

Chapter 1

So What Is Creativity?

In This Chapter

- ▶ Noticing the creative scene
 - ▶ Getting curious about curiosity
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Creativity – a difficult thing to define, but perhaps in its simplest form the act of generating ideas – is at the very heart of human experience. The world is full of creative activity, so wherever you go and whatever you do, you're in reach of it. Creativity takes many forms – from humble products to grand designs, from the simplest crafts to the highest art – and no two people will define it in exactly the same way. There's always something to celebrate.

But creativity is about much more than passive appreciation. You were born creative and you have all the resources you need to partake actively in the abundance of creativity around you.

In some places and situations, creativity is obvious. And sometimes it's under the radar. But it's always there. You're in touch with it daily, whether you notice it at a conscious level or not. As you look around at the products you use and the ideas you work or play with, you're experiencing the flow of creativity that makes modern life possible.

Seeing Creativity Everywhere

Creativity isn't just about 'arty' things. It's manifested in every man-made object. Original works of art and mass-produced products are all the result of creative imagination and an individual's unique ability to turn thoughts into

reality. And creativity isn't just about objects, it's also about ideas. Whatever your politics, spiritual beliefs, intellectual preoccupations or personal passions, each object is the result of the creative evolution of original ideas.



Take a moment to consider something you feel passionate about. It may be a sport, a belief or a personal preoccupation. Consider why you feel so strongly about it. Think about how 'real' it feels to you. Now take a step back and recall what first excited your interest here. What was the path that brought you to where you are now? Who first inspired you? Who inspires you now? Those are all elements of the creative thinking that brought this passion into your life.

Spotting obvious signs of creativity

When you watch a film or the television, listen to music or use a computer, you're in direct touch with creative thinking. All those films, songs and software packages began with the germ of an idea. Many people just experience the end product, which is fine because that's what the creator intended.

It can be fascinating to go deeper, though, and consider how the product originated. Some individuals take pleasure in seeking out the processes behind the finished article. Doing so is one way to enhance your own appreciation of the creative process.

Creativity in your hands

This book, whether you're reading a hard copy or an electronic format, is the product of several centuries of creative development.

A few hundred years ago, you may, if you were lucky, have had access to a manuscript or a public proclamation in your village. Unless you were a priest or a member of a small coterie of scholars, you were probably denied the luxury of reading. Gradually, education led to wider familiarity with reading skills, and this in turn created a demand for access to the written word.

By the time Gutenberg came onto the scene, the world was ready. His printing press came about, by his own account, through a flash of

inspiration in which he combined the agricultural press with the concept of moveable type. The essential third ingredient was oil-based ink, and together these elements gave the world the printing press. This is a classic illustration of creative thinking, where disparate existing concepts are combined to create something entirely original.

Fast-forward to the present day and modern printing, which is the culmination of countless creative insights and refinements to this original process. It's impossible to imagine a world without printing. The ability to publish came about through generations of creative ingenuity.

Selling High Concept

Hollywood likes originality, but not too much. Many ideas for films are pitched in terms of what's called the *high concept*. This means existing stories or actors are juxtaposed to create a new entity. Examples include *Jurassic Park* (what if you were able to clone prehistoric monsters?), *Groundhog Day* (what if you woke up and every day was the same?) and *Planet of the Apes* (what if apes overtook mankind?). Sometimes the high concept is led by the actors, like Danny DeVito and Arnold Schwarzenegger as *Twins*.

Fleshing out the central idea, the pitch is usually presented in five steps (in descending order of importance):

- ✓ **Original and unique:** Even if it's based on existing material, there must be a twist that makes it new.
- ✓ **Mass appeal:** The idea has to attract a large audience.
- ✓ **Story specific:** There has to be a special factor that drives the story forwards to avoid a 'So what?' response.
- ✓ **Obvious potential:** The pitch alone should make you want to see the film; that's what the trailer will summarise.
- ✓ **Short:** Hollywood is overwhelmed with ideas for the next blockbuster, so there's no time for anything superfluous.



