

ONLINE
EXCLUSIVE
EXCERPT
NOT FOR RESALE

HOW
TO
SEE

WHAT
OTHERS
MISS

ROHIT BHARGAVA AND BEN DUPONT



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The world is full of
obvious things which nobody
by any chance ever observes.

—Sherlock Holmes

The Hound of Baskervilles by Arthur Conan Doyle

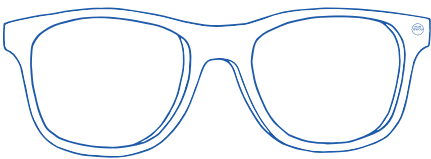
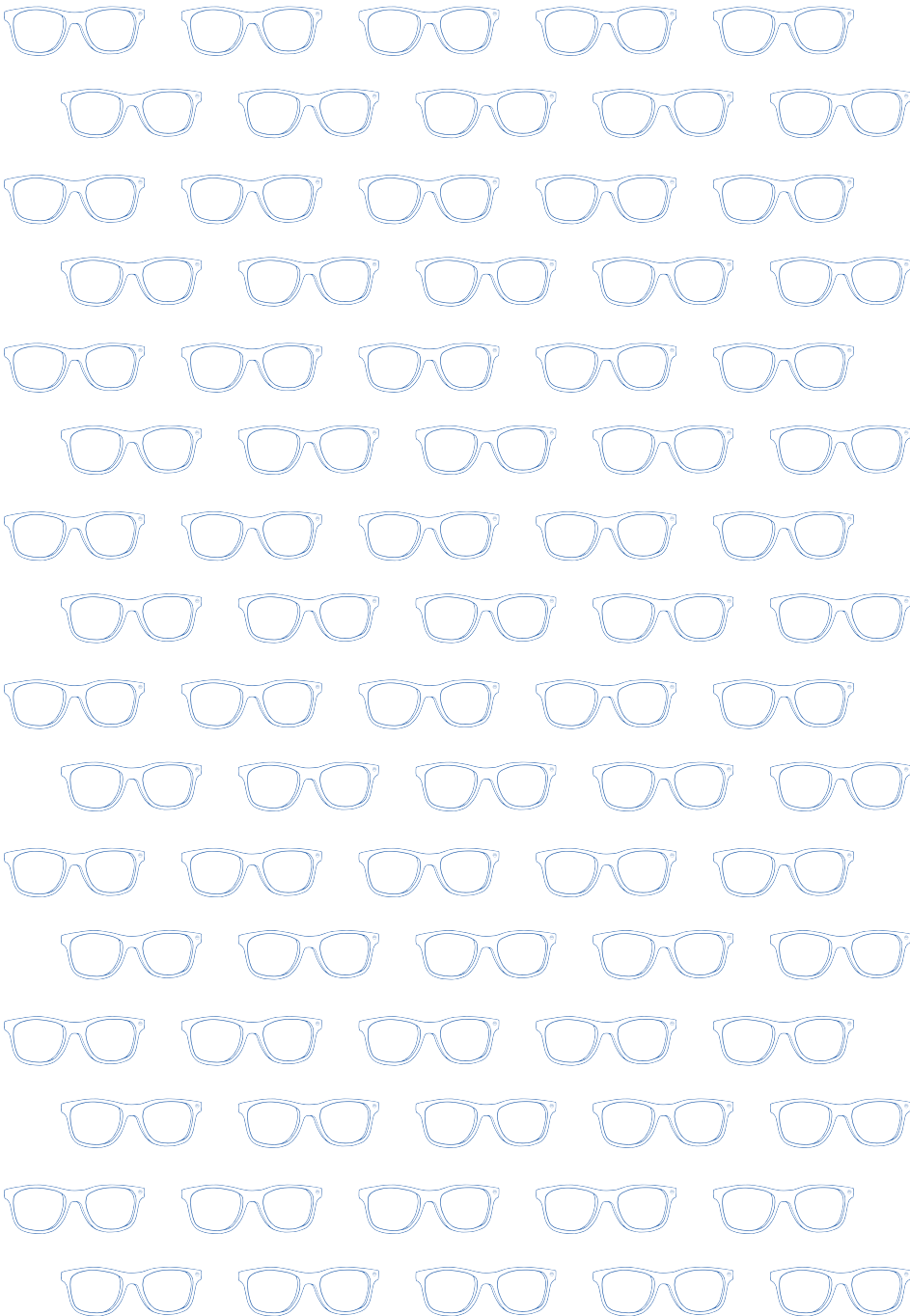
Examine (something) thoroughly to isolate that which is most important or useful.

NON - OBVIOUS THINKING

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Introduction

On a Sunday afternoon in Mexico City, eighty thousand spectators gathered in the city’s largest stadium to accidentally witness history. It was the last day of competition in the 1968 Summer Olympics, and the crowd was about to watch the final efforts of the remaining competitors in the high jump.

Two of the three athletes clearly belonged there.

Russian legend Valeriy Brumel was the reigning Olympic champion and favorite to win. Running in a close second was American Ed Caruthers, a world-class athlete who had also been drafted into the NFL. The third and most unlikely finalist was a tall, gangly engineering student named Dick Fosbury, who had showed up that morning for the biggest competition of his life wearing two mismatched shoes.

Despite his awkward appearance, he was the main attraction. The reason was his unusual technique.

Until then, the traditional way to high jump was by using the scissors technique, which involved getting the first leg over the bar, followed by the other. Fosbury, however, had a different approach. His method involved running up to the bar, turning backward, and propelling himself over while his body faced the sky. They called it the “Fosbury Flop.”



That day, Fosbury cleared 2.24 meters, setting an Olympic record—enough to win the gold medal. Since that afternoon more than five decades ago, nearly every medalist in the high jump event has used Fosbury’s flop technique. Fosbury won by turning his back on the traditional method and inventing a new way to compete.

