

The New Art of Ideas

Unlock Your Creative Potential

by **Robin Landa**



Contents

The Three Gs Method

Page 2

Goal

Page 2

Gap

Page 3

Gain

Page 4

DEI: Amplifying the Three Gs

Page 5

Emotional Obstacles

Page 6

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Unlike conventional books about generating as many ideas as possible no matter how good they are, *The New Art of Ideas: Unlock Your Creative Potential* by Robin Landa focuses on generating good ideas that have value, ideas that can make a difference to individual's lives, to society, and our planet. The value presented in the book is this: When you identify *a goal, a gap, and a gain*, then you know your consequent idea will have value.

The Three Gs—goal, gap, and gain—unlock an idea. The Three Gs can help you understand what a worthwhile idea is, how it works, and how to generate one. Furthermore, the Three Gs yield ideas that move the needle, ideas that are not inconsequential but worthwhile, ideas that will make a difference. It is a new way of thinking, a new framework for ideation. No other framework points you in this direction—that is, on the path to ideas worth pursuing. *The New Art of Ideas* is a step-by-step guide to generating, crystallizing, or amplifying worthwhile ideas.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The Three Gs Framework.
- Applying Goal, Gap, and Gain to unlock ideas.
- How to Amplify the Three Gs with DEI.
- Tools to tackle the emotional obstacles that block your path.

The Three Gs Method

To get a worthwhile idea—big or small—use *The New Art of Ideas* framework’s Three Gs: goal, gap, and gain. Here’s how it works.

A *goal* is your aim, what you want to achieve. Let’s say your goal is to design a shape-shifting concept car. Direct your efforts at researching and developing the car concept. Your goal challenges you to focus your thinking, energy, and resources.

Determine if the goal will fill a *gap*. The gap could be any number of things: a type, a size, a location, a system, a product, choreography, music, art, arts fusion, marketing, design, song cycle genres, and more.

Finally, is there a benefit in there for someone, for society, or for our planet? What do they *gain* from your *goal* and filling this *gap*? This gain can apply to a community, a company, an entire industry, and so on. If there’s no benefit, there’s no point in filling the gap—or perhaps there was no gap to begin with.

The gap and gain aren’t as clearly defined in innovations or creations in the arts as they are when someone invents a medical device or a sustainable farming system. Nonetheless, the arts are critical to people’s well being and inspire thinking and creativity. All great art is transformative because it allows us to understand ourselves more deeply, as part of the greater work.

All one needs to do is think of an installation by Luis Salgado, a poem by Amanda Norma, songs by Fiona Apple, or a film by Lulu Wang to realize how to arts nourish us, inspire us, transport us, and connect us to each other, to creatures, and our planet.

The Three Gs help you generate, crystallize, or unlock ideas that are worthwhile. Societal value takes many forms. “Worthwhile” means ideas of value that make us think critically and creatively, inspire us, or move us the way the arts do; make our lives better; are for the betterment of the world; and consider the triple bottom line—people, the planet, and profit—rather than simply profit or novelty.

Often people convince themselves that good or great ideas require a golden nugget of brilliance or even genius possessed by only a fortunate few. Certainly, intelligence refined by education is a key factor. But a golden nugget of genius is not required. Just about anyone can generate an idea—a harebrained idea, a poor idea, a meh idea, or a dangerous

idea. That’s not to say that brilliant people don’t generate poor ideas; however, they generate many ideas—some that prove worthy of pursuing.

The Three Gs remind us that there is more than one way to generate an idea and direct our energy along the way. A goal and a gap that lead to an idea worth pursuing offer a gain. They inform, educate, support, empower, elevate, inspire, enrich our creative thinking, move the needle, entertain, advance, provide a utility, or do something for the greater good.

It doesn’t matter how creative or daring you are right now. What matters is whether you’re open to revising your thinking. If you pursue the Three Gs—this system will accelerate your thinking—you will be on the path to truly worthwhile ideas.

And here’s the true beauty of the Three Gs: you can use this framework in any order. A goal isn’t always the entry point for an idea. A gap may be staring you in the face, and you move forward from there. Or you can’t help but notice how something is benefiting people—a gain so apparent you can move ahead from that point.

This process is nonlinear. The goal, gap, and gain influence each other—they are synergistic and are not or should not be siloed. The Three Gs also allow you to backtrack and reassess. The Three Gs are fluid.

Goal + Gap + Gain = Worthwhile Idea

GOAL

When setting a goal, you don’t need to clearly articulate the goal for your thinking process to begin. You can start by noticing an opportunity and asking questions. Ask, “what if?”

