



THE 30-DAY CREATIVITY CHALLENGE

ED BELL



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CONTENTS

OK, Let's Get Your Creativity On	i
Day 1: The Bucket List	3
Day 2: Green Day	5
Day 3: One-liners	7
Day 4: Travel Plans	9
Day 5: The Crosshairs Challenge.....	11
Day 6: Country-lebrities.....	13
Day 7: The Emoji Challenge	15
Day 8: Free Write #1	17
Day 9: Word Gaps.....	19
Day 10: Twenty Places.....	21
Day 11: Word Halves	23
Day 12: The Autograph Challenge	25
Day 13: Assuming Otherwise.....	27
Day 14: Free Write #2.....	29
Day 15: The Relationship Challenge.....	31
Day 16: The Circle Challenge.....	33
Day 17: The Explanation Challenge.....	35
Day 18: The Draw-It-Yourself Rorschach Test	37
Day 19: Free Write #3.....	39

Day 20: The Empathy Challenge	41
Day 21: The Hexomino Challenge	43
Day 22: The New Bucket List.....	45
Day 23: Yes We Can: Problem Solving #1	47
Day 24: Three Haikus	49
Day 25: The Failure Challenge.....	51
Day 26: The Storyboarding Challenge	53
Day 27: The Persistence Challenge	55
Day 28: Not A or B, but C: Problem Solving #2	57
Day 29: The Core Beliefs Challenge	59
Day 30: The Top Row Challenge	61
 That's a Wrap – What Now?	 63

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At The Song Foundry it's our mission to share great songwriting ideas with the world. At thesongfoundry.com we publish articles about songwriting, host free videos on various songwriting topics, and offer Skype songwriting coaching worldwide.



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OK, LET'S GET YOUR CREATIVITY ON

Hello. Holá. Konichiwa. And welcome to *The 30-Day Creativity Challenge*, a unique set of daily challenges designed to turn your creative skills up to eleven.

Over the next thirty days you'll find yourself thinking up twenty unusual things you can do with household items, turning bare sketches into interesting images and reflecting on what creativity means more broadly in your life – all with the ultimate goal of making yourself more creative.

But hang on a second. Is that definitely a thing? Is creativity something you can learn?

The short answer is yes. A slightly longer answer is yesss. And an even longer answer is yes – scientists have studied it.* (And artists could have told you it anyway.)

See, just like you'd find it weird if anyone said "I just don't speak French" or "Gosh darn it, I just don't play the clarinet" – as if it's possible to be good those things without trying – there's no such thing as "I'm just not creative."

Instead, there's only "Well, actually, I'm as creative as anyone else, I've just not spent a ton of time developing that particular skill yet."

* For an eminently readable summary of some of this research, check out <http://creativityatwork.com/2012/03/23/can-creativity-be-taught/>

THE 30-DAY CREATIVITY CHALLENGE

In other words: **creativity is not a talent you have, it's a skill you learn.** It's something you get better at the more you do it. It's something you improve by *practicing it*.

And, in short, that's what this book is here to help you do.

The challenges are pretty mixed in what they'll have you do – which means you'll enjoy some more than others, and might find some of them weird or a bit crazy. Well, some of them are weird or a bit crazy. But don't go skipping anything – that's really important.

Because the truth is, the most important thing you need to do in working through these challenges is to get into the habit of working through them – to give yourself the time and space you need to be creative. Because, just like in the gym, developing your creative muscles means putting in your creative reps. Because, as dancer, choreographer and author Twyla Tharp said, "Creativity is a habit, and the best creativity is the result of good work habits."

So before you start, you'll need a plan for setting aside a 15-minute slot every day for thirty days – ten minutes for the challenge, plus a few extra to read and understand it – without fail.

You can do the challenges whenever you like, but for the sake of making them a habit, I recommend you pick the same or a similar time each day. (First thing in the morning – while your mind is still fresh – is a great time.) Then, all you'll need to work through them is a pen or pencil and a pad of paper. Some of the challenges you could do on a phone or tablet, but so you can focus for ten minutes without distractions, writing on something that won't buzz with notifications is a great idea.

Of course, if you're super keen you could do two or even three challenges per day. I recommend doing them over thirty as they were

THE 30-DAY CREATIVITY CHALLENGE

designed, but it's cool if you want to try something different. As long as you carve out thirty uninterrupted 15-minute slots to do the challenges, you'll get all the benefits you can from them.

Finally, each challenge comes with a specific target – like think of at least twenty things that fit some specific criteria, or draw at least fifteen things that do something specific. I based these goals on what's typically possible in ten minutes to give you a target to aim for – but if you do less or more some days, that's OK. As I said, I tried to make the challenges open-ended enough that anyone can do them, so your results may vary, and that's fine.

And that's basically all there is to it.