The science fiction film *Ready Player One* takes place in a world where people immerse themselves in a virtual universe to escape the harsh reality of life on a ravaged Earth. Against this backdrop, eccentric genius James Halliday announces a

video game contest to find an heir to his trillion-dollar fortune.

Wade Watts is among the many players trying to solve this virtual treasure hunt, beginning with its first task: a seemingly unwinnable car race.

For years, no one has come close to completing the challenge. But inspiration



strikes our main hero. As the race starts, Wade stalls his car and immediately starts driving in reverse. That unexpected choice unlocks a new path, allowing him to avoid obstacles the others face and win the race.

Wade conquers that first quest by shifting his perspective and unlocking a road that had been invisible until that moment.

Joy Buolamwini had to wear a white mask to be seen. As an MIT graduate student in computer science working to train social robots on facial recognition, she realized that her dark skin wasn’t recognized by the generic software used by most of these robots. The problem was algorithmic bias built into facial recognition systems, which she described as the “coded gaze.”

Buolamwini's solution was to start a movement for more inclusive technology. Her organization, the Algorithmic Justice League, has become a gathering point where technologists and citizens can report experiences of algorithmic bias.

In recognition of her impact, Buolamwini has been named one of the world's Most Creative People. Her work has influenced new global legislation, inspired the mission of ethics groups within corporations, and was chronicled in the award-winning Netflix documentary *Coded Bias*.

On the surface, an unexpected Olympic champion, a fictional teenage video gamer, and an invisible computer scientist don't seem to have much in common. Yet each managed to do one of the most challenging things anyone can do: taking a non-obvious perspective unlike anyone else.



Seeing What Others Don't

Detective stories typically feature a hero solving a case by piecing together a theory from many small observations that only they have made. Like the unaware secondary characters in a good mystery story, we can also get distracted by big things and

fail to notice minor details that seem insignificant at first—but turn out to be the clues that ultimately help solve the case.

Fosbury noticed that when his sport moved to using foam mats as landing pads in the high jump event, it offered a chance for athletes to land safely in ways they couldn't before. His observation led him to develop his famous flop technique ... and win the gold medal.

The character Wade Watts solved the key to the virtual car race using his knowledge of James Halliday's life. He remembered reading a small detail in Halliday's virtual diary that proved to be the clue to understanding him and making the winning choice to find a different path.

Joy Buolamwini took up the study of algorithmic bias after she experienced the frustration of being ignored by facial recognition software due to the color of her skin while working with robots in a lab. Realizing the real-life consequences of that experience prompted her to do something about it.

These are not examples of geniuses or once-in-a-lifetime talents. Instead, they are both real and imagined stories of people who taught themselves to pay attention to the details overlooked by everyone else. Learning to do this starts with observation, but it takes more than just noticing the details around you.

{ The goal of this book is to teach
you how to overcome blindspots
and become a more original thinker. }

We call this “non-obvious thinking.” And the search for *how* to do it has shaped both of our professional lives.

Seeking the Non-Obvious

For Rohit, seeking non-obvious ideas started when he worked at one of the world’s biggest ad agencies. He was part of an unusual task force working to dream up new ways to apply behavioral science to create more persuasive marketing.

This deep work studying human behavior and influence led Rohit to write the “Non-Obvious Trend Report” the following year. The report went viral, reaching more than two hundred thousand professionals, and became the springboard for Rohit’s bestselling series of annual Non-Obvious books about predicting trends that would run for ten years, reaching more than a million readers.



While Rohit was exploring non-obvious ideas through his research and books, Ben was building a deeply engaged community around non-obvious thinking too. For the past twenty years, his annual Non-Obvious Dinner event has brought together a mix of U.S. senators, CEOs, and Nobel Prize laureates alongside entrepreneurs, musicians, and high school students to imagine a better future.

{ Often the best ideas come from
unexpected voices, the non-experts
who bring an outsider's perspective. }

At every dinner, participants are challenged to share their most “non-obvious” ideas for changing the world. Each table picks their favorite, and the whole room then decides on the most significant idea of the evening. Some of the winning non-obvious ideas over the past decade have included shifting higher education to a three-year on-campus experience, using “digital exhaust” data to cure cancer, and solving the dilemma of who will take over family businesses when kids leave or seek a different life—the so-called rising “succession crisis” among small-town businesses.

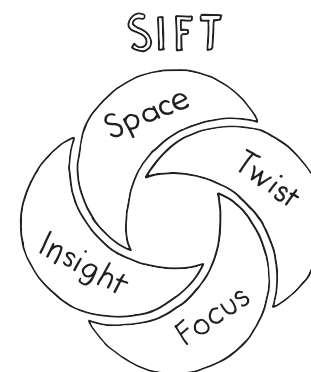
Whether hosting an unconventional gathering or interviewing researchers on the cutting edge of new technology, our work has individually offered each of us an intimate look at how fascinating minds work. Over the years, we both became obsessed with cataloging what we've learned about how some of the world's smartest and most creative people engage in non-obvious thinking. What mindsets and habits allow them to do what they do? What do they know that others don't? And, more importantly, can anyone learn to think and see the way they do with some training and practice?

This obsession brought us together to write this book because we believe that anyone can become a non-obvious thinker.

The SIFT Framework

Most bakers know that one of the secrets to making light airy cakes is sifting your dry ingredients. When you sift flour, for example, you eliminate lumps and incorporate air while removing impurities. The benefits of sifting offer a perfect metaphor to describe how you can start to think in more non-obvious ways too. Aside from baking, the word *sift* has another meaning: to isolate that which is most valuable.

It is this secondary meaning that led us to use the word as a memorable acronym for the method we will teach you in this book. Our goal is to help *you* become a non-obvious thinker. This starts with using the SIFT method:



{ Before you can see what others miss,
you must develop the mental flexibility
to be open to new ideas. }

This process starts with creating more *space*. Space is the warmup stretch that makes limber, non-obvious thinking possible. In Part I, you will read about proven techniques for creating space, from reinventing your breathing to unearthing your mental biases.