Next time you're really hooked on creative output, whether it's a film, song, programme, work of art, or even a simple wind chime or dream-catcher, track it back to its roots. What was the idea behind it? Where might the inspiration have come from? How did it evolve into the finished article? Can you make another one yourself? If you copied it, how would you start?

Noticing less obvious signs of creativity

Everything man-made has been through a complex series of processes from raw materials to end product. And nowadays almost everything has been through the hands of a designer.

If you choose to look at the world through fresh eyes, you can appreciate the innovation and ingenuity that's gone into many of the most common objects. Even the humblest man-made object is an embodiment of creative thinking. Someone conceived it and then drew a design for it. And if it was manufactured, they drew a blueprint, made the moulds, and assembled it.



A simple disposable modern pen may not appear ‘creative’ on first inspection, but it’s a small masterpiece of creative thinking. For it to exist, someone had to rethink the way pens work. Then the designer had to design an intricate series of components. The manufacturing had to comply with very fine tolerances so the nib and the cap or click mechanism operated as intended. And that’s just a cheap pen!



Take a fresh look at a familiar object. Select something you use every day, and examine it as though you were from another planet, experiencing it for the first time. Use all your senses as you study it. How does it feel to the touch? What does it smell or even taste like? What sounds does it make? Don’t worry if it’s not ‘meant’ to have a smell or taste – remember, many people like the taste of plastic or the smell of a new car. Now look at it carefully. Examine the materials it’s made from, the contours, the shapes, the overall design. Consider the sequence of processes required to arrive at the finished article.

Designers like Sir Jonathan Ive, creator of the range of Apple products, and Sir James Dyson, of innovative vacuum cleaner fame, don’t just sit in a studio sketching exciting new products. They spend much of their time exploring materials. They want to know how strong they are, how they feel to the touch, how they look, how they cope with wear and tear. All these considerations inform the design process and contribute directly or indirectly to the end product.

Finding Curious Ways to Fulfil Your Curiosity

Curiosity is an integral feature of creative thinking, and the subject itself is full of curiosities and apparent paradoxes. Many of the tools and techniques used in creative thinking are counterintuitive, and they work precisely because they provide choices that are outside the usual conventions.



Creative thinking encourages you to view the world with fresh eyes and to tolerate ambiguity even when it takes you in unusual, unexpected directions.

Conventional thinking patterns tend to be logical and structured. Creative thinking patterns, on the other hand, tend to be much more fluid. Many of the tools and techniques for creative thinking are designed specifically to encourage detours, leaps of imagination, and reframing of concepts.

Creative thinking encourages you to be curious – seeing the world differently, noticing more. And it also encourages you to tolerate the curious – to be comfortable with ambiguity and to enjoy the paradoxical.

Reconciling paradoxes and juxtapositions

Several creative thinking techniques involve exploring the notion of *paradox*, intentionally upsetting conventions through the use of absurd or apparently self-contradictory observations (like saying ‘This true statement is false,’ for example). Doing so can be a useful way of opening your mind to fresh possibilities. If you consider the White Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass*, who informed Alice that in her youth she could ‘think of six impossible things before breakfast’, you have an idea about the possibilities of playing creatively with paradox.

Another of the classic definitions of creativity is *juxtaposition* – the collision of different or contradictory ideas. Much humour – especially the most creative variety – is rooted in juxtaposition, such as: ‘A horse walks into a bar and says . . .’ Several ideas collide in this brief opening line, even before the punch line. Horses don’t usually wander into bars, and they certainly don’t talk, but this one does both. Then there’s the implication that the barman won’t be surprised by this event. And all before we discover what the horse has to say. In the same vein, many creative ideas emerge from this unexpected juxtaposition process.

For another example of juxtaposition (and for evidence that even physicists use creative thinking!), take a look at quantum mechanics – a science full of unlikely and even implausible collisions of ideas. Can an object be a particle and a wave at the same time? Physicists have conducted convincing experiments demonstrating that this is not only theoretically possible, but that it can be observed happening in real time. Black holes and dark matter are just two more examples in this *Alice in Wonderland* world.