“What if” is a magical question. It invites you to speculate, to wonder. It’s a helpful tool for forming a goal if you don’t have one at the start. Any probing question, such as “If only..” or “I wonder..” work to seed ideas, foster a creative mindset, determine goals, and in turn raise other questions.

These types of questions foster imaginative and unconventional avenues of thought. The answers to “what if” questions are found because people set them as goals and then go out to realize them.

If you are still unsure about your goal, try to challenge the status quo. Any entrenched mindset fights finding a novel approach. Entrenchment happens when a belief or way of doing something becomes so firmly set that it becomes part of a person’s identity or corporate or organizational culture.

. . . most companies and even schools expect and reward pedestrian thinking to solve problems. . .

This is where you must be brave.

When this happens, there often is resistance to changing the status quo. Resisting the status quo helps unlock creative potential. Just because something has been done one way for a long time doesn't mean it's the only or right way.

By thinking differently from prevailing conventions, you might discover a goal. Challenging the status quo usually means you're employing unconventional thinking. Your goal might go against prevailing public or professional opinion. And what's worse, most companies and even schools expect and reward pedestrian thinking to solve problems, relying on established constructs, techniques, methodologies, and practices.

This is where you must be brave.

Conventional thinkers often don't get unconventional thinking. Conventional thinking is thinking within an existing construct or model. Unconventional thinking may follow creative lines of thought that tend to generate original solutions.

Consider this. Conceiving the worst solution might inform your thinking or assessment of what people really want. For instance, instead of asking, "How can we get more people to subscribe to our evening dress rental service?" ask "How can we get people to unsubscribe?"

Illuminating pain points can lead you to ways to improve a service or product, and that improvement becomes a goal. Think of all the ways you could get it wrong—all the issues that would annoy people. This way of thinking can help you see what the right goal would be.

Another way this approach works is to set a pedestrian goal, one that has been done before or is painfully dull. Thinking of wrong or pedestrian solutions prompts you to think of a goal, and ultimately an idea, that would be more engaging and might get under people's advertising radar.

Maybe that's not the way you think, which is just fine. There are plenty of ways to pinpoint an original goal. A passion of yours might be your way in. If you love soccer, hiking with friends, or curating fashion, could you determine a goal based on one of your passions? Many people

form goals out of an unbridled interest in a subject, activity, or combo of things.

When setting a goal, think small. If you want to be a game designer, start by creating one concept for one game. Why start modestly? Putting too much pressure on yourself might backfire, whereas the act of conceiving one game has just enough stress to excite you and is a finite goal, which is highly achievable. If you set too big a goal, you might hamstring yourself.

Setting more than one goal at a time can be daunting. One goal is all it takes to move toward determining a gap.

GAP

A gap is a missing piece that fills a need—an area not yet explored or underexplored, a question not yet asked, or a population not addressed or underserved. A gap can occur in any discipline; in any form; for any population or population sample of any size, type, or location; for any system, in any situation, in any location, and for any conditions.

Whether your goal is to design a new device or structure, write a story, create a digital game aimed at seniors (a definite gap), sell more product, open a restaurant, build a crowd-sourced furniture delivery app, determine if your goal will fill a gap.

Every unique and worthwhile idea must address a gap—some knowledge, information, entertainment, utility, method, system, framework, creative work, and so on that is missing in any discipline.

There is almost always something that remains to be done or learned in any field. If you're not filling a gap, then you're likely not contributing something worthwhile, interesting, inspiring, challenging, original, or creative. There are always gaps in knowledge.

You might be thinking, *How would I find a gap?* Think:

- What is needed? A product, system, device, art form, leadership method, or something else?
- In any field, what is the key question that remains to be solved or answered?

- What has been underfunded or under researched?
- What has not yet been interpreted or made clear?
- What has not yet solved issues of homelessness, hunger, or clean water for all?

A gap could be any number of things—a type, a size, a location, a category, an analysis, a system, a product, and so on. You never know what will click. Who would have imagined people could book commercial flights on rockets into outer space during the early twenty-first century or remove carbon dioxide from the air with a carbon removal factory?

A gap might not be entirely novel—it could be your unique spin, treatment, or investigation, significant or small. In 2004, when Chef David Chang opened Momofuku Noodle Bar, he changed New Yorker's minds about ramen and became part of a new food movement. The gap Chang filled is clear to everyone now. His different approach to what most of the world considers inexpensive dishes, ramen noodles and pork buns, redefined Asian cuisine.

Sometimes a goal and a gap must be in sync with the times. They might be dependent on available technology or, conversely, they can spur technology. When affordable 3D printers came on the market, creators and makers were thrilled to have this new tech at their fingertips. What if your goal were to solve the endemic crisis of homelessness using a 3D printer?