Once you have learned to create more space, in Part II you will learn to uncover *insights*. Insights go beyond describing the world as we see it on the surface and explain *why* it is the way it is. Discovering them usually starts by asking better questions.

After you get better at collecting insights, you will need to narrow your attention to the things that matter most. In Part III, you will learn techniques to help you *focus*. This includes new suggestions to block out the many distractions we all face and see other perspectives unlike your own. To help you do it, we will share techniques to discover patterns, avoid the paradox of choice and use constraints to improve your thinking.

The final stage in the SIFT framework is what we like to call the *twist*. This is the moment when you challenge yourself to take your thinking even further. If your mental journey to this point was akin to a high jump, this would be the moment when you raise the bar just a little higher. When you do this, it is not just for your own benefit. The impact of opening your mind to see new perspectives and welcome uncommon thinking may matter much more than any of us realize.

Non-Obvious Thinkers Wanted

At a time when social media algorithms fuel deep polarization in our society, our culture is desperate for more non-obvious thinkers. Old solutions for new problems rarely work. We need people who see what others don't, ask questions, and push back against the obvious status quo—people who have the empathy to put themselves in other people's shoes without dismissing alternate perspectives as misguided.

{ The world needs more non-obvious thinkers. }

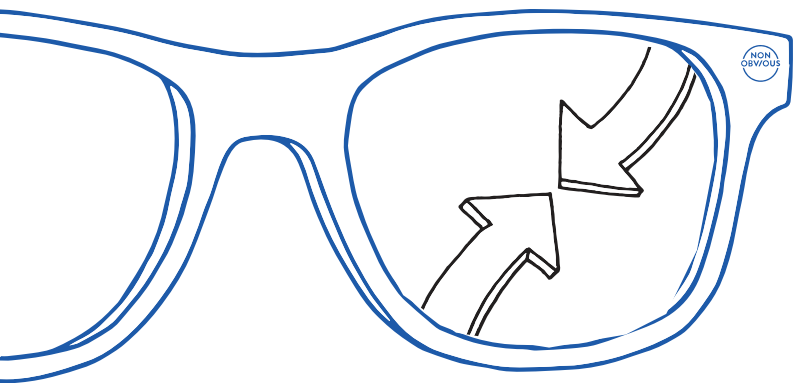
Non-obvious thinkers are the instigators who come up with bold, original ideas that propel *all* of us forward—and have the courage and determination to turn them into reality. They are the ones who change things for the better. And every country on Earth is hungry for more of them.

You can become one. This book will show you how.



PART THREE

Focus Your Ideas



OVERVIEW //

FOCUS YOUR IDEAS

Every May in the southern fields of Turkey's Anatolian province, dozens of family farmers start their mornings picking the softest blooming rose petals that will later be steam distilled into their world-renowned Damascus rose oil. It takes more than 10,000 flowers to make a single drop of this precious oil, worth more per ounce than gold. This combination of time—and a lot of raw material—creates a world-class product.



The 250-year-old Waterford crystal factory in Ireland is renowned for its longstanding program where those who aspire to become master craftsmen must complete an eight-year-long apprenticeship to learn how to make every cut in glass required to create the brand's high-end luxury crystal bowls, vases, and glasses. When they are done with their training, these master craftsmen, like the Turkish family farmers, use a unique method of distillation to take many elements and focus them to create a beautiful, elaborate, and very specific product.



Focus, the third step of the SIFT method, also involves a similar process of distillation. Our favorite analogy to describe this is through a term that is usually associated with museums: curation.

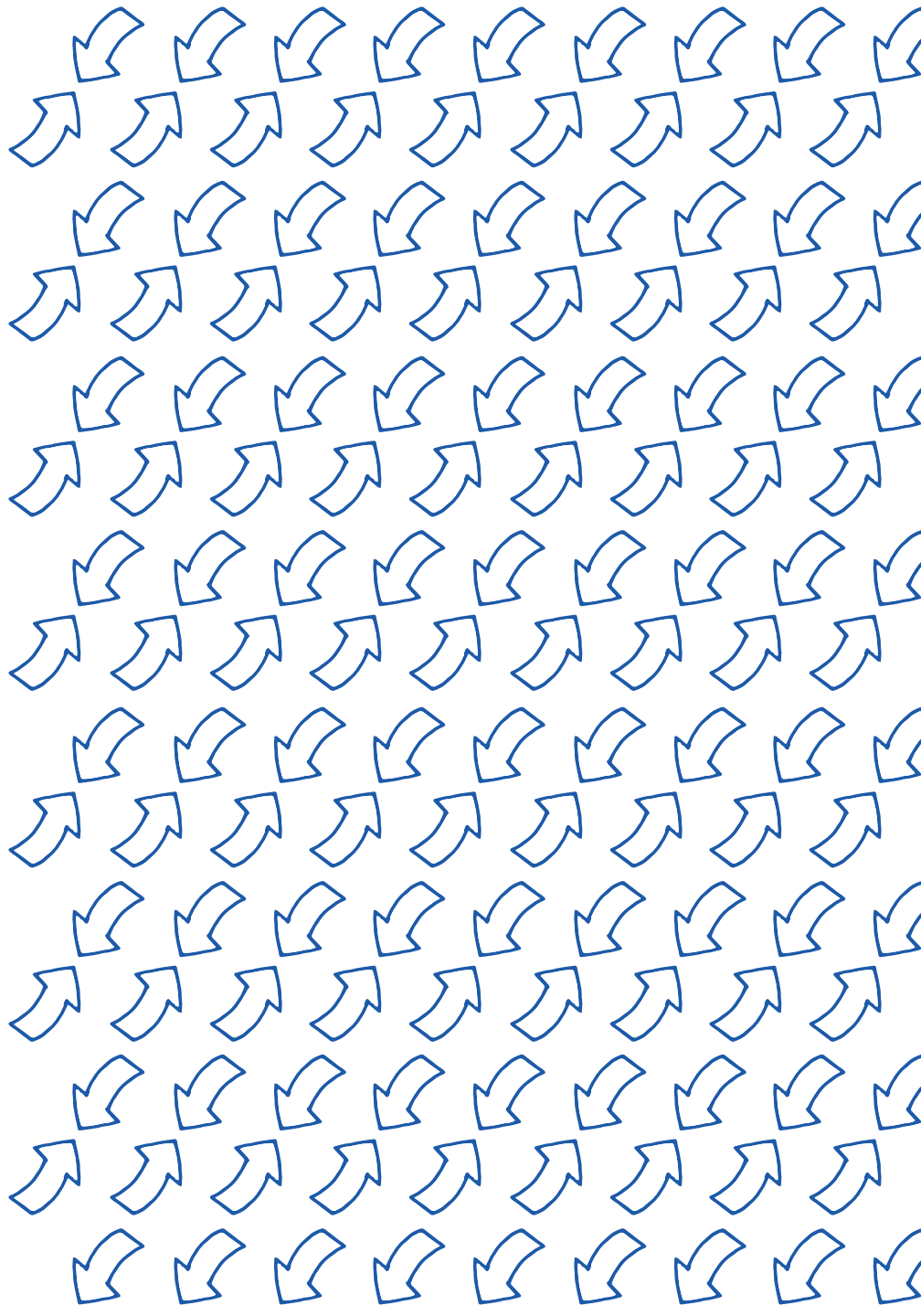
{ The art of curation is about discerning what is most meaningful. }