Since they're creative challenges, there are no right answers – so you won't find any answers at the back of the book. But if you're the kind of person who loves to compare your answers to someone else's, you could find a friend to do the challenges at the same time and then compare notes. (That's also a great way to hold yourself accountable if you know that's going to be difficult for you.)

So there we go.

Here's to the art – and skill – of being creative. The art – and skill – of creating something out of nothing. The art – and skill – of not just thinking outside of the box but of realizing there only was a box in the first place if you're happy to put yourself inside one.

And, by the way, it's an art and skill that isn't just for artists and quote-unquote creative people. It's for entrepreneurs who want to solve people's problems. It's for employees who want to be more productive and more engaged at their job. It's for anyone who wants to have better personal relationships, it's for anyone who wants to live a more rewarding, more interesting life, and – best of all – it's

THE 30-DAY CREATIVITY CHALLENGE

for anyone who wants to leave the world a better place than they found it.

It's an art and skill for anyone who wants to be smarter and faster about creating *anything*. Because that's the best thing about creative skills – they apply to *everything* creative. And once you have them, you can have fun using them whenever you like and wherever you like, whatever you decide is worth creating.

Because as Albert Einstein supposedly said, “Creativity is intelligence having fun.”

Except, truth be told, he probably didn't – it turns out someone turned ‘attributing snappy one liners to famous dead scientists’ into their own creative project. But the sentiment is definitely true: creativity is supposed to be fun.

So without further ado, let's go have some.

THE 30-DAY CREATIVITY CHALLENGE

[DAY 1]

THE BUCKET LIST

“Creativity involves breaking out of established patterns in order to look at things in a different way.”

EDWARD DE BONO

Lots of people think creativity is just coming up with ideas out of nothing. And while that's kind of true, all creative ideas have to come from *somewhere*: they come from things, concepts or ideas that already exist but get put together in new and unexpected ways.

Your first challenge – thinking up unusual things to do with everyday items – gives you the opportunity to practice exactly that.

Why it matters: Creativity is about taking existing concepts and ideas and doing something new with them.

THE 30-DAY CREATIVITY CHALLENGE

DAY 1 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Think of at least twenty things you can do with a bucket.

Remember: you get bonus points for every unusual answer you come up with. So 'watering the plants' is an OK answer. But 'ridiculous paperweight' is a great one.

And as I said in the introduction, if you get to twenty things well before ten minutes is up, keep going.

[DAY 2]

GREEN DAY

“To have a great idea, have a lot of them.”

“When you have exhausted all possibilities, remember this –
you haven’t.”

THOMAS EDISON

It’s easy to assume that great, creative thinkers are just better at coming up with great, creative ideas. But that’s not how it works.

Great, creative thinkers have as many terrible ideas as everyone else. They’re just better at saying no to their average or OK ideas and pushing themselves to keep trying different things until they get to the really interesting ones.

In other words, creative people are good at coming up with way more ideas than they need – then picking out the best ideas from all the options. That’s what today’s challenge is all about.

Why it matters: Coming up with your best creative ideas means trying out tons of different ideas, so you can pick out the best ones.

DAY 2 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Come up with at least forty objects that are green.

It's OK to come up with obvious answers – like 'grass' – especially when you start. But once you've exhausted those, to get to forty objects you'll have to start thinking up not-so-obvious answers too – like 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles'.

Once you're done, take a moment to pick out your best four or five ideas, if you like.

[DAY 3]

ONE-LINERS

“But out of limitations comes creativity.”

DEBBIE ALLEN

Creativity thrives on limitations. Lots of people assume it's the opposite, but *not* being able to do *anything* helps you focus on doing *something*. And often those limitations help you do that something in a specific and distinctive way you might not have thought of otherwise.

Today's challenge is a drawing challenge with a simple limitation: you can't take your pen or pencil off the paper.

Why it matters: Being able to work within limitations is an essential part of being creative, and a great way of creating something you might not have done otherwise.

DAY 3 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Sketch each of these six things in a single line – that is, without taking your pen or pencil off the paper:

[1] stick man

[2] apple

[3] skyscraper

[4] sunset

[5] virus

[6] bus stop

Rough sketches are fine – you don't have tons of time, so you don't have to add tons of detail.

The real challenge here is finding creative ways to celebrate the restriction imposed on you: to make a feature of the places you'd love to take your pen or pencil off the paper but can't. This includes if you make a mistake or draw something you didn't mean to – keep your pen or pencil on the paper and find a way to work with it.

[DAY 4]

TRAVEL PLANS

“When you can do a common thing in an uncommon way,
you will command the attention of the world.”

GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER

Today’s challenge is about getting from A to B – specifically from London to Barcelona. And like the other brainstorming challenges you’ve done, the challenge is to think beyond the obvious and see where that takes you.