Such a home undoubtedly would fill a gap. This technology, faster and cheaper than conventional construction, could help address out-of-reach home prices for would-be buyers as well as homelessness for thousands. This confluence supports the *goal*, illuminates the *gap*, and yields a worthwhile *gain*.

To pinpoint a gap, such as the one in housing construction, train yourself to look for an insight—a human truth. Conducting research is a given for scientists, social scientists, and many other experts, whether in a lab, in a studio, or out in the field, which may be in the built or natural environment.

If you're not a scientist, you can gather information related to your goal by conducting casual or anecdotal research with an eye toward discovering an insight. Think of contemporary technology, products, services, and brands that have come to market and are doing well—rideshare, drones, meal delivery services—and reverse engineer their ideas using the Three Gs to see what gaps they filled.

Other ways to identify a gap include:

- Finding a pain point that people experience with a product, service, or sector
- Looking for incongruities that are inconsistent with how most businesses operate
- Use analogies to co-opt methods, systems, intelligence, or paths employed by others
- Do or make, such as writing or creating to experiment or articulate an idea
- Ask yourself imagination-building questions
- Think about intersections of factors like technology, demographics, trends, the economy, and social movements
- Conduct real-world observations to see how people behave

Remember that you must prepare your mind for finding an insight. Practice mindful observation, be curious, and see potential in all.

GAIN

Once you've set a goal and determined whether it fills a gap, assess whether there is a gain—a benefit or advantage for people or our planet. Disney Pixar's *goal* for its film *Inside Out* was to portray a range of emotions so that children could easily understand their own feelings. The film's message is that emotions are important and need to be recognized and validated.

That message filled a *gap* in children's film entertainment as well as in the emotional lives of children. The *gain*: helping children identify different emotions to help them better understand what they're feeling.

The film also can help parents recognize, accept, and validate their child's emotions. Ideas worth pursuing offer a gain—they are worthwhile, useful, or meaningful to people, creatures, or our planet. They inform, entertain, provide a utility, or do something for the greater good.

How do you determine if the goal and gap produce a gain? Think about what drives people. People respond to ideas, inventions, brands—anything really—because they want what it's offering: a better lifestyle, self-improvement, delicious food, odor-free armpits, a cooler home, more fun, something that helps a toddler sleep on a plane, and so on.

People seek a functional or emotional benefit for themselves, their families, their loved ones, their community, the rainforest, or their dog. They want to know, what's in it for me?

People seek a functional or emotional benefit for themselves. . . They want to know, what's in it for me?

Think of our atavistic urges. Beyond our basic need for air, food, and shelter, people want to belong, have friends and family (related to survival and companionship), love interests (related to sex drive and companionship), be stimulated or amused (related to play and gratification), experience things (related to curiosity and participation), and to self-actualize (related to creative growth and intellectual development).

An important consideration when coming up with a worthwhile idea is to determine the target audience; it's a crucial factor in advertising, branding, industrial design, interactive design, entertainment programming, copywriting, marketing, and even in teaching. An idea must have within it some emotional or practical functional benefit for people or someone they care about. Otherwise, they will not pay attention or will tune out. There's too much going on 24/7.

If you were to search the term "great ideas," inventions would undoubtedly pop up. People see inventions as synonymous with ideas. Inventions may be the one category people think of when they think of idea generation, but they're certainly not the only one. Not everyone is an inventor.

In fact, you might have had an idea for an invention only to realize that you don't have the engineering or technical background to make it happen. That doesn't mean you shouldn't pursue it. Many people collaborate successfully. And many inventions provide a gain by driving progress.

The arts are another segment ripe for gains. The gains from the arts include enrichment, enlightenment, insight into humanity and our world, empathy, sharing, and seeing as others see and think. The arts transport us. They transfix. They teach. Each worthwhile novel, short story, poem, song, design, building, sculpture, play, dance, and painting is based on an idea.

The field of entertainment, education, information, world issues, social good, products, and services all depend on ideas. When applying the Three Gs, you're focusing on generating worthwhile ideas and are much more likely to think of the triple bottom line—profit, people, and our planet.

Another way to look at a gain is to determine the why: Why

do you have this goal? Why is the gap worth filling? Why would people gain from it? As author Simon Sinek says, it's not *what* or the *how*—it's the underlying *why* that matters. You can evaluate a gain by asking, What's the *why*?

Not every product is for everybody. That's where knowing your audience comes in. Look at it from other people's point of view. Become the audience, and see it as they see it. Take a survey. Do some research, even if it's casual. Don't assume people's points of view or needs.