Museum curators don't just create exhibits, they also routinely decide what not to showcase. What paintings should be moved to the archives? What treasures should be packed away because they don't fit the theme of an exhibit?

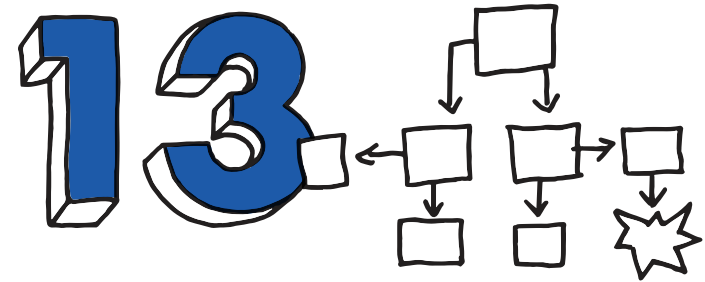
Non-Obvious Thinking

Like museum curators, most of us will face similar challenges in refining our own thinking. After following the techniques from the first two steps of the SIFT method, you'll already have created space for new ideas and uncovered some insights. Deciding which of these to focus on can become overwhelming—but it doesn't need to be. One thing that can help is to become what science fiction author Isaac Asimov famously described as a “speed understander,” someone adept at quickly separating the signal from the noise.

In this section, we'll show you how to focus your ideas on what's most important so you can become a speed understander for yourself.



FOCUS YOUR IDEAS



Identify the Real Problem

Discover the Water

Be a Satisficer

See the Other Side

Add Constraints

Use Augmented Creativity

FOCUS YOUR IDEAS //

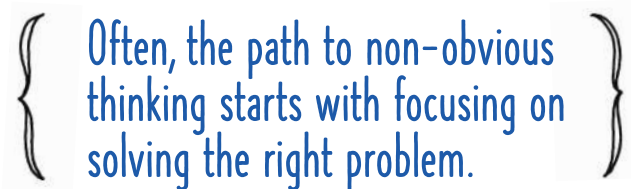
Identify the Real Problem

Elisha Otis didn't invent the elevator, but his name is the one most associated with the humble mode of indoor transportation used by people around the world every day.

What he *did* create—and demonstrate dramatically at the 1853 World's Fair in New York was the first passenger-safe elevator. Before his invention, elevators were widely used, but never to transport people. The danger of a cable snapping and sending passengers hurtling to a fiery death meant people were scared to ride in an elevator.

At the World's Fair that year, Otis climbed onto an open platform elevator as a man stood behind him, ominously holding an axe. At just the right scripted moment, the staged saboteur

cut the rope as onlookers gasped in horror. Rather than plunging to his death, Otis and the platform came to an abrupt halt thanks to the safety brakes he had installed. It was, historically and literally, the world's first elevator pitch.



Often, the path to non-obvious thinking starts with focusing on solving the right problem.

After Otis's theatrical demonstration, the safety brake was quickly adopted widely, and the elevator became, in the words of author and economist Tim Harford, one of the "fifty inventions that shaped the modern economy." It brought about a new era in architecture, allowing buildings to be taller and, in turn, cities to be more densely populated.

The mantra of modern entrepreneurship follows in Otis's footsteps: fall in love with problems rather than solutions. But the problem that truly needs addressing is often more nuanced than it appears. In the case of the elevator, at face value, the problem Otis was solving was fixing the danger inherent in riding on an elevator. His innovation, the safety brake, did just that.

The *real* problem, though, was convincing a wary market that his innovation was dependable enough for elevator riders to trust it with their lives. *That* was the problem he memorably solved with his memorable World's Fair stunt.

A related problem-solving mindset can also be seen in the healthcare field. Many pain management doctors, for example, are now making it a priority to focus on underlying medical issues instead of rushing to prescribe pharmaceutical solutions to alleviate pain. These evolved doctors already know that pain is the human body's way of sending a message; and they are committing themselves to listening. The choice to either ignore or address these signals can mean the difference between potentially leading a patient toward a painkiller addiction or offering them a better way to manage chronic pain.

In most challenging situations there are likely to be surface problems and hidden ones. Building your skills to dig deeper to spot and spend your attention on those masked issues is a skill often associated with consultants. What they do is ask smart questions and learn from the answers to identify the real problem where they should spend their focus. Let's review a few techniques to help you do that.