Combining the familiar and the strange

Creative thinking is often a matter of combining the familiar and the strange. Indeed, the founder of Syntectics, a popular method of creative thinking, described his role with clients as ‘making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar’.



Another classic definition of the creative process is ‘the association of two different ideas’. Mixing two ideas, especially if they appear entirely unrelated, is one of the more reliable starting points for thinking creatively. Some professionals argue that there are no new ideas, only combinations of existing ones. However, that fails to account for the genuine moments of blinding inspiration – they may be rare, but they do exist.



You can make the familiar strange by pretending to be discovering an object or concept for the first time. Choose something that's part of your everyday life, something you never think twice about. Now imagine it has just appeared out of the blue. One way to do this is to pretend to be the proverbial Martian who has just arrived on earth with no knowledge of earth culture. Ask questions like 'What is this?' 'What does it do?' 'And what else . . .?' Try to surprise yourself.

And you can make the strange familiar by putting yourself in the position of someone who uses that something every day. Say you visit an unfamiliar location – someone's workshop or kitchen, or a new shop for example. You may find yourself encountering an object for the first time. This is a perfect opportunity to play this game and immediately reinvent it as something you use every day (even if your imagined use is not the use you think it was designed for – that makes the game better!).

Familiarity can breed contempt. Until fish farming made salmon affordable, it was considered a luxury on a par with caviar – highly desirable but very rare. However, Queen Victoria's Scottish staff were fed salmon so frequently that they finally rebelled and requested a change of diet.

Entwining the tangible and the elusive

Sometimes, creativity hits you like a bolt of lightning. When this happens, you really know it. It's often reported that a new idea or a solution to a problem can spring into the mind full-grown and vivid, almost touchable. Some creative individuals live for this moment. However, it's also common to find that your creative thinking can leave you 'on the edge' without a clear direction or solution. Don't worry about this, because this book is packed with hints and tips to get you to your creative destination.

Experiencing the seductive and the scary

Many people are irresistibly attracted to creativity. They enjoy experiencing the fruits of creativity, whether in films, music or art, and they actively seek out creative environments. And some of these people also like to roll up their sleeves and participate, whether at work or in their personal lives. If you're in this group, you have a head start, because creativity generates positive energy.

However, the notion of creativity in its various forms makes some people nervous. They find creativity daunting, and don't feel themselves to be part of it. 'I don't know much about art, but I know what I like' is sometimes used as a defence against being exposed to new experiences. This is unfortunate, because opening your mind can be one of the most enriching and rewarding events imaginable.



If you've found yourself rejecting creativity, take a fresh look. Try a different perspective. If you're looking at or listening to the work of an artist, try looking below the surface. Instead of giving up because you feel you don't understand or 'get it', take a little time to see through the artist's eyes or the eyes of someone who likes that particular style. Doing so won't always work, but sometimes you can discover something unexpected and open a new door.

If you feel that you're not particularly creative, this book is packed with material to help change your mind and introduce you to the wealth of creativity that's yours for the taking. After you get a taste for creativity, it can be a bit like chocolate – 'Just one more bite'. Creative thinking is very more-ish.

Adapting Strategies to Help You Survive in the Creative World

Creativity is partly a question of adaptation. When situations change, they require fresh thinking. Persisting with old habits and behaviours in the face of new information can cause frustration and increase stress levels.

External events can instigate the need to act creatively. Sometimes, circumstances demand a rapid shift. Something unexpected happens and you find you need to step up a gear or change your game. In these circumstances, your natural creativity is likely to kick in, providing you with the stimulus necessary to engage in the task. In these situations, having some tools and techniques up your sleeve (such as those covered in Chapters 6–8) to assist the process is always helpful.

You may also have an inner drive to create. This drive can be the result of a period of high pressure or a gradual build-up, like water coming to the boil.

Both external events and internal drives serve the creative spirit well, as higher states of alertness brought on by such events are often all the stimulus needed to trigger creative thinking.

