing.

## References

- Buzan, T. (1996). *The mind map book: How to use radiant thinking to maximize your brain's untapped potential*. New York: Plume.
- Cameron, J. (1992). *The artists' way: A spiritual path to a higher creativity*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam.
- de Bono, E. (1970). *Lateral thinking: Creativity step by step*. New York: Harper & Row.
- de Bono, E. (1985). *Six thinking hats*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Co.
- Edwards, B. (1979). *Drawing on the right side of the brain: A course in enhancing creativity and artistic confidence*. Los Angeles, CA: J. P. Tarcher.
- Elbow, P. (1981). *Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Klauser, H. A. (1986). *Writing on both sides of the brain: Breakthrough techniques for people who write*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins.

Paivio, A. (1986). *Mental representations: A dual coding approach*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Pullman, P. (2002). From Exeter to Jordan. *Oxford Today: The University Magazine*, 14 (3).

### **Author Notes**

Associate Professor Helen Sword is head of the Academic Development at The University of Auckland and Head of the Academic Practice Group, Centre for Academic Development, The University of Auckland

E-mail: [h.sword@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:h.sword@auckland.ac.nz)