A hand holding a glowing lightbulb against a starry night sky background. The lightbulb is illuminated, casting a warm glow. The background is a deep blue and black space filled with stars and a faint nebula. The hand is in the foreground, holding the lightbulb. The overall composition is centered and framed by a white border.

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Creative Hacking

Creativity & Data Series



An overview of

Creativity Hacking

Step 1

Boost your creativity

Cultivate a creative lifestyle

Step 2

Harness innovation

Tactics & exercises to brainstorm content ideas

Step 3

Filter for the big idea

Learn how to qualify ideas



Step 1

Boost your creativity: Cultivate a creative lifestyle

"You can't use up creativity. The more you use the more you have."
— Maya Angelou

Creativity is a muscle you can grow with regular practice. By incorporating exercises into your day-to-day life, you'll be able to more easily come up with new content subjects, find a fresh angle to approach a topic with, and stand out from the crowd with truly original ideas.

Unlike bodybuilding where you know exactly which muscles you need to exercise to build them, there's actually no single region in your brain where creativity happens. It spans across a number of areas and can include multiple sections working together in harmony. So in order to cultivate a well-rounded creative mind, you need to approach your mental exercises in a variety of ways. Let's check out some of them:

Covered in this section

- > *Become a Renaissance person*
- > *Schedule time for creative thinking*
- > *Shake things up*
- > *Take a break*
- > *Incorporate play*
- > *Avoid censoring yourself*

Boost your creativity

Become a Renaissance person

"Curiosity about life in all of its aspects, I think, is still the secret of great creative people"

– Leo Burnett

Channel your inner DaVinci and dabble in a lot of things. Maintaining an unquenchable curiosity for the world will help expand your pool of knowledge and experiences to pull from when producing new ideas. Increasing the depth and breadth of your knowledge bank will help you innovate faster and come up with better and more unique ideas.

Be curious

Open your mind and get curious. Constantly explore new topics, try new experiences, and travel to new places. In order to come up with novel content in your niche, you need to spend time with information that others don't usually spend time with. Engage with books, movies, art, etc., that you wouldn't normally. In addition to broadening your knowledge of the world, you will also be building new neural pathways and increasing your creative capacity.

Observe the world and take lots of notes

Make it a habit to carry a journal with you everywhere you go so that no matter where you are you can capture the ideas when they hit. Don't just write down ideas though. Make note of anything interesting and unique that you come across. Write down an interesting conversation you overhear while you're at a coffee shop, sketch out your view from the park, or make note of the way a piece of art makes you feel.

Read a lot

Become a voracious reader. Read lots and lots of books, articles, and magazines. Go to your local bookstore or library and browse. Preview books on Amazon. Read lots of different genres and dive into lots of different topics. Highlight and save things that spark your interest as you come across them.

Meet new people

Expand your world view by getting out of your comfort zone and meeting new people. Check out available virtual events or host an online meetup. Avoid the echo chambers of your normal social circles and find people with new perspectives you can talk to. Ask questions and really make it a point to listen to what they say. Try to put yourself into their shoes and see how the world looks through their eyes.

"I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen."

– Ernest Hemingway





Boost your creativity

Schedule time for creative thinking

*"To practice any art, no matter how well or badly,
is a way to make your soul grow. So do it."*

— Kurt Vonnegut

Innovation is an important factor in helping your business to grow, stay relevant, and differentiate itself. As such, prioritizing and setting up time to focus on your creative mindset can be very beneficial for your business' continued success.

Set aside time for your creative practice

Set up a daily or weekly time slot where you can just focus on innovation – whether that be flexing your creative muscles, brainstorming new content, and/or thinking about new strategic avenues you can explore in your business.

Some suggestions to set yourself up for success:

- > Time: Figure out what time of day you are most creative.
- > Environment: Design your space to include things that inspire you, make it feel special, and get your creative juices flowing.
- > Routine: Do a little ritual every time to help signal to your brain that it's time to get creative. For example, the author [Jack Kerouac would light a candle](#) to signal the start of his writing session and blow it out when he was finished.
- > Warm up: Put together little practices to warm up your mind whether it be writing, sketching, or doing a quick puzzle or brain exercise.

Practice producing ideas every day

As they say, practice makes perfect. In order to develop a muscle, you need regular exercise. Develop your creative ability by forcing yourself to come up with ten ideas every single day. If you make this a daily ritual, you will find you get better and quicker at brainstorming new ideas. You want to make this an enjoyable practice so avoid any perfectionist tendencies and just focus on quantity over quality. If it's easier, pick a topic each day to help focus your creativity and avoid overwhelm.



Boost your creativity

Shake things up

"Creativity involves breaking out of expected patterns in order to look at things in a different way."

– Edward de Bono

One way to get unstuck if you're having a problem coming up with a new idea or solution is to forge a new neural pathway by doing something unrelated. Einstein, for example, would play his violin when he was stuck on a physics problem.

Break your patterns and try new things

Vary when and where you brainstorm. Creativity tends to peak during your "off-hours" so come back to the problem at various times throughout the day to see what new ideas you may come up with. Additionally, you should change up your environment. According to [one study](#), 60% of creative people operate in 2-3 different workspaces, so try switching up where you're working or even just rearrange your workspace from time to time.