Emulating child's play

Children find it easy to drop old behaviours and beliefs in favour of new ones, which is one reason why they take so readily to technology. Faced with, say, an electronic game, they simply keep trying options until they get the sequences right.



Children don't start from the position that they don't know how to do something – merely that they haven't got there *yet*. They live in a world where many things are unknown quantities, so a new game is just something else to be mastered. As an adult, you're well-advised to take a leaf from that book, as it's a good recipe for creative thinking.

Adults, on the whole, are less adaptable than children and more likely to persist in pursuing routes that aren't working. It's been said that repeatedly doing the same thing and expecting a different result is a path to insanity. And you've probably been in situations where you've seen someone doggedly repeating actions that aren't delivering the required result, and perhaps even commenting on it:

'I keep putting this key in the lock but it just won't work!'

'Perhaps it's the wrong key?' you offer.

'But I keep trying and it just won't work!'

'Have you tried turning it the other way?'

Long pause. 'Oh.'

Recognising creativity as a necessity – not a luxury

Despite the resistance of some ultra-rational thinkers, creativity is an integral part of life. In both work and personal situations, problems occur which require more than a purely logical approach:

- ✓ That seems difficult – is there a smarter way of doing it?
- ✓ Something new is required – how do you dream it up?
- ✓ That's a knotty problem – how do you go about cracking it?

Opening the door to your creativity is the first step in dealing with these types of problem.

Brave new world?

Life without creativity would be unimaginably dreary. One of the (many) reasons for the sudden collapse of East Germany in 1989 was the stark contrast between East and West Berlin. On one side of the Berlin Wall was a comfortable consumer society enjoying the benefits of a culture of creative freedom, whereas on the other, shops were permanently starved of products, queues were a daily reality, and the most basic consumer goods were in short supply. Moreover, on the East side of the wall, creativity was actively frowned on and all kinds of artists were considered potential dissidents.

The appalling situation in East Germany gave rise to a stream of jokes about the communists' mistrust of education, one of which is:

'How many Stasi (secret police) does it take to make an arrest?'

'Two. One to write the arrest warrant, and the other to monitor the intellectual.'

Innovate or die

One of the measures of commercial success is sustained innovation. Indeed, many experts regard it as the single greatest determinant of long-term survival in business. Now more than ever, companies that fail to outstrip, or at least keep pace with, their competitors are doomed.

In the past couple of decades, creative thinking has moved closer to centre stage and is no longer regarded as a peripheral benefit. Many leaders recognise that creative thinking isn't a luxury to be added on from time to time, but an integral part of the business process.

Appreciating creativity as your lifeblood

Whether you participate in it or merely enjoy the benefits, creativity enriches your life. Much of life today would be impossible without the stream of innovations that produced the products that make your life and mine more comfortable.

Periodically, television documentaries and magazines review what life was like ten, 20 or 50 years ago. Apart from seeing how quaint and old-fashioned everything appears, it's worth looking a little deeper and observing the pace of change thanks to innovation. Just a few years ago, televisions were big clunky boxes, music was played from vinyl records and programmes were recorded on low-grade videotape. A few years before that, television was black and white and the UK had only a couple of channels and no means of home recording. Tracking the history of consumer products gives an insight into the energy and direction of creative thinking.



Travel back in time and mentally replace your current home or office products with those from a decade or two ago. Consider whether you could live with them, knowing what you know now.

Getting into a Creative Frame of Mind

Do you feel creative? This is a bit like asking ‘Do you feel healthy?’ Most people do feel healthy, but they just don’t think about it, because it’s a natural state.

If you’re one of those individuals who feels creative, you’re fortunate, because you have a head start when it comes to creative thinking. A lot of scientific evidence demonstrates that creativity flourishes most productively in people who already believe themselves to be creative.

However, if you don’t recognise yourself in this picture and don’t see yourself as creative, don’t worry. I’ve designed this book to show you that you really *are* creative, and to help you develop this resource in your life.