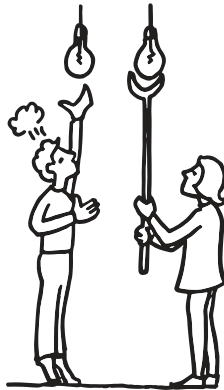
HOW TO



Identify the Real Problem

Follow Your Frustrations

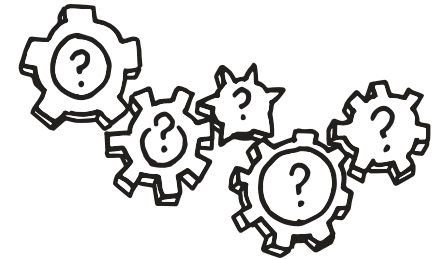
Let your frustration be a source of inspiration. Getting to the root cause of what annoys you can help point your focus in the right direction. Many of the founding stories for brands we recognize today started in this way. Reed Hastings famously had the idea for Netflix after getting frustrated by a \$40 fee from Blockbuster for returning a video late.



When you choose to take inspiration from the things that make you angry for being the way they are, it can help you to achieve a focus that leads to better non-obvious thinking.

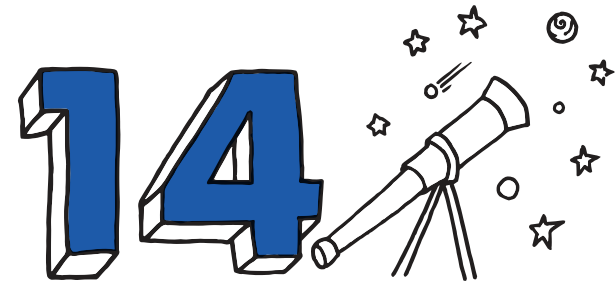
Ask Five Whys

Next time you need to uncover an underlying problem to focus your ideas, use the “five whys method”—asking why something is the way



it is and following each explanation with the same question: asking “Why?” five times. Popularized by Toyota founder Sakichi Toyoda, this thinking model can also help you get to the *real* underlying problem faster and discover your focus in the process.

FOCUS YOUR IDEAS



FOCUS YOUR IDEAS //

Discover the Water

The search for alien life is a relatively recent one in the long timeline of human existence. Thousands of years ago, our ancestors likely wondered about the stars in the sky but knew little, if anything, about solar systems. Today, our growing understanding of space has led many in the scientific community and beyond to believe in the possibility of life beyond our planet.

A cornerstone of the search for alien life is the “Goldilocks Zone,” a term first coined more than fifty years ago to describe the theory that every star in the galaxy must have a region where conditions are neither too hot nor too cold—but *just right*—to sustain liquid water, which is still believed to be a

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prerequisite for all organic life (as we know it) to exist.

In other words, rather than broadly searching for signals of alien life, it is more efficient to focus on the search for planets in a habitable zone where liquid water might be present. Find the water, and we might find the aliens too.

Just as astronomers identified water as the key indicator of possible alien life, looking for the common theme or pattern among your insights and ideas can help you focus on those that matter most.



Pinpointing a common element
among ideas can help you zero
in on the bigger picture.

That's an approach Rohit took when writing the final *Mega-trends* edition of his signature Non-Obvious Trend book series as well. For that project, he had to identify the most prominent themes across the 125+ trends he had previously introduced over the past ten years. To start, he focused on a trend from the 2011 report where he had suggested that social media was making celebrities more accessible. In the following years, other trends noted how companies had started showcasing

their employees as heroes, how luxury brands were trying to be more relatable, why products with flaws were beloved *because* of their quirks, and how create more human experiences was becoming a driver of innovation at companies of all sizes.

The common theme among these trends was something he described as *human mode*—a term describing the idea that as our world gets increasingly digital, people are seeking out and placing greater value on physical, authentic, and sometimes imperfect experiences designed with empathy and delivered by humans.

Rohit's trend curation method and the quest to find water on distant worlds are both examples of how identifying a common element can help you align multiple ideas, especially those that may not immediately seem to have anything that binds them.

Seek that common element among your insights to focus on what really matters. That is how you find *your* water.

HOW TO Discover the Water

Focus on Similarities

When engaging with people from cultures other than your own, finding shared experiences, values, and interests leads to common ground. Empathy starts with trying to identify bigger similarities instead of getting distracted and disconnected by differences. Music is often described as the universal language, and nearly every culture on Earth has some sort of drums or percussion to create the beat. Similarly, if you can think about what this “beat” is that unites your insights, you will find your similarities too.



Go Physical

To better identify what your ideas have in common, sometimes physically laying them out can help. Use a



whiteboard, a digital collaborative platform, or just a table and a stack of stories and ads torn from magazines and spread out where you can visually arrange them. Sometimes, seeing all your ideas spread out at once can help you see patterns that you would otherwise miss. The stories and ideas that we can touch and hold as part of this process become more meaningful for us simply because they feel rarer than digital content.

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FOCUS YOUR IDEAS //

Be a Satisficer

One of the most influential books in the social science and marketing fields just turned twenty years old. When it was first published, it challenged the fundamental belief about consumption that having more choices is always good.

When published, Barry Schwartz's *The Paradox of Choice* stunned the business world by suggesting that too many choices can *diminish* happiness and increase anxiety. In the book, Schwartz showed that the more time we spend deciding on a purchase, the more regret we are likely to feel about it. In a sense, the book predicted FOMO (fear of missing out) entering the dictionary.

One of the main ideas from the book is that most people are *maximizers* or *satisficers*, depending on the situation. Maximizers “seek and accept only the best,” often feeling the need to spend hours researching and weighing their options to ensure a decision or purchase is the optimal one. Paradoxically, maximizers also score high on the regret scale—a tool psychologists use to measure how much remorse someone feels over a past decision.

Even when maximizers end up with a decision or outcome that is objectively better, they often struggle to be happy with their choices and feel the need to know how the alternative choices might have turned out.