Adjust your perspective

Try to remove yourself psychologically from the topic. Imagine yourself on the other side of the problem. Imagine you've already completed the project or finished the task. What new perspective do you get from this side of the problem? In what new ways would you approach the project? How could you work backwards to your end goal?

Do something that scares you

Try doing something that you are afraid of. This will help in two ways. First, it will help break you out of a rut, give you a new perspective, and shake up your mindset – ultimately encouraging new ideas to come to you. Second, by doing things that make you fearful, you will help increase your tolerance for scary things. Fear is a major obstacle for creativity so by better managing your fear, you can increase your capacity to take bolder steps with your content and business.



Boost your creativity

Take a break

"Creativity involves breaking out of expected patterns in order to look at things in a different way."

— Edward de Bono

Stepping away from the problem or project for just 20 minutes can significantly boost your output. A lot of those big, "ah-ha" moments come to people when they are doing something completely unrelated, so build in those breaks to allow your brain to work through a problem freely and without pressure.

Take a walk

What do Beethoven, Charles Dickens, and Steve Jobs all have in common? They all were avid walkers! A study from Stanford University found that a person's creative output increased by an average of 60% when walking, so go take a break to get outside to get your heart rate going and the creative juices flowing.

Spend time by yourself

"When I am completely myself, entirely alone... or during the night when I cannot sleep, it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly. Whence and how these ideas come I know not nor can I force them." — Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Creativity can really flourish when we are alone. Carve out time in your day to spend by yourself whether it's before everyone else wakes up in the morning or after they've gone to bed. Turn off distractions, unwind, and give yourself the space to get lost in your own thoughts.

Sleep on it

In one Harvard Medical School study, participants were tasked with imagining a problem they were looking to solve before going to bed. They found that half the participants reported dreaming about their chosen problems and a quarter of them were able to come up with novel solutions to their problems in their dreams.

Practice mindfulness and meditation

One study found that just 10-12 minutes of meditation each day can make you more creative. Meditation and mindfulness practices can also help limit stress, reduce anxiety, and quiet our self critic which all have a negative impact on creativity.

Boost your creativity

Incorporate play

"I never made one of my discoveries through the process of rational thinking"
—Albert Einstein

Play and laugh

Creativity is born from play. Fuel your inner child. Expose yourself to new things. Laugh. Having fun can boost your mood and engage the part of your brain responsible for producing ideas.

Daydream

[Science has shown](#) that daydreaming improves creativity, focus, and clarity. Letting your mind wander offers your brain a chance to rest and experience a mental incubation phase that can allow you to come to your creative breakthrough.

Doodle & Draw

Some of the most successful people in this world such as Bill Gates, Walt Disney, and Albert Einstein have [used drawing](#) as a way to play with ideas. Doodling helps us better process and retain information. It can help our brain relax and get our creative juices flowing.

Get happy

[Being happy has been shown to boost creativity](#) and help people make better decisions. In an interesting chicken-or-the-egg scenario, it's also been shown that by doing something creative you can boost your happiness. So by focusing on either your happiness or your daily creative practice, you can boost the other!



Boost your creativity

Avoid censoring yourself

"The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt."

– Sylvia Plath

Censorship is the enemy of creativity. Here are some tips to help avoid your brain getting in your way:

- > **Freewrite:** Just sit down and start writing. Write whatever comes into mind – anything at all even if it feels mundane and inconsequential.
- > **Set up a timer:** Put a set amount of time on the clock and write or come up with as many new ideas as you can before time runs out.
- > **Put it in pen:** Write and/or sketch your ideas in pen so that you're not tempted to erase or type over them.
- > **Go for quantity over quality:** In order to avoid censoring yourself, aim to produce a large volume of ideas. By forcing yourself to focus on quantity, you can help your brain avoid getting stuck on whether an idea is good enough or not.





Step 2

Harness innovation:

Tactics & exercises to brainstorm content ideas

"There is no such thing as a new idea. We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope."

– Mark Twain

Once you've established a creative lifestyle and built those muscles up, you can start using them for your business.

Creative exercises are helpful, tactical systems you can try out when you have a specific problem or topic you need to brainstorm for. They can improve your mental cognition, increase your innovation, and boost your idea generation.

In this next section, we're going to look at some bigger picture tactics and specific exercises you can implement. Pick and choose the exercises that work for you or for the specific problem at hand. Use these to:

- > Become more flexible at problem solving
- > Uncover more robust and multi-dimensional solutions
- > Help when you get into a creative rut
- > Home in on an effective creative process for your content strategy
- > Drive increased success for your business

Covered in this section

- > Activate your content radar
- > Restructure your ideas
- > Find inspiration from others



Harness innovation

Activate your content radar

The best way to come up with new ideas is to simply notice them. So all you need to do to be more creative is to be more aware of your thoughts, more observant of your environment, and more persistent about capturing these ideas as they come to you.

Identify the problems that need your solutions

Observe what problems you encounter in your day-to-day life. Look at what struggles your readers are experiencing. Think about ways you are uniquely positioned to help provide solutions to these problems.