Converging and diverging

Creativity is a natural state, and different people have different ‘resting states’ where creative thinking is concerned. This difference is largely related to personality. Some temperaments are in a permanent state of high creativity, fizzing and buzzing with ideas, whereas at the other end of the scale, others need time to get revved up. These are known as *divergent* and *convergent* styles of thinking, respectively.

One of the simplest ways to demonstrate the difference between convergent and divergent thinking is to try the exercise of coming up with as many uses as you can for a brick in a limited time. Some individuals find this exercise difficult, thinking that a brick is a brick is a brick, after all. However, some can perceive many ways to use a brick – as a weapon, a paperweight, an ornament, and so on. And at the extreme divergent end of the scale are those who generate a continuous flow of possibilities, playing with all sorts of ‘What if . . .?’ questions: what if it was made of something else, or as big as a bus, as tiny as an atom, as light as a feather? And so on.

When this experiment is conducted with large groups, a consistent bell-curve pattern emerges, with a few very convergent individuals who can’t think of many uses, a few who generate an unending stream of ideas, and the majority bulging in the middle, with maybe eight to 20 uses for a brick.

Thinking divergently

Divergent thinkers find it easy to generate thoughts and can create a stream of ideas, even on unpromising subjects. They tend not to be over concerned with quality or consistency, and don't usually censor their output. They often resent being interrupted while in full flight, even though sometimes their ideas seem bizarre or outrageous to others. The wildness of their flights of fancy isn't usually important, because they'll edit their output after they've concluded their stream of ideas.



If you're naturally a divergent thinker, you're likely to notice what's around you – the little things as well as the big ones. You're inclined to ask a lot of questions, even ones that may seem trivial, obvious or occasionally embarrassing to others. You may also be inclined to see the funny side of things and to enjoy absurdities instead of being over exercised by them.

Thinking convergently

Convergent thinkers tend not to perform so well on idea-generation sessions that involve producing a lot of ideas rapidly. This is because their style of thinking is more evolutionary and their best ideas often come at the end of a considered reflective process. They're not necessarily less creative than their divergent counterparts; they just go about the task differently.



If you're a convergent thinker, you're likely to take a steady approach to tasks, including creative ones. You may get occasional hits of creative inspiration, but in the main you progress toward goals. In tasks like dreaming up uses for a brick, you may not generate a big list in a few minutes, but you're more likely to be coming up with ideas a long time after the task is finished.

Storming ahead

Working individually, everyone finds his or her own right gear for creative thinking, and can learn or be taught the most beneficial techniques and processes for enhancing creative thinking skills.

Problems arise in group situations, such as traditional brainstorming sessions, where everyone is sharing the same task at the same pace. The divergent thinkers usually dominate, because they're the first to come up with ideas, although those ideas may be inferior or off target.



Recent studies have resulted in fresh thinking about idea generation, and the consensus is that traditional brainstorming methods work less well than individual sessions or than alternating structures where individual and group activities are performed successively. I discuss this in detail in Chapter 7.

It's also worth noting that some of the traditional ground rules for brainstorming – and other idea-generation methods, for that matter – were typically based on absence of criticism or negative feedback. But recent research has convincingly demonstrated that a climate of healthy debate – including critical comments – actually works better for creative thinking.

The message here is that, in creative thinking, it's always worth questioning assumptions – even about the nature of creative thinking!

Being physically passive but mentally active

An effective starting point for getting in the mood for creative thinking is total relaxation. In the hurly burly of modern life, it's all too easy to be busy being busy. Even when trying to surmount a creative challenge, many people find that they're inclined to rush the fences and resolve the issue as they would any other kind of task. Unfortunately, the brain isn't wired to do this.

When you take in new information, it's rapidly absorbed and then shifted into the brain's filing cabinets. This cognitive system works beautifully for straightforward, logical tasks: you have a problem, you go to your mental filing cabinet, access the relevant bits of information and hey presto. (This is why so many of the older theories about the brain's workings were based on mechanical and computing analogies.) However, creative thinking requires the deployment of some different cognitive processes, and these aren't so receptive to a file-drawer approach.

