

Is the key to creativity “unlearning”?

What if everything we have learned in our lives has actually diminished our creativity?

What if we are inherently creative as children, then over time lose much of that capability? That possibility is what I discovered when I stumbled across this [blog.post](#) at Creativity at Work.

In 1968, George Land conducted a research study to test the creativity of 1,600 children ranging in ages from three-to-five years old who were enrolled in a Head Start program. This was the same creativity test he devised for NASA to help select innovative engineers and scientists. The assessment worked so well he decided to try it on children. He re-tested the same children at 10 years of age, and again at 15 years of age. The results were astounding.

Test results amongst 5 year olds: 98%

Test results amongst 10 year olds: 30%

Test results amongst 15 year olds: 12%

Same test given to 280,000 adults: 2%

“What we have concluded,” wrote Land, “is that non-creative behavior is learned.”

(Source: George Land and Beth Jarman, [Breaking Point and Beyond](#). San Francisco: HarperBusiness, 1993)

Need a visual representation to really drive home the point? Try this:

Lots of questions here:

- Does this mean that most people are born creative?
- Does formal education stifle creativity?
- Is it possible to learn anything that actually augments creativity?
- Or is the best thing to *unlearn* conventional approaches to being creative?

I can't offer any official data to the conversation, but I do have anecdotal 'evidence' that suggests these tests are onto something, specifically with regard to brainstorming.

In the six week [Prep: From Concept To Outline workshop](#) I created, I have writers spend an entire week doing nothing but brainstorming. I tell them to create a Master Brainstorming List such as a Word document and whatever they generate in the way of ideas for their story that week, all of it should go into that list. No judgment. No pre-editing. Turn off what we associate with the left-brain and get in touch with the right-brain. Free the mind and let oneself go.

In the words of that great screenwriting guru Obi-Wan Kenobi: *Go with your feelings, Luke!*

I provide three extensive sets of prompts and techniques to facilitate brainstorming:

- Character Work: Any combination of biographies, monologues, questionnaires, interviews, sit-downs. Basically engage key characters — especially the Protagonist — to learn more about them and start to find their voices.
- Archetypes: Use five primary character archetypes — Protagonist, Nemesis, Attractor, Mentor, Trickster — as lenses through which to live with and analyze the story's main characters, exploring each character's respective narrative function and how that can shape

their personality and, thereby, influence the story.

- Subplots: My theory is that Subplot = Relationship. So I encourage writers to make a list of each primary character, then consider the nature of their relationship with the Protagonist as well as their own interrelationships. Again, use these as lenses to feel one's way into those character relationships and what each of those subplots means relative to the overall story.

These are prompts. Tools. Each an opportunity to [go into the story and find the animals](#).

Photo by [Hal Gatewood](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Here's the thing. Some writers take to the brainstorming like ducks to water... albeit ducks tethered to a computer and a screenwriting software program. But *many* writers

find this part of the prep process challenging. Even with the context provided by the workshop — the three sets of prompts, the week-long period, due date, Master Brainstorming List — I have worked with a lot of writers who struggled to get into the creative flow.

The key to them breaking through is often when I lay this on them:

“Remember your 5th grade teacher? The grammar lessons. Outlining. Diagramming sentences. Draw within the lines. All of that? Chuck it. When you are brainstorming, your 5th grade teacher has no place in the process. You are freed from the shackles of that systemic approach to learning. Rather I want you to feel your way through this process. Turn off your inner critic. Get in touch with the obscure voices in your mind. Listen to what they have to say. Sit with your characters and feel what they are feeling. There is no right or wrong when you are brainstorming. You never know when you will strike gold. So put it all down in the Master Brainstorming List. And remember: Tell your 5th grade teacher to beat it.”

Invariably I convey some version of this to the writers I work with in Prep during brainstorming. And more often than not, it works. So in a sense, it does appear to be a kind of unlearning that is required for some writers to get their brainstorming in gear.

It's as if those writers need to reopen their way of thinking

in order to access a sort of pure, even — dare I say — *infantile* form of creativity.

Again, I'm no scientist. But I've worked with literally thousands of writers in my time as a screenwriter and teacher, and interfaced with thousands more as a blogger. And often I discover creativity emerges most powerfully when a writer goes against convention... freed from what they've learned.