Exercises

- > **Identify your readers' struggles:** Figure out what your readers are struggling with. Review your blog comments, your social feeds, your emails, and look for frequently asked questions or problems that your readers have.
- > **40-20-10-5:** Write down your problem in 40 words or less. Then reduce that down to 20 words, then to 10, then finally to just 5 words. This can help you understand the true crux of the problem so you can ideate and identify the best and most simple solution.
- > **Reverse brainstorm:** Instead of trying to think of a solution to a problem, think about other ways to cause the same problem. Once you have those, then think about how to take preventive measures for those problems.

Question all things

"You see things; and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say, 'Why not?'"

— George Bernard Shaw

Ask questions. Then ask follow-up questions. For maximum inspiration, your questions should be open-ended (not yes/no), short, and simple. Some things to question include:

Exercises

- > **Reverse your assumptions:** List out all your assumptions on your desired topic and then go through each one and imagine it wasn't true. What would it look like if the opposite situation were true? For example, what if parents didn't want to help their kids succeed at math? What would they do differently to make their kids fail? Based on your answers, you could then write a post about 10 things to avoid doing when teaching your children math.
- > **Skyscraper technique:** Brian Dean ([Backlinko](#)) developed this technique where you start by looking at content across the internet that's performing really well and/or getting shared a lot. The next step is to then imagine what that content would look like if it was 100 times better. What would make that piece of content even more amazing?
- > **What are other people asking?** Dig into the questions people are asking about a topic around the web. Look at Google, Reddit, Amazon questions, etc., and see if there are any questions that might make for an interesting post where you can provide your expertise and insight.

Understand the connections

"Creativity is just connecting things." — Steve Jobs

Figure out the intersection of how two things relate or how two random things could combine into something new and unique. To do this, you will first want to acquire lots of information, experiences, and bits of knowledge from lots of places.

Exercises

- > **Identify overlaps:** How can you merge two or more topics into one? Figure out how they are connected. The more unrelated they appear, the more interesting and unique ideas you are likely to produce.
- > **Create forced relationships:** Take two or more unrelated topics and create your own unique relationship between them and/or invent something entirely new.
- > **Look at something from a new perspective:** How could a topic be viewed from someone in a different niche than yours? How would they approach it? Would there be different objectives and/or solutions?

Go beyond the obvious

Dig deeper and force yourself to go beyond what's readily available about the topic. Look at why things are the way they are, get into the more nitty-gritty facets of the topic, and force yourself to produce even more ideas.

Exercises

- > **Keep asking why:** Question your assumptions. Why is this true? Why do we do it this way? Why do people believe that? Then keep asking why, getting deeper and deeper into the root causes. You may uncover ideas for how to do something different, realize that an assumption people make is actually false, or get a better understanding of the reasoning behind certain things and share these back with your readers.
- > **100 attributes:** Force yourself to list out 100 things you know about a topic. By writing out all the things you know, you might stumble upon an idea for your content. For example, you might find things that not everyone knows about, wrong assumptions people make, interesting groupings of attributes, etc.
- > **10x10x10 matrix:** Create a list of 10 ideas you have for a topic. Then, pick one of those ideas and come up with 10 different variations of it. Then, pick one idea from the new list and generate 10 more variations. This can help you generate a lot of ideas quickly!



Restructure your ideas

Simplify

"Creativity is more than just being different. Anybody can plan weird; that's easy. What's hard is to be as simple as Bach. Making the simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity." – Charles Mingus

Take your idea and simplify it. By reducing something to its most basic components, you can re-examine how each element comes into play and potentially find new ways to reinvent the process.

Exercises

- > **Break it into pieces:** Break down a larger topic into the smaller components that make it up so you can look at each of them one at a time and play around with them.
- > **Explain like I'm 5:** Think about how you would explain the concept to a 5-year-old to help reduce your idea to its most simple roots. Check out the [Explain Like I'm 5 subreddit](#) for more inspiration.
- > **Take a birds-eye view:** Think about how you can simplify ideas by taking a step back to examine how it fits into the bigger picture.

Visualize

Visualizing in and of itself is a great way to shake things up and try looking at things in a new light. It can allow you to uncover new connections, rethink and reimagine existing ideas, as well as help you to simplify concepts.

Exercises

- > **Sketch it out:** Create a doodle, a diagram, a flow chart, or a storyboard of an idea or topic. Flesh out the details, try out different visual techniques, and don't censor your output.
- > **Mind mapping:** Make a [mind map](#) to help brainstorm or develop ideas. Mind mapping is essentially drawing out a diagram of information connected to a central topic or idea. It's a great way to explore various avenues and perspectives on a topic.
- > **Put together a collage:** Create a collage to generate ideas about a topic. Collect various visual elements such as images, sketches, pictures, words, quotes, etc., and bring them together into one place. This can help you start seeing some bigger picture themes, produce some new ideas, or refine existing ones.
- > **Creative visualization:** Instead of a physical visualization, use your mental muscles to [visualize](#) a topic or idea in your mind. Play around with the idea by visualizing new improvements, new ways to implement it in your life, new functionalities, and more.

Harness innovation

Find inspiration from others

Collaborate with others

Invite other people to collaborate on projects to help push you out of your comfort zone and inspire you to discover ideas you wouldn't have been able to come up with on your own. Especially try to find people with different perspectives, niches, and/or backgrounds to team up with, as they can bring new insight to your work and really help you push the envelope of what you're capable of.