{ Learning to appreciate when an idea is good enough instead of always seeking more options can be the key to focus. }

In contrast, satisficers “settle for something that is good enough and do not worry about the possibility that there might be something better.” You might think being a satisficer means being willing to settle for something suboptimal, but Schwartz points out that satisficers are just as discriminating as maxi-

mizers. Being a satisficer, according to Schwartz, is the secret to “fighting back against the tyranny of overwhelming choices.”

From sitting down on the couch and trying to decide what show to stream, to encountering 28 (or more!) brands of pasta sauce in the grocery store, the chaos of too many options has invaded nearly every part of our lives. Deciding where to focus will be considerably easier if



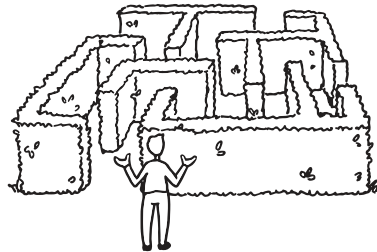
you can learn to think like a satisficer. Adopting this mindset isn’t really about making better choices; it’s about committing to the choices you’ve *already* made. Satisficers don’t dwell on the other options they *could* have made. Instead, they double down on the ones they *did* make. They can make them work.

Besides helping you avoid decision paralysis, a satisficer mindset allows you to focus on an idea without regrets and devote yourself to fully understanding and developing it—and perhaps seeing something in the process that others have missed.

HOW TO Be a Satisficer

Be a Chooser, Not a Picker

What criteria do you use to make a choice? It probably depends on the choice, but science suggests the important thing is to make sure you have some criteria



in mind. Schwartz explains that actively considering your options will make you a “chooser” instead of a picker. A picker feels overloaded by choice. A chooser focuses on what makes a decision important and imagines alternatives if necessary, but then moves forward without regret or imagining every other foregone choice they could have made. Be a chooser.

Decide Who to Trust

When you are faced with a decision with many options, sometimes the only way to simplify your choice is to seek advice from the person you feel you can trust the most on the topic. Find the right expertise—or spend your time deciding whose advice you trust the most. Then seek out their perspective and follow their recommendations. This can be the ideal way to narrow your focus in situations where there are many variables and you might struggle to make a choice without some guidance.



FOCUS YOUR IDEAS

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See the Other Side

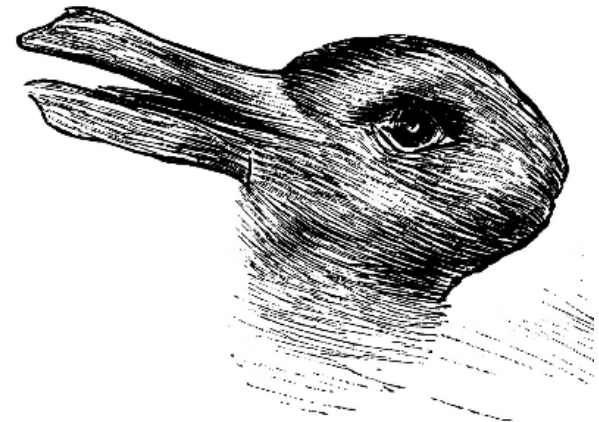
Add Constraints

Use Augmented Creativity

16

FOCUS YOUR IDEAS //

See the Other Side



Quick! What do you see? A duck or a rabbit?

This century-old optical illusion has long been a tool for researchers trying to understand the human brain. Some teams

theorized that the animal you see first could indicate which side of your brain is more dominant. Others suggested that the speed with which you *alternate* between seeing the duck and the rabbit might reveal your brain flexibility.

One research team went in a different direction, testing a hypothesis that the animal you see first might be influenced by the seasons. Their results suggested that around Easter time, more people were likely to see the rabbit. At other times of year, the duck was reportedly more popular.

{ There is more than one way to see something; seeing it from a different perspective is the real challenge. }

Over a century of multiple studies, one thing has never been in dispute—*both answers are right*. In our divided modern times, it's hard to imagine this conclusion being accepted by anyone. People cannot decide what the truth actually means, but they do seem certain that they are right and others are wrong. What if the ability to hold two contradicting ideas in equal regard was actually the real truth?

While the science remains inconclusive about what optical illusions like this one actually reveal about us or our brains, they do remind us that there is usually another way to see something—a way you didn't see at first.

In the 1990s, the Magic Eye book series featured stereograms—flat images where a hidden 3D image was integrated into a two-dimensional pattern. The only way to see these buried images was by altering your focus so you looked *through* the page instead of directly at it. While the popularity of these Magic Eye images has faded, they still offer an enduring lesson for how we might see the other harder-to-notice side of anything if we just focus on a different angle.

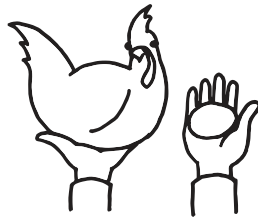
The most important thing is not which side of the optical illusion you see first or even how quickly you can find the hidden message in the Magic Eye, but whether you can see them at all. And whether you can appreciate the perspective of those who see the other side you didn't, or those who believe everyone is just pretending to see something and there is actually nothing there at all.

HOW TO

See the Other Side

Embrace Dual Truths

In a world where we are constantly tempted to see things as either true or false, there is a lightness that comes from being able to accept the gray area. That image is a duck *and* a rabbit. A platypus is an animal that is both a mammal and a reptile. A glass can be both half full and half empty. Embracing the possibility that two or more things that seem incompatible can be true simultaneously is a sophisticated idea. But if you start paying close attention, you'll find that this is the case in many more instances than you'd think possible.