Being physically active and mentally alert

As with so many aspects of the creative process, there are completely different ways of getting creative. This is where your tolerance of ambiguity comes into play!

For the actively inclined, instead of relaxing your body (see the nearby sidebar 'Tuning out to tune in'), you can get your creative juices flowing by indulging in physical exercise. Many people find that engaging in physical activity frees the mind from its usual patterns. In fact, many professional athletes describe their exertions as a kind of meditation, so this route can lead to the same destination as meditation.

Tuning out to tune in

An excellent way to put yourself in a receptive state is to fully relax your body. You can do this at any time when you want to access a receptive state quickly and easily. The more you practise relaxing your body, the easier it will become. It's also similar to the method you use for meditating, so it's useful to learn it to apply whenever you want to relax.

Begin by sitting comfortably, hands in your lap, feet on the floor. Close your eyes and let the tips of your thumbs and middle fingers gently touch; keep them that way throughout the session. (You'll discover why in a moment.) Now relax your body from head to toe:

- ✓ Notice your head, and gently move it on your neck muscles. Feel how comfortably it sits.
- ✓ Relax your eyes. (You may want to open and close them briefly to ensure you're comfortable.)

- ✓ Relax your jaw and neck.
- ✓ Flex and relax your shoulders to make sure the muscles are unstressed.
- ✓ Move that relaxed feeling down your arms: upper arms, lower arms, hands. Notice your thumbs and middle fingers touching.
- ✓ Move the relaxation to your chest, and notice your breathing.
- ✓ Relax your trunk.
- ✓ Move the relaxation down your legs to your thighs, knees and ankles.
- ✓ Move your ankles and gently wiggle your toes, and then put your feet back on the floor.

Now you're ready to apply your mind to the task in hand.

Programming Yourself for Creativity with Neuro-linguistic Programming

Several of the concepts you encounter in this book are based on valuable insights originating from *neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)*. (You can read more in *Neuro-linguistic Programming For Dummies* by Romilla Ready and Kate Burton.)



NLP's rather unusual name comes from the amalgamation of its three key elements (one of its founders observed that the choice of name was assisted by generous quantities of fine Californian wine):

- ✓ **Neuro** describes the neurological component, the part involving the way the human mind works, and the structure of the brain. Sensory channels (the five senses of sight, sound, taste, smell and feeling, as well as some others that are under investigation) handle everything you experience. So 'neuro' deals with the way sensory information is processed, stored and used.
- ✓ **Linguistic** refers to the fact that, as users of language, humans process raw sensory information linguistically. In practical terms, this means that experience is *encoded* (that is, stored in ways that the brain can handle). As a person's language skills grow, so does the use of metaphors and narrative to make sense of events. So language acts as a filter.
- ✓ **Programming** is the way the brain encodes the vast amount of sensory information to prevent it becoming overwhelmed. Direct experience is inextricably intertwined with language to give meaning and organisation to events.

While no single definition of NLP exists, it's useful to bear in mind that NLP isn't an 'it' – if anything, it's a 'they'. NLP is a repertoire of tools and techniques for successful living. It's based on a pragmatic model of doing what works. And much of the core material is directly relevant to creative thinking.

NLP is defined in several ways, as befits a system based on a repertoire or toolbox of skills that enable individuals to achieve personal excellence. Here are some of the common definitions:

- ✓ The science of excellence
- ✓ The art and science of communication
- ✓ What makes you and other people tick
- ✓ A manual for the brain
- ✓ A toolkit for personal and organisational change

NLP is built on four essential pillars. These are:

- ✓ **Rapport:** This is your ability to be in tune with others. In creative terms, it's relevant to group activities, and good rapport enables you to understand and be sympathetic to others who work in different ways. Both convergent and divergent thinking skills are valid (I talk about them in the 'Converging and diverging' section earlier in this chapter), and whichever camp you're in, you can appreciate the efforts of others.
- ✓ **Sensory awareness:** This is the noticing that's so important to a healthy, creative lifestyle. The more you actively use each of your senses in everyday life, the more your acuity grows, and you find yourself becoming more sensitive to events, moods and situations. In short, the more you notice, the more you notice.