Crowdsource

Collect ideas, questions, comments, and suggestions from your readers, from random people on the internet, and from your friends and family. Getting other people's points of view can help trigger new ideas for your own content.

Borrow ideas

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

– Austin Kleon (author of "Steal Like an Artist")

Find inspiration from other people. Think about how to build upon what others have done to make it even better. Allow yourself to be influenced by other creators, by certain styles. Experiment with them and figure out a way to add your unique voice or perspective.



Filter for the big idea:

Learn how to qualify ideas

"Ideas are like rabbits. You get a couple and learn how to handle them, and pretty soon you have a dozen."

— John Steinbeck

You now have a ton of ideas! So how do you figure out which ideas to prioritize and which to leave behind?

Setting up evaluation systems to figure out which ideas are worth your time can save you a lot of effort in the long run. It can prevent you from just guessing and allow you to more strategically pick and choose your opportunities.

Covered in this section

- > *Qualifying through quantifying*
- > *Review and prioritize ideas*
- > *Evaluate the potential upside of an idea relative to its cost*
- > *Use an evaluation graph*
- > *Leave room for your gut instinct, experimentation, and fun*

Filter for the big idea

Qualifying ideas

“Curiosity about life in all of its aspects, I think, is still the secret of great creative people”
– Leo Burnett

Qualifying through quantifying

Figuring out how to tell the difference between a good idea and a bad idea is something that takes trial-and-error. You can expedite this learning process by trying to set up systems to qualify a good idea that’s going to pay off. Some types of assessments you could perform include:

- > **Keyword:** Check relevant words in your keyword tool for volume competitiveness
- > **Competitive analysis:** See what current content exists and get a sense of how it’s performing
- > **Historical performance:** Assess your existing content to see if similar topics are doing well
- > **Ask your audience:** Poll your audience to gauge their interest

Review and prioritize ideas

Going through your top ideas and reviewing them against the same criteria can help you narrow them down and make sure you’re picking ideas that make sense for your business and audience. Some common questions you might ask yourself to prioritize your ideas include:

- > What are the potential rewards?
- > Are you excited about it?
- > Does it match your skillset?
- > What does your audience need? Will they respond well to this?
- > How long will it take to produce and create the content? How much energy will it demand of you?
- > What sort of materials, equipment, or technology will be required to produce it?
- > What are the financial costs?

Evaluate the potential upside of an idea relative to its cost

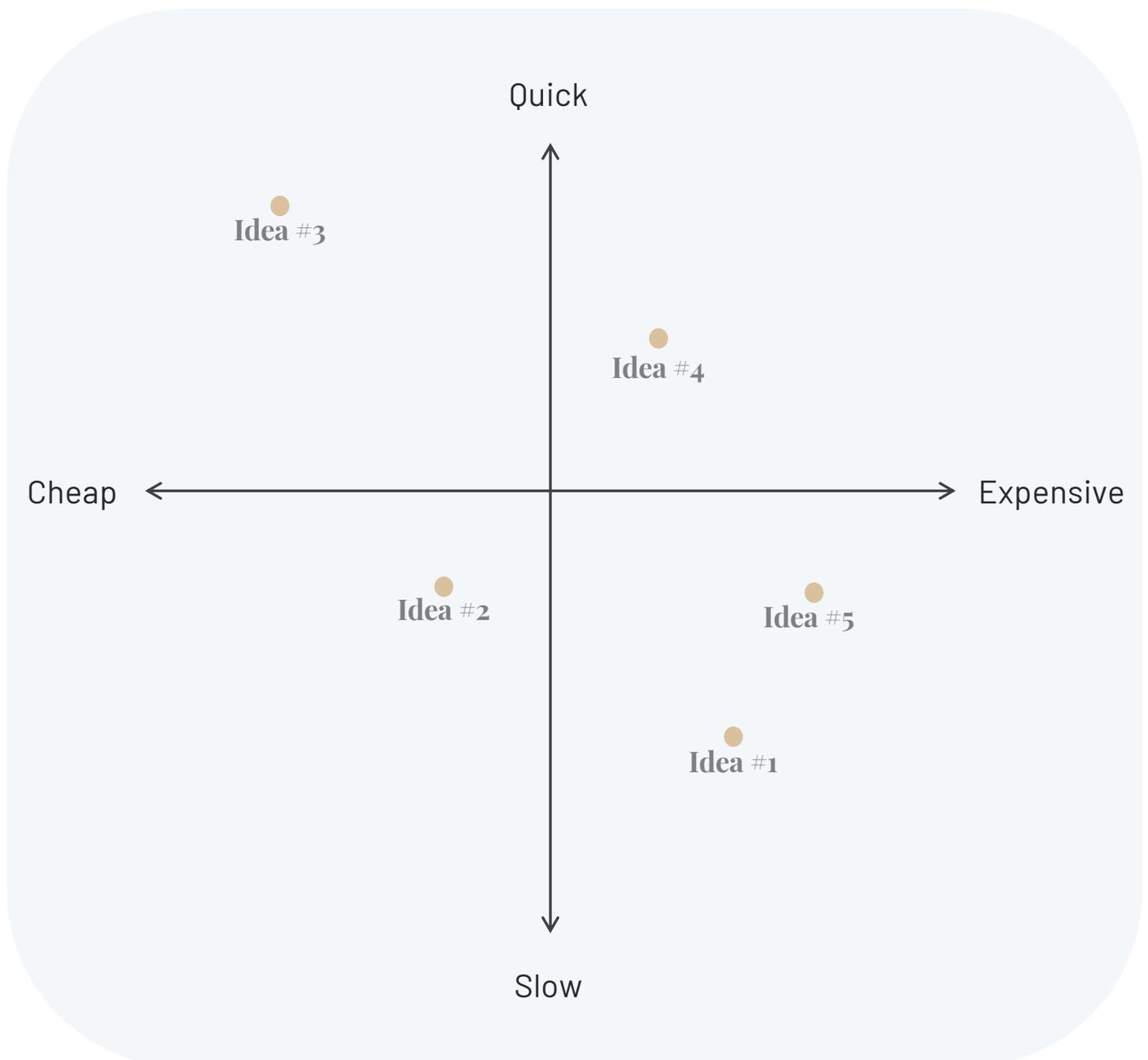
Weigh the cost to develop your idea against what you hope to gain. By “cost”, don’t just consider the monetary investment – think about the resources, time, and energy that will be required as well. When it comes to quantifying the upside, use your historical performance for similar content and look at average pageviews, RPM, and social shares that you may hope to get for each idea type. Opt for those ideas that offer the highest reward for the lowest cost.