Why it matters: Creativity often begins by exhausting the obvious or well-known possibilities before pushing yourself into the more unusual ones.

DAY 4 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Come up with at least fifteen ways you could get from London to Barcelona.

As usual, you can start with more obvious ones – like ‘fly’ or ‘hitchhike’. But then try more unusual ones – like ‘coach tour’ or ‘cargo ship’. So it’s not just about listing different types of vehicles, but different contexts or situations you could end up travelling between the two cities.

If you need to check where London and Barcelona are on a map before you start, go ahead. But for reference, they’re about 700 miles apart, and there’s at least 20 miles of sea to cross to get between them.

[DAY 5]

THE CROSSHAIRS CHALLENGE

“Every new idea is just a mashup or a remix of one or more previous ideas.”

AUSTIN KLEON

One fun kind of creative project is a theme and variations, where you take the essence of an idea or concept and turn it into tons of related but different things.

Today’s challenge is an opportunity to practice that – you’re going to take the three elements of a simple crosshairs symbol and see what else you can make with them.

Why it matters: Once you know the tools at your disposal, creating different and interesting things means combining or using those tools in different and interesting ways.

DAY 5 CHALLENGE

 10 mins

Sketch at least fifteen different designs made up of a circle and two straight lines. Then give them names or titles, like these:



Crosshairs



Ferris Wheel



**Holy Hand
Grenade**

The lines can be any length. The circle can be any size. All of those things can touch each other or not. The goal is to think of as many individual designs as you can, then have some fun labeling them.

Like always, if you get to fifteen designs with time to spare, keep going.

[DAY 6]

COUNTRY-LEBRITIES

“Creativity is the ability to see relationships where none existed.”

THOMAS DISCH

OK. Let's have some fun.

One of the best things about being creative is that it's not always about coming up with great ideas, but often about discovering great ideas that are already sitting out there somewhere, just waiting to be noticed.

Today's challenge – a fun game of mashing up country and celebrity names – is a chance to do just that: to connect things you already know about in ways you've never thought of before.

Why it matters: Creativity is discovery – it's about making connections between things you already know about, but in unexpected ways.

DAY 6 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Sometimes, you can mash the end of a country name into the name of a celebrity, like this:

Argentina + Tina Turner = ArgenTina Turner

Sudan + Daniel Radcliffe = SuDaniel Radcliffe

Find at least twelve more of them.

What counts as a country and what counts as a celebrity? Ten minutes isn't enough time to debate whether Taiwan counts as a sovereign nation or how many Twitter followers anyone has. So use your judgment: if most people you know would agree that somewhere is a country or someone is a celebrity, it's all good.

[DAY 7]

THE EMOJI CHALLENGE

“Get into your own creativity. Sketch and paint with different mediums and follow your heart.”

PETER MAX

Yesterday's challenge was about discovering things that fit a specific format – they either work or they don't. In today's challenge there's also a specific theme, but you get much more room to use your imagination and do things your way.

Why it matters: Creativity is about rolling with a specific idea or theme, then adding your own brand of imagination and ingenuity to it.

DAY 7 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Draw fifteen medium-sized circles. Now add lines and shapes to make them into fifteen different emojis expressing different emotions.

This challenge isn't just about replicating the fifteen emojis in your most-used tab. You can make up new ones or reinvent existing ones – just aim to make each one express a different mood or emotion.

[DAY 8]

FREE WRITE #1

“If you hear a voice within you say ‘you cannot paint,’ then
by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced.”

VINCENT VAN GOGH

Sometimes the best and craziest ideas start out as the worst and weirdest ideas. Being creative means being able to silence your inner critic – at least to begin with – so you don’t censor any great ideas before they have the opportunity to become great.

That’s one of the reasons I don’t believe in writer’s block. Just like you have to let a tap run for a second to get past the stale and stagnant water, if you just start creating something – anything – the good stuff will flow soon enough.

Today’s free writing challenge – a challenge to write for ten minutes without stopping – is a great way to practice that.

Why it matters: Editing and filtering is an important part of the creative process, but early on it’s also important to be able to let your ideas flow without changing or rejecting them.

DAY 8 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Start writing with the following prompt, and keep writing for ten minutes without stopping, editing or filtering yourself:

“One day last summer, I ...”

[DAY 9]

WORD GAPS

“Make an empty space in any corner of your mind, and
creativity will instantly fill it.”

DEE HOCK

Sometimes – like in yesterday’s challenge – being creative is about letting your mind wander freely to see where it takes you. But sometimes, creative problems are more specific: they’re about working within a bigger vision or idea and filling the gaps between

What if you could turn your ideas into a business?

...that’s it for this preview.

To complete the full 30-Day Challenge, pick up a copy at

thesongfoundry.com/30-day-challenges