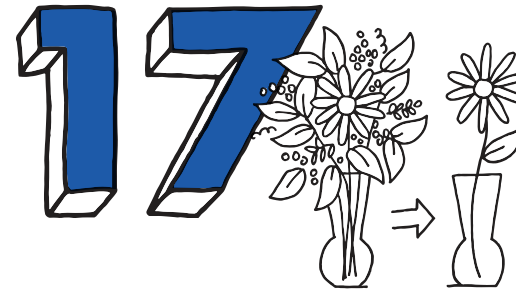


Tell Situational Backstories

When encountering a rude person who makes you angry, ask yourself: *what situation could make this behavior reasonable?* For example, if someone cuts you off in traffic, imagine they are rushing to the hospital for an emergency. Psychologists suggest this technique helps you consider the other side of any situation and choose to live your life offering more understanding and kindness even to the people who wrong you.



FOCUS YOUR IDEAS



FOCUS YOUR IDEAS //

Add Constraints

One of the most well-known doctors in modern history owes his fame to a chance stroll on Madison Avenue.

Ted, as he was known to his friends, had given himself the title of “doctor” despite having no medical training. He dreamed of being a published author, but was discouraged by a recent a string of 27 rejections from book publishers.

Finally, in 1937, as he was walking down the street, he bumped into a former classmate who happened to work for a publisher named Vanguard Press. This friend agreed to give Ted a shot and publish his first book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*. The story was an instant hit, propelling Dr. Seuss to household-name status.

Identify the Real Problem

Discover the Water

Be a Satisficer

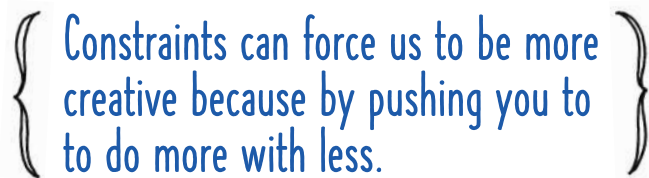
See the Other Side

Add Constraints

Use Augmented Creativity

Over a decade later, Dr. Seuss's then-editor, William Spaulding, had an idea. In the 1950s, inspiring kids to enjoy reading was getting harder and harder. Television was presenting an irresistible alternative, and children were abandoning books. Spaulding challenged Ted to write a story "that first-graders can't put down"—using no more than 225 different words from a pre-determined list of 348. Rising to the task, Dr. Seuss wrote *The Cat in the Hat* using 236 words.

A few years later, another friend took that same challenge one step further, daring Dr. Seuss to write a children's book using only 50 unique words. His answer to *that* test would become the bestselling book of his prolific career, *Green Eggs and Ham*.



Constraints can force us to be more creative because by pushing you to to do more with less.

Like *The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham*, some of history's most enduring creative works were created by introducing similarly beneficial constraints. Near the end of his life, renowned artist Henri Matisse was confined to his bed and

wheelchair. Unable to stand and paint any longer, he created a new artistic diversion: paper cutouts. Many years later, some of his best-known art was produced through this method he later described as "drawing with scissors."

In the mid-80s legendary Nintendo game music composer Koji Kondo developed the soundtrack for the original Super Mario Brothers game while facing extreme constraints of his own. Under orders to use as little data storage as possible, he composed the music using just five repeating tones that were looped in unexpected ways in order to avoid boring or annoying gamers. Today, it is widely considered one of the best video game soundtracks of all time.

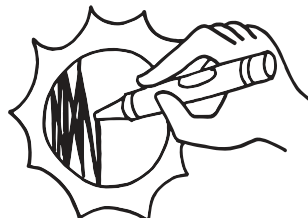
Constraints like the ones each of these creators faced can force better ideas *because* they offer some structure around creativity. Science has shown that people tend to develop more varied and creative solutions when options are limited.

As you turn your attention to curating your ideas, consider imposing a few creative constraints of your own. For example, what if you could restrict your ideas to only what might be possible within a specific industry or what could reasonably be accomplished within no more than 48 hours? Remember, when you are forced to innovate with less, you can focus your thinking in new and interesting ways.

HOW TO Add Constraints

Practice the Art of Subtraction

As the writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery famously said, “A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left

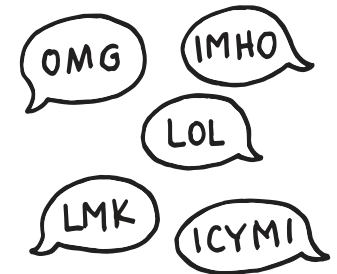


to take away.” Embrace this philosophy by limiting your idea development time or reducing the number of people involved in a decision. You can also introduce constraints around the technology you will (or won’t) use, or the budget you make available. Each of these choices are examples of sharpening your focus through intentional subtraction.

Invite Brevity

Twitter’s original 140-character limit required early users to distill their thoughts. It sparked a new method of communication. The mandatory limit did not allow for much nuance, but it helped users to focus only on

what mattered most. You can adopt a similar approach by being as brief as possible and choosing to use more plain language in all your communications—from emails to contracts.



FOCUS YOUR IDEAS



FOCUS YOUR IDEAS //

Use Augmented Creativity

Charley Douglass had a secret the size of a mini refrigerator on wheels.

Across nearly every large Hollywood TV studio in the 1950s and 60s, Douglass was considered the maestro of laughter. His signature “Laff Box,” a contraption that looked like a typewriter and tiny portable piano with metal strings, could produce hundreds of types of crowd laughter, from surprised chuckles to loud guffaws to a slowly diminishing laughter with one person enjoying the joke just a little longer than everyone else. Driven by its success and the cutthroat competitive nature of the movie business, Douglass was notoriously secretive about how it worked. His secrecy helped him build a monopoly over

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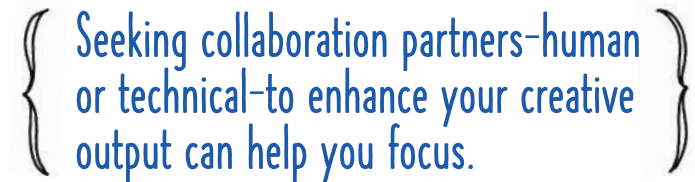
the laugh track business that lasted for decades. His laughter reels are still in use today.