Use an evaluation graph

The evaluation graph tool can help you narrow down and filter out your ideas. To create one, first create a two-axis graph and pick your contrasting criteria for the X and Y axis. For example, you could use the X axis to show the cost to produce your idea and write "cheap" and "expensive" on either end (or get more specific and list out the dollar amounts). On the Y axis, you could write out the time it will take to complete on each end of the axis in generic terms like "quick" and "slow" (or get more specific and write out the number of hours it will take you to work on the project).

Once the axes are labeled, you can plot the various ideas you have listed out on the graph where they belong in terms of those criteria. When they are all plotted out, you can then pick out which projects are the best mix of criteria based on your goals, objectives, and/or limitations. For example, if you don't have a lot of time or money for a project, then focus on those projects that are both cheap and quick to produce.



Filter for the big idea

Leave room for your gut instinct, experimentation, and fun

"Creativity is inventing, experimenting, growing, taking risks, breaking rules, making mistakes, and having fun."

– Mary Lou Cook

Go with your gut

Sometimes, you may not be able to quantify an idea but you just have a feeling it's a great idea. You can just feel your readers are going to love it. Give yourself the space to follow your intuition.

Experiment

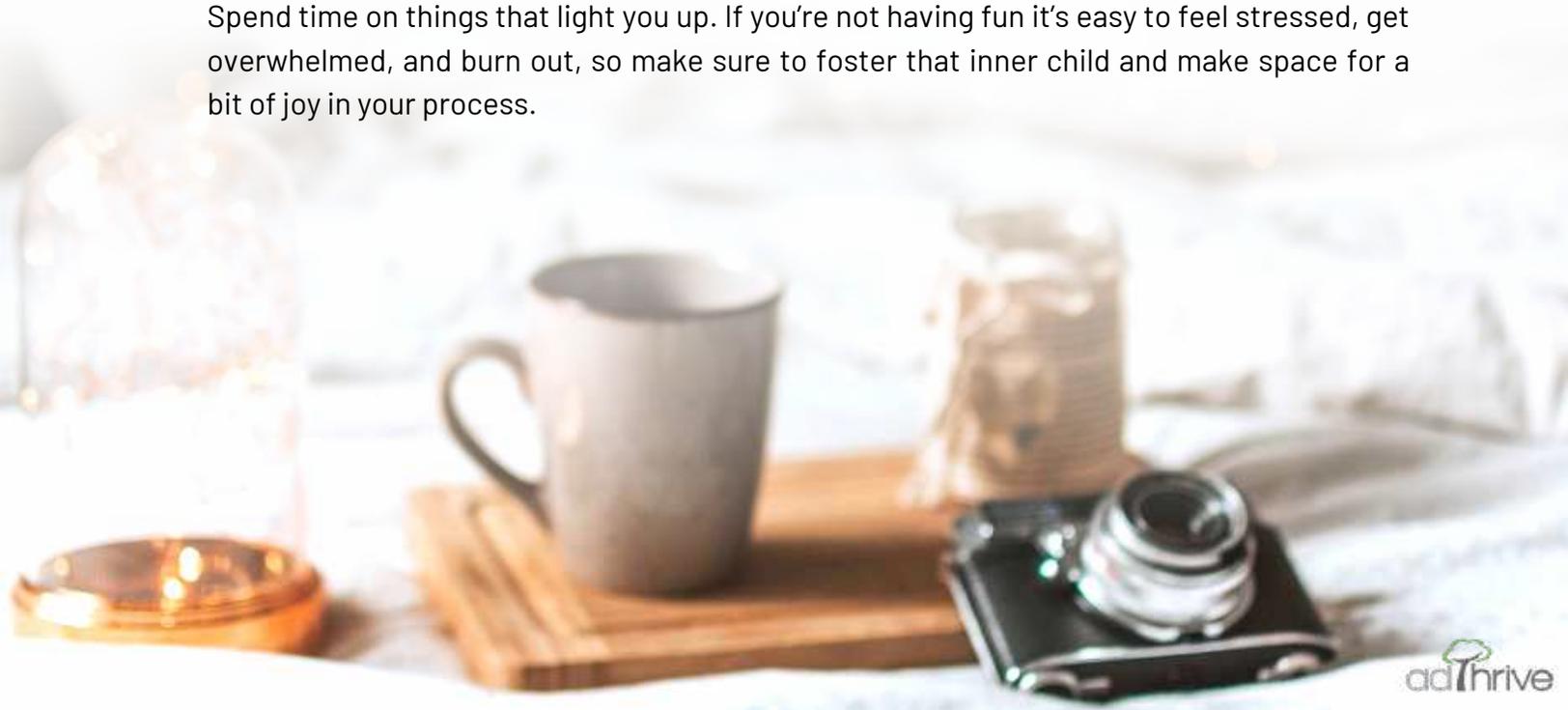
If there's something you just want to try, go for it! Try to spend a bit of your time on new ideas so you can push the envelope of your innovation. Outside of the joy you get from just creating something, you might stumble upon a gold mine at the same time. It's hard to qualify something that's never been done before and as the saying goes, fortune favors the bold!