- ✔ **Outcome thinking:** If you fail to plan, you plan to fail. Outcome thinking is the process of asking yourself what you want out of a situation and how you'll know you've achieved it. It empowers you to make the most of the choices available to you. This is very relevant in creative thinking, where you may not always know the answer in advance, but you recognise the choices to take on the path, and you'll recognise the right outcome when you see it.
- ✔ **Behavioural flexibility:** Behavioural flexibility is doing something different when what you're doing isn't working. Children usually do this much better than adults. Becoming skilled at this kind of adaptation is an important prerequisite for effective creative thinking.

In addition to building on the four pillars, creative thinking at its best makes use of several other contributions from the NLP repertoire:

- ✔ **Modelling:** One of the core techniques of NLP, it's based on the close observation of the behaviour of peak performers. One of the most efficient ways to learn a new skill is to copy carefully – to model – someone who already does it expertly. In this book, you'll find many examples of the output of creative thinkers – if what they do works for them, you can use it to work for you too.
- ✔ **Anchoring:** Touching the tips of your middle fingers and thumbs together is an example of anchoring. Anchoring happens when you form an association between a thought and a pattern of behaviour. The brain works on patterning (that's the programming part of the NLP system), and when you link thinking and behaviour in this way, the physical aspect triggers a shift to a new pattern. Then, when the anchor is embedded, repeating the action will evoke that response. So after a while, touching thumb and middle finger alerts your mind to begin the relaxation process.
- ✔ **Visualisation:** Many creative thinking tools are based on visualisation, which is a core component of NLP. Chapters 6 and 7 explain methods for visualising.
- ✔ **Curiosity:** Allied to *sensory awareness* – the business of noticing – is the cultivation of what's been called a restless curiosity. A hallmark of many creative individuals is their relentless search for answers to questions ranging from the mundane to the most far-reaching. Children aren't embarrassed to ask, and it's not a bad habit for creative adults to nurture.
- ✔ **Tolerance of ambiguity:** This is the ability to live with confusion or ambiguity. Many of the tools and techniques for thinking creatively require the suspension of certainty. This usually requires some effort at the outset, but as with any skill, it can be cultivated and becomes easier with experience.

- ✓ **Resourceful state:** One of the elements of NLP is placing yourself in a state of alertness and awareness. You can describe it colloquially as being bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.
- ✓ **Timelines:** This is considering events and important moments in the context of when and where they happened. This approach provides many significant, and sometimes surprising, insights.

A useful concept that comes from NLP is the notion of being present or being in the moment. Whatever the term, it boils down to remaining alert to where you are, what's happening and your place in it. Some have described this concept as acuity, or really noticing. In workshops, I use the metaphor of the hawk which hovers still in the sky far above its domain, focusing all its attention on the tiniest movement below that signals the possibility of prey. It economises its own movements, not just because it doesn't want to draw attention, but because it doesn't need distractions where food may be involved.

This subject is full of paradoxes and apparent contradictions, and here it's possible to be both in the moment and out of the moment. Many participants in creative sessions report that just as they achieve that mysterious and compelling sense of really being there, the creative moment has happened somehow without them noticing. Participants in workshops report this phenomenon again and again, and it's echoed in coaching and therapy scenarios, where epiphany (a fancy term for a sudden breakthrough) often occurs when it's least expected. Don't blink or you'll miss it!

Fighting through Uncreative Times

Sometimes, you just can't find your creativity. That solution just won't come. That new idea remains elusive, despite your best efforts. This situation can be very frustrating. Why can inspiration be so hard to attain sometimes? Well, no single, simple answer exists. Stress and anxiety can both be contributors, as can exhaustion after sustained activity. And sometimes, your energy pool is just drained for no apparent reason.