The Laff Box was designed to mimic the effect of a real-life audience for broadcast television, a new category of entertainment that allowed people to watch a show isolated at home. Douglass helped “sweeten” the television shows by adding a masterful combination of background laughter that TV critics of the time said “gave people permission to laugh.” He made funny shows even funnier by helping the audience focus on the jokes.

A laugh track is an example of augmented creativity—a method used to focus on and enhance the creativity of an individual or product. The term sweetening is an apt one to describe how augmented creativity works: it’s like adding sugar to a cup of tea.

Today, there are many ways to automate creative augmentation using generative artificial intelligence tools (Gen AI). You can run an AI filter to improve the sound quality of any recording or use it to fill in missing details of a damaged or tightly cropped photo. Or you can generate text or refine your own writing with AI tools, “sweetening” your prose and making it clearer, shorter, or more creative.

As Gen AI continues to become a larger part of our daily lives, workplaces, and any new professional tasks, the challenge to integrate and benefit from it in productive and ethical ways will become more urgent. Yet if you learn to do it well, you will find yourself able to harness a superpower that makes *you* more productive, creative, and prolific.



Seeking collaboration partners—human or technical—to enhance your creative output can help you focus.

Like the Laff Box, these tools enhance the creativity of your idea. They don’t work best as a replacement for creative effort, but rather as collaboration partners.

In that sense, you might leverage AI technology or get help from a colleague to augment your creativity. Either way, what matters is that you can focus your thinking by seeking out creative collaboration partners in human and technology forms.

HOW TO Use Augmented Creativity

Generate Some Criticism

As we wrote the various chapters for this book, we regularly fed chapters into a Gen AI tool and prompted it to provide a 1-star negative review and tell us why they would earn that rating. We also asked our Gen AI tool to read and summarize various chapters of the book from several perspectives: including a 19 year old college student, a startup founder and chief marketing officer. This tactic helped us isolate less effective arguments and improve them. When you are trying to elevate an idea's non-obviousness, you can use these tools in the same way for quick on-demand feedback.



Collaborate More

This book benefited from many voices who added early input, offered feedback on its ideas, and helped to hone these lessons and insights. This collaboration came from events, conversations, interviews, and the many sources that we turned to in writing the book as well as a panel of early readers. When you're feeling a lack of focus or uncertainty about what matters most, seeking out an external perspective can be the key to helping you refine your focus too.



Confidence is belief in yourself.
Certainty is belief in your beliefs.
Confidence is a bridge.
Certainty is a barricade.

—Kevin Ashton
Author of How To Fly A Horse



Conclusion

In 2012, a science team on an Australian survey ship headed to a spot 700 miles east of Queensland to visit Sandy Island and made a startling discovery. It wasn't there.

The scientists had arrived exactly where all modern maps and GPS showed the 15 mile-long oval-shaped island to be for well over 100 years. It was even pictured on Google Maps.

Yet in the spot where the island should have been, there was only 1,400 meters of deep water and no land visible for miles. When the missing island was first reported, it created a flurry of speculation and conspiracy theories.

Was this another Atlantis or perhaps a secret military base? Could some cataclysmic event have led to the disappearance of an entire island?

Over time, the most widely accepted explanation turned out to be somewhat less dramatic. The island had never existed in the first place. The fact that it had been included on maps of the time was explained away by a combination of nautical errors and wishful thinking by too-long-at-sea captains that had persisted for generations. Until that fateful long overdue moment when someone thought to confirm there really was an island there and *undiscovered* it.

After confirming the nonexistence of Sandy Island, Google officially removed it from its maps. Others followed. Across the annals of human history, the idea of undiscovery is hardly discussed, but perhaps it should be. While rare, this geographic correction awakened the public's imagination to the tantalizing possibility that perhaps our entire world isn't quite as known as we sometimes think it is.

If an island that was thought to be real for over a century could turn out not to be, what other entrenched mistakes about the way things work remain unknown even today?

Non-obvious thinking often requires questioning the things that we know so we can shift and broaden our perspective.

There is a Sandy Island in each of our mental maps. The challenge is discovering (or sometimes undiscovering) what it is and choosing to see the truth.

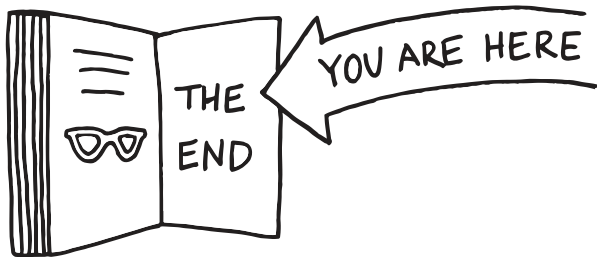
In Scotland, a recent effort by Lexicographers at the University of Glasgow to build a thesaurus of the Scottish language revealed there are over 400 words for snow including *flindrikin* (a slight snow shower) and *skelf* (a large snowflake).

The interesting thing about being stuck in a Scottish flindrikin, though, is that your experience of the snow doesn't depend on knowing the word for it. No two snowflakes look alike after all ... even if one of them happens to be a skelf.

There will always be things like language or culture or beliefs that offer reasons for seeing the gaps between your experience and others. But beneath these contrasts, there is more that brings us together if you look deeper.

Opening your mind to see other perspectives takes bravery. Choosing to engage with people unlike yourself or seeking information that is outside your usual media diet does too. More than anything else, this book is about unlocking this sort of bravery in yourself and using it to see the things that others miss.

That's what non-obvious thinkers do, and the more of us there are in the world, the better the future will be.



Further Reading

As we came together to write this book, we also turned to our book shelves to pull out the ideas that had inspired us most.

In the following pages, you'll find a curated list of the books that we have found ourselves recommending most over the years. On your journey to become a non-obvious thinker, this reading list is designed to be a guide to continuing to build your skills and knowledge. One of the best ways to do that is to read more books.