Fail intelligently

Be open to failure. Failure can teach you as much as success can, as long as you take the time to process, understand, and filter those learnings back into your business so you don't repeat mistakes.

Lean toward joy

Spend time on things that light you up. If you're not having fun it's easy to feel stressed, get overwhelmed, and burn out, so make sure to foster that inner child and make space for a bit of joy in your process.





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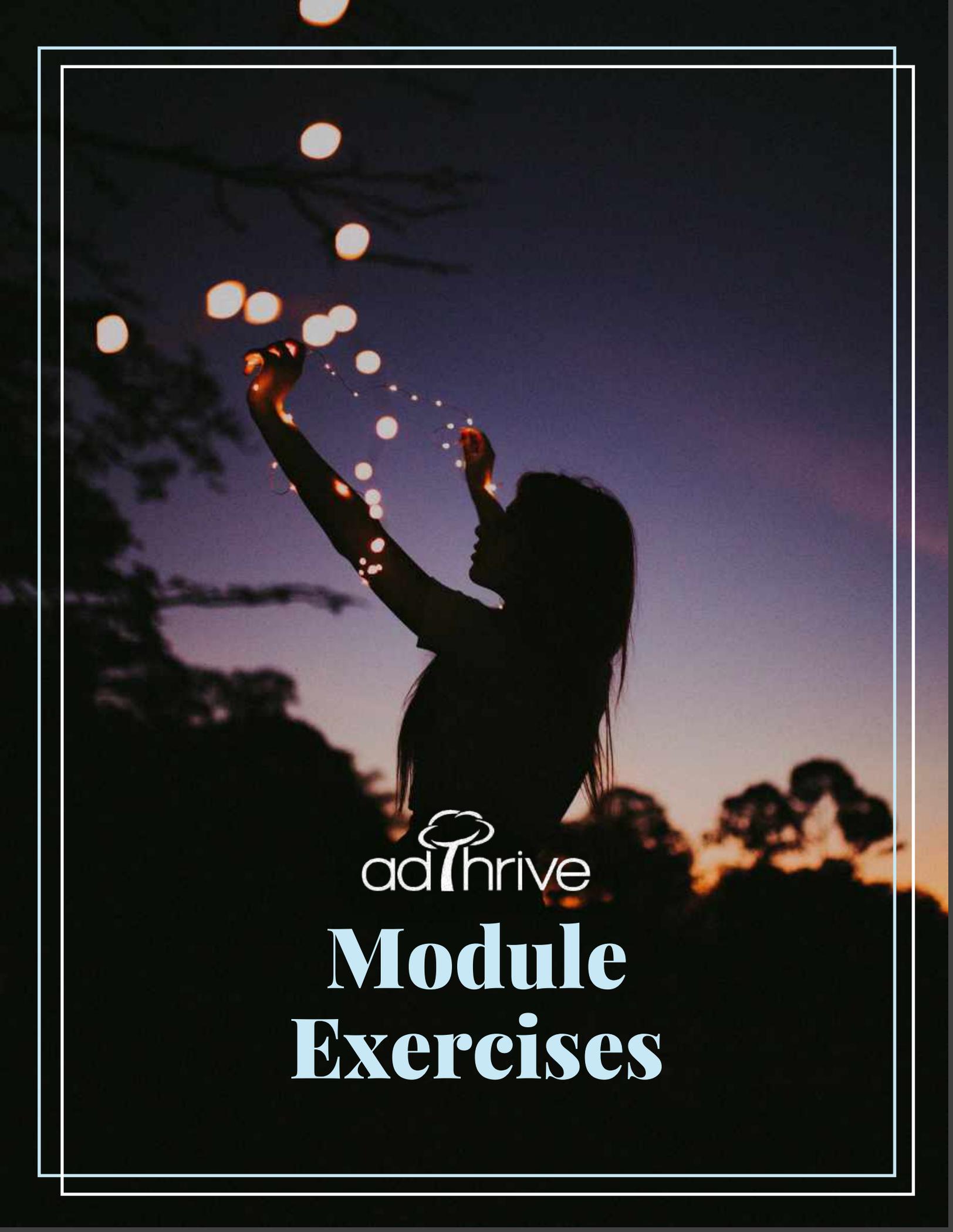
Creative hacking resources