If this happens to you occasionally, remember that you're in good company. Many professionally creative individuals have fallow periods where nothing much happens in the imagination. Through their experience, you can take advantage of some tips and techniques they've evolved to get through these times, and I've described some of the most reliable ones below.

Being stuck

The simple fact is that everyone gets stuck sometimes, however fluent and creative they are normally. Dwelling on the fact that you're stuck is something to avoid, because you may worry yourself into a worse state and prolong the situation. A far more constructive approach to take at frustrating times like these is to spend your time exploring ways to get past it, which is where this book comes in.

I just can't keep pace with brain research

I mention research and studies about creativity throughout this book. This is a warning that much of the information about the brain will become outdated as a result of the huge amount of research that institutes around the world are undertaking. This research, coupled with frequent breakthroughs in technology, will allow much more precise investigation. Here are two examples:

- ✓ Thanks to a new generation of MRI scanners at Harvard, neuroscientists have been able to access much more detailed information on the interior organisation of the brain. One of the team has said that, whereas the previous generation of scanners allowed observation of 25 per cent of the brain's activities, new scanners have turned the ratio on its head: the view now is that some 75 per cent of the brain's workings are accessible. The extraordinary images show that the brain's structure is actually a lattice-work, not unlike the matrix in the film of the same name. The implications of this revelation are substantial, and have a direct bearing on understanding the thinking process.
- ✓ Advances in research on *neuroplasticity*, which is the brain's ability to

change its structure, look very exciting. Neuroscientists used to think that upon reaching adulthood, the brain was fixed and could only deteriorate with age. However, it now appears that the situation is much more positive. Recent research shows that the brain continues to change throughout adult life, and in the aftermath of traumatic events such as strokes it rebuilds where possible and generates alternative pathways. Again, the implications of this newly evolving information will provide many clues about brain function.

Whenever you read about the state of the art in neurological matters, remember that this is a science in its infancy. Some of the sharpest minds on the planet are dedicating all their resources to perfecting knowledge of what goes on inside our heads. Ever-evolving technology and breakthrough insights characterise this field. This is creative thinking at its finest. Victorian scientists thought physics was nearly finished and a little mopping up would allow everything measurable to be measured. Then Einstein inconveniently came along and comprehensively upset the Newtonian apple cart. The situation with brain science is similarly fluid.

Getting unstuck

To stimulate your creative juices if you discover you're stuck, you can try a number of simple techniques:

- ✓ **Recognise that you're stuck.** This is the first and in many ways the most important step. Don't be in denial, acknowledge the situation, and prepare to take action to change it.
- ✓ **Do nothing.** Surprising as it may seem, this often works very effectively. You can do nothing by switching to a different, less demanding activity (such as Sudoku or a crossword), taking a break, or even having a power nap. Don't feel guilty – you're just recharging your creative batteries.
- ✓ **Do something.** Make the positive decision to do something equally engaging. You probably have some important stuff to do, so if you're stuck, now's the time to do it. Your mind loves activity, and engaging in a task, any task, can be a great way to rediscover your creative centre. Often, ideas will come just as you commit to the alternative task, so be alert to that possibility.
- ✓ **Get help.** Being stuck can be a lonely path. But help is at hand. Have a chat with a friend or colleague. Input from someone not engaged in your task can generate serendipitous ideas, because while you're consciously engaged, your unconscious mind is still on the job, looking for connections. And if you're working alone, dipping into a book – this one, perhaps – can provide stimulation from a different source.

Minding your brain

The terms brain and mind are often used interchangeably, but they are different. The distinction between brain and mind is that the brain is the equipment housing the functions of the mind.

If you think of a car, it has everything you need to get from A to B. There's a powerful engine to provide the motor power, you have control of the steering, velocity and gearing. And you sit in the comfort of an ergonomically designed

seat. This is your brain. It's top of the range, and equipped with all the latest extras. It even modifies itself as you use it.

But your brain, impressive as it is, would be precious little use without you in the driving seat. This is your mind, in charge of operations.

So to remember the distinction, your brain is your car and your mind is the driver.