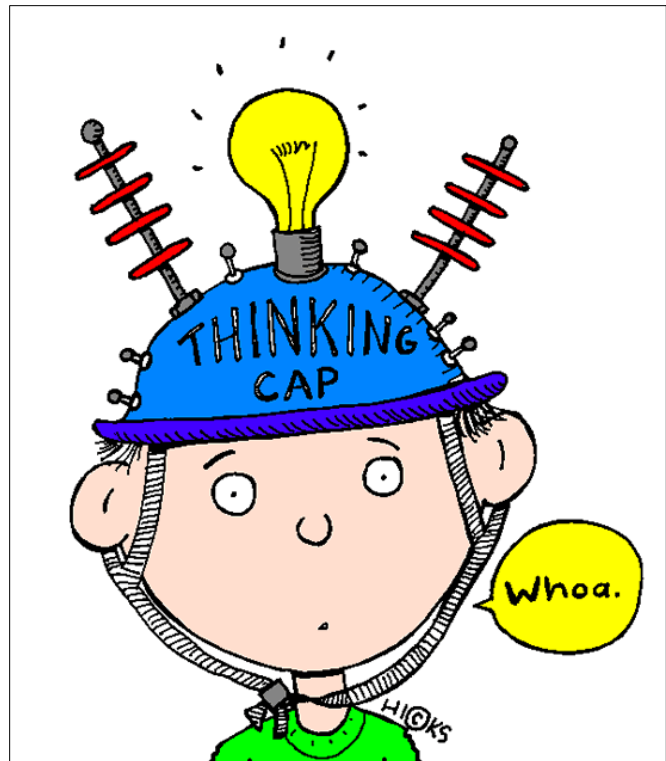


The most powerful question in the world: What if...?

Questions can be incredibly powerful, if we know the right ones to ask. They get our minds thinking in different directions, serve as catalysts for our imagination, remind us to question our assumptions and are an innate part of our human curiosity.

When it comes to developing creative ideas to enhance your work and life, there is one question that stands head and shoulders above all others. It alone is responsible for more human progress than nearly any other factor.

What is this all-powerful question? The simple “What if...?”



What makes this simple, two-word interrogatory so formidable? It signals your imagination to start working. It gets your mind thinking about possibilities that don't yet exist. It enables you to envision a potential solution and think through how it might work in vivid detail, all in your mind.

It's not an exaggeration to say that "What if...?" is responsible for most of the man-made objects you see around you right now. Each one is the result of someone asking questions like, "What if we created something new that solved this problem? How could I make this better? What would it look like? How would it work?"

What do the experts say?

Here's what some leading creative experts have to say about the power of the "What if..." question:

"Asking 'what if?' questions is not only a lot of fun, it also gives us the freedom to think along different lines. Who should "whack" himself with this soft thinking tool? Everybody — housewives, salespeople, children, teachers, comedians, coaches, politicians, doctors, scribes, florists, managers, and you — can benefit from asking 'what if?' It's a great way of freeing ourselves from the deeply ingrained assumptions we have about the world around us."

- Roger von Oech, *A Whack on the Side of the Head: How You Can Be More Creative*

"Without "What If" we wouldn't have electric lights, indoor plumbing, the 10-speed bicycle, or even sent a man to the moon! When we stop asking "What If" we are saying to the world, "There is no more room for improvement, everything is hunky-dory just as it is... we are content with the status quo."

- Don The Idea Guy Snyder, *100 Whats of Creativity*

"Asking 'What if?' is a lateral thinking technique that helps us to explore possibilities and challenge assumptions at the same time. We use the 'What if?' question to stretch every dimension of the issue. Each 'What if?' question should be extreme to point of being ridiculous... Each question generates stimulating lines of inquiry by testing the rules and dominant ideas boundaries that are assumed to apply to the problem. Start with a challenge and, individually or in a group, generate a short list of really provocative 'What if?' questions. Take one and see where it leads. Follow the crazy train of thought and see what emerges. You will start with silly ideas but these often lead to radical insights and innovations."