Creative hacking resources

Additional creative exercises

- > [15 seconds of brilliance](#)
- > [30 circles](#)
- > [Alternate uses](#)
- > [Brainstorming](#)
- > [Brainwriting](#)
- > [Building blocks](#)
- > [Charette Procedure](#)
- > [Compound collaboration](#)
- > [Customer journey map](#)
- > [Dictionary story](#)
- > [Draw it again](#)
- > [Draw something](#)
- > [Empathy maps](#)
- > [Incomplete figure test](#)
- > [Musical ideas](#)
- > [New out of two](#)
- > [Paper clip test](#)
- > [Remote associations](#)
- > [Re-purposed product](#)
- > [Reverse brainstorming](#)
- > [Rolestorming](#)
- > [SCAMPER](#)
- > [Six thinking hats](#)
- > [Starbursting](#)
- > [Storyboard](#)
- > [Yes, and...](#)



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Module Exercises

Module Exercises:

1.

Boost your creativity: Do it right now!

Act now and get started on fostering a more creative life by completing this checklist.

- Purchase a notebook if you don't already have one.
- Open your notebook and write down ten ideas right now.
- Go read ten pages from a book you think would help you and/or your business.
- Find an online event to attend and go register.
- Go to your calendar and schedule a time for your creative practice. It can be as little as five minutes a day.
- What's a problem you want to solve? Write it down in your notebook and think about it right before going to bed tonight.
- Draw anything that comes to mind right now in your notebook.

Module Exercises:

2.

Harness innovation: Try out the exercises either here or in your notebook.

40-20-10-5

Write down your problem in 40 words or less.

Then, reduce that down to 20 words.

Now, reduce to 10 words.

Finally, reduce to just 5 words.

Skyscraper technique

Look at content across the internet that's performing really well and/or getting shared a lot. Then imagine what that content would look like if it was 100 times better. What would make that piece of content even more amazing?

Module Exercises:

Reverse your assumptions

List out ten assumptions about your desired topic. Then, go through them one by one to think about what you might do if it wasn't true. What would it look like if the opposite situation were true?

Assumptions

Reverse assumption

1.



2.



3.



4.



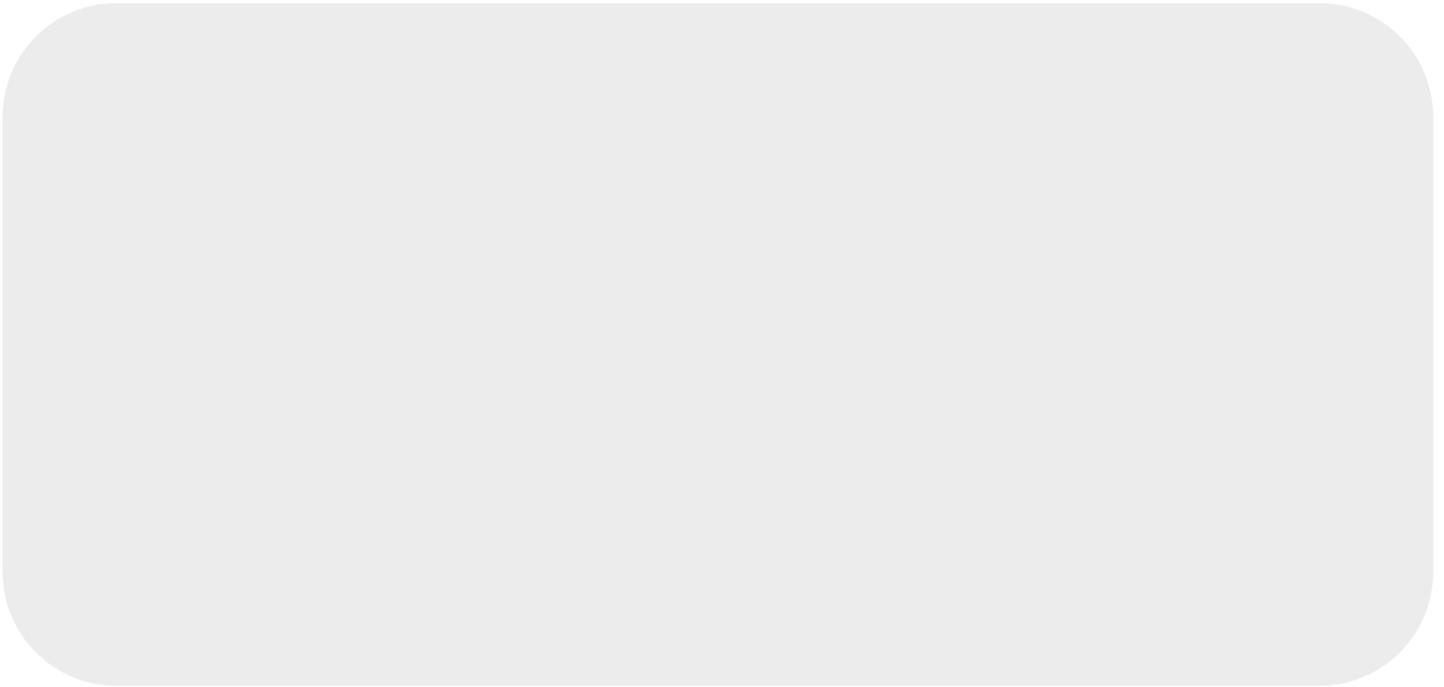
5.



