

APA DIVISION 15 PRESENTS



ONE TIP

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Ideas Matter

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My last undergraduate course was marine biogeochemistry. I needed one more science course for my chemistry degree, and I like the ocean (seriously, it came down to that).

I recall little of the science, but I vividly remember my professor's stories. My peers saw them as time-wasting digressions, but I saw the value in tales about research gone awry, opportunities seized, and his genius in paying extra for smoked turkey at his daughter's wedding.

One particular story has stuck with me. As a graduate student, he came up with an interesting idea. He refined it, bounced it off of his professors, and was pretty sure he'd solved one of marine chemistry's pressing questions. He wrote a letter to the world's most famous marine chemist to get some feedback.



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Did he ever get it! The eminent researcher sent a long, handwritten letter that berated my professor for thinking he could solve such a big problem in the field. My professor joked that the letter “hurt a bit.” But then he noted that the screed never mentioned the quality of the idea – not once! “That,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, “was when I knew I was right.” Pursuing the idea helped establish his career.

My take-away from his story (other than “don’t punch down”) was that high-quality, unique ideas matter. In my own work, papers that have resonated the most are those with creative ideas at their core: unique perspectives, outside-of-the-box interpretations, different ways of thinking about data.

On the flip side, I’ll occasionally stumble on one of my old papers that few cited – and that I’d forgotten about. Those papers are almost always devoid of fresh ideas. Even a little innovation can be a massive value-add for scholars’ work.

The good news is that it isn’t that hard to come up with good ideas. People write books on the topic, but I’ll just share some strategies that have worked for me over the years.

When you boil it down, creativity is about transforming old stuff into new stuff. Sometimes you’re combining old stuff, or modifying it, or just looking at it from a different perspective. The key here is that you need “stuff.” In other words, knowledge is critically important to idea generation. Read whatever you can get your hands on, attend talks even if they’re outside your areas of interest, ask colleagues about their work. Absorb and think about as much information as you can. Extra bonus: When someone asks you to do something, you can say, “I’m working!” as you watch TV or read a Substack newsletter.

As implied above, breadth of knowledge is just as important to creativity as depth of knowledge. Consuming a wide range of information helps you find perspectives that others in your field may not have come across. Maintaining a healthy breadth of information also helps guard against functional fixedness – the tendency to get cognitively constrained when thinking about a problem, such as, “We approach this type of problem in only this way in our field”).

Seek out opportunities to play with ideas and get feedback. A historian once told me that major theories often appeared for the first time in textbooks, because the author had the flexibility to offer a new perspective without the risk of having it crushed by peer review. I use a similar strategy: When asked to write review chapters, I do the invited review but always try to move some major conceptual idea forward. In my experience, most editors are more than willing to give you this flexibility.

Finally, ask yourself, “What’s new and interesting here?” as you do your work. This is important even if reporting on a direct replication! Not every aspect of your work needs to be innovative, but you should strive to put something fresh into everything you produce. Conceptualizing your work as a search for valuable ideas increases its impact and keeps it interesting for both you and the field.

ONE TIP is published quarterly by APA Division 15 (Educational Psychology). In each issue, senior scholars share their stories and insights to guide and inspire junior scholars. For recommendations or suggestions, please contact Serena Shim, Division 15 ONE TIP Editor, at sshim@bsu.edu