- Paul Sloane, from an article on InnovationTools.com

A visual version – just for you

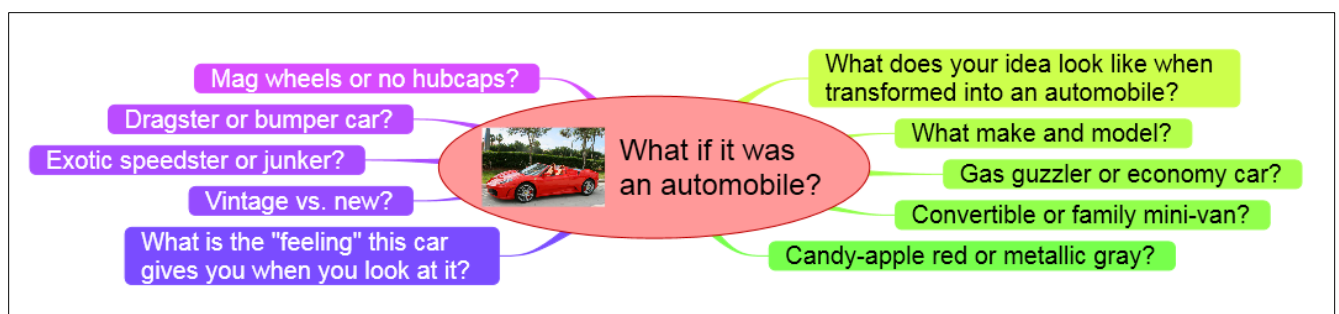
I'm so convinced of the power of creative questions to improve your life that I have taken the 100 questions from Don Snyder's *100 Whats of Creativity* book and have published them as a

mind map for your use. I have also organized them into logical groups to make them more manageable. It's available as a PDF file here. I won't be publishing it as a set of mind map templates this time around, because it's not intended for you to sit down and brainstorm with all 100 questions. I explain more below.

[Download the What if? mind map \(PDF\)](#)

How to use this mind map

1. Create a mind map with only a central topic. Enter a several-word description of your current problem or challenge.
2. Select several questions at random and add them to your map. Begin brainstorming with them. Don't worry if some of them seem ridiculous or absurd. Your goal is to engage in lateral thinking – coming at your challenge from different perspectives and directions. Ridiculous questions are not an end unto themselves – rather they are stepping stones to innovate solutions. In other words, use the ridiculous questions to generate some absurd ideas, and then ask yourself, "How can I apply these absurd ideas to my current situation?" That's the key!
3. You may find it helpful to take the question from the mind map and break it down several more steps, as in the example below. If you have trouble generating follow-up questions, then I strongly urge you to [view the SlideShare version](#) of Don's *100 Whats* book. You can also [buy it in softcover on Amazon.com](#) – or [pick up the Kindle e-book](#) immediately for only \$0.99 (I did the latter, and now have Don's book on my iPhone as a set of creative thinking prompts that go with me everywhere). Each of the 100 questions in his book contains multiple thought-provoking follow-up questions. For the example below, I took the ones that Don supplied and added a few of my own:



4. Decide what you're going to do with the ideas you have generated. Ideally, you're going to want to have a set of evaluation criteria in mind (such as cost or ease of implementation) and then rate each idea on a scale of 1 to 10. Then add the scores for all of the criteria to arrive at a total score for each idea. You can even record all of this information as sub-topics within your idea map. Using this simple process will help you to identify the idea that best solves the problem.

More lateral thinking resources

The 100 Whats book and mind map are great examples of lateral thinking – literally, “thinking sideways” about your problem or challenge, in order to force your mind to look at it from new, fresh perspectives. Here are some other excellent resources I recommend if you want to learn more about this subject:

- [How to be a Brilliant Thinker: Exercise Your Mind and Find Creative Solutions](#) by Paul Sloane
- [The Leader's Guide to Lateral Thinking Skills: Unlocking the Creativity and Innovation in You and Your Team](#) by Paul Sloane
- [Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step by Step](#) by Edward de Bono
- [A Whack on the Side of the Head: How You Can Be More Creative](#) by Roger von Oech
- [Thinkertoys: A Handbook of Creative-Thinking Techniques](#) by Michael Michalko

Conclusion

It's easy to look at a list of questions like the ones in the 100 Whats mind map and say, “*That's ridiculous! Why would I ever want to ask questions like that?*” But if you did that, you would miss a major opportunity for personal innovation. Asking the same old tired questions – or simply jumping at the first obvious solution – doesn't yield much in the way of value. It's when you push past these easy, low-value ideas that your brain delivers up its best thinking.

Unusual, creative questions open the door to your imagination. They drop-kick your brain out of its usual rutted thinking into new, creative pathways. They are especially valuable if you think you are not naturally creative, as many people do. You'll discover, as you play around with this visual list of questions, and start applying it to your own challenges and opportunities, that it's actually incredibly valuable – and fun, too!

Have fun questioning your assumptions and exploring the “What if” possibilities in your life!

Questions?

Please contact Chuck Frey at chuck@innovationtools.com.

Please [visit the Mind Mapping Software Blog](#) for all of the latest news, trends and resources related to visual mapping.

You can also [follow Chuck Frey on Twitter](#) for even more insights and ideas.