Module Exercises:

Mind mapping

Draw out a mind map of a topic you're considering writing about.



10x10x10 matrix

Create a list of ten ideas you have for a topic.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.

Module Exercises:

Then, pick one of those ideas and list ten different variations of it.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.

Then, pick one idea from the list above and generate ten more variations.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.

Module Exercises:

3.

Filter for the big idea: Practice assessing the ideas

Review and prioritize checklist:

Try evaluating one of your ideas from the last exercise using the checklist:

Your topic idea:

1) What are the potential rewards to you and your business?

2) Are you excited about it?

3) Does it match your skillset?

4) What does your audience need? Will they respond well to this?

5) How long will it take to produce and create the content?

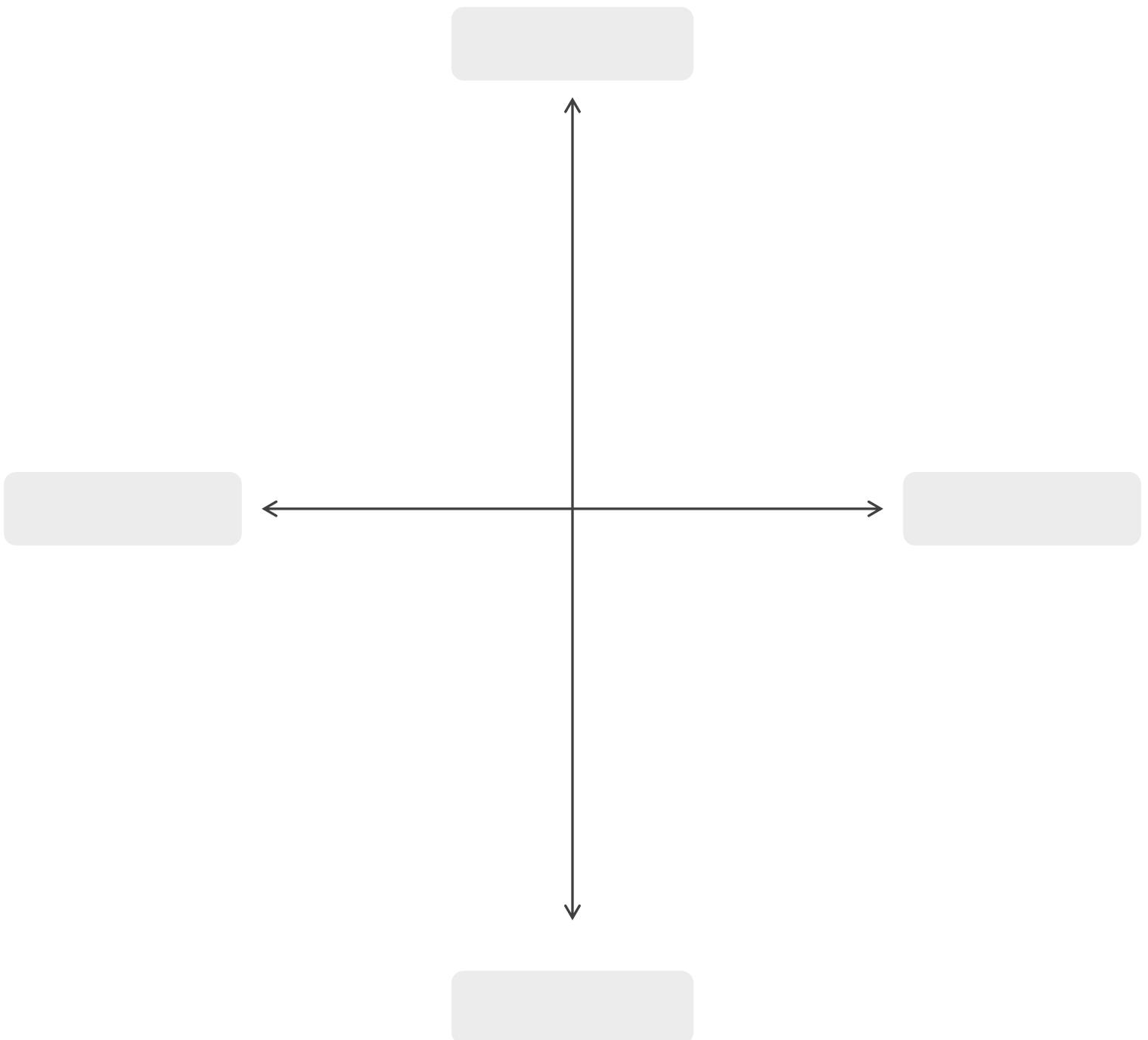
6) What sort of materials, equipment, or technology will be needed to produce it?

7) What are the financial costs?

Module Exercises:

Evaluation graph

Create an evaluation graph with some of the ideas from above.





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Thank you

Questions, comments, feedback?
Reach out to support@adthrive.com