Understand what your audience truly needs or wants and you will understand the *why* of the audience's behaviors.

Think about a gain you'd like to see in the world. Worthwhile ideas contribute not only to business success and the economy but to social well-being, ecological concerns, to the health and safety of communities, the advancement of disciplines and knowledge, to the arts, to the interests of individuals.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Amplifying the Three Gs

DEI is the X factor. By inviting multiple perspectives, diversity, equity, and inclusion reveal the vantage points of a wide range of people. Those diverse perspectives, which will undoubtedly be different from yours, will allow you to view your idea differently and anew. Your idea can be dramatically improved by thinking about it in a new way.

Looking at a goal, a gap, a gain, a partially realized idea, or a fully fledged idea from viewpoints different from your own helps you perceive multiple scenarios, multiple gaps, and potentially multiple gains, ultimately resulting in better ideas that appeal to more people in more meaningful ways.

Multiple perspective taking allows you to mentally walk in others' shoes, to look at a situation, an idea, a life lived, or an event from the viewpoints of people who are different from you, who have had different experiences. That shift in perspective adds a fuller dimension to the Three Gs.

DEI also combats groupthink—that is, the conformity that happens when similar people, who might be unfamiliar

with outside perspectives, work in a group. If you view the Three Gs from other perspectives, you will begin to see how age, gender identity, neurodivergence, culture, race, ethnicity, religion, or community characteristics might affect and ultimately amplify your concept.

When you augment the Three Gs with DEI, you will find valuable insights into other people that will lead you to more ideas, better ideas, more *significant* ideas.

Emotional Obstacles

There are obstacles that can get in anyone's way when trying to generate an idea—even when a terrific framework such as the Three Gs is in place. Some external obstacles might be obvious—working full-time, a family to care for, a companion who wants your time, inadequate resources, and much more.

For many people, one big internal obstacle is impatience. Please be patient with yourself. Creativity and actualizing an idea take time. Hang in there. Your present self might be frustrated but your future self will be very pleased you stuck with it.

Emotions play a great part in how we act. Internal and external obstacles can prevent us from setting a goal and eventually generating an idea. There are many tools that can be used effectively to ensure obstacles don't impede success.

Make a Deal with Yourself

For some people, establishing a time of day to work on a project, write, or ideate is important to help them keep to their schedule. Figure out what works for you, and make it non negotiable. No arguments. Make a commitment. You likely will encounter obstacles along the way but think of how satisfied you'll feel if you've made the time you need to realize your idea.

Tackle Your Doubts

Self-doubt is a very real feeling. We live in a society where there is great pressure to achieve. Not everyone is interested in the same things, nor are they capable of the same things. However, everyone can generate a worthwhile or even great idea using the Three Gs.

There's a tendency to inflate self-doubts. To combat that, jot down one thing that's bothering you—that's standing in your way of generating your idea. First determine whether it is a legitimate reason or whether it is a mental barrier you can overcome. Write down how you can overcome it. Also,

try to determine what triggers self-doubt. Then you can resolve to do something about it.

Focus

When you're taking the time to work with the Three Gs or work with the idea you've generated, focus on it. Filter out distractions. Let that be the one project you work on for however long you've decided to dedicate to it for the day. Prioritize your projects. It's a good way to work on what's most urgent first and move down the priorities list from there.

But it's also good to give full attention to your idea. That doesn't mean you have to force yourself to think. Subconscious thinking happens when you're performing semi-conscious activities, such as strolling in the park or folding laundry.

Change Your Thinking

Whether your hurdle relates to your own skills or talent, the project, or the circumstances—change or reframe your thinking. Ask yourself, how can I look at this in a different way? Before you reframe, jot down what you're thinking—your goal or your notions, a tentative goal, your concerns, your thoughts, your feelings and so on.

Now you've not only acknowledged not only what you're thinking but a possible goal. Reframing can help you find meaning—that is, find the gap and the gain. Reframing a problem can change outcomes.

You have what you need to use the Three Gs. *The New Art of Ideas* works: Set a *goal*. Determine if there's a *gap* you can fill. See if there would be a *gain*. Ideas are constructions. Ideas are seeds—your idea might inspire someone else. Ideas often connect to other ideas, and they connect us to each other. Use the Three Gs to generate your ideas. Because worthwhile ideas can alter the course of human progress.



Robin Landa is a distinguished professor of design at Kean University and one of the top authors of textbooks on graphic design and creative design. Landa has won numerous awards from organizations such as the National Society of Arts and Letters, the National League of Pen Women, and Human Rights Educators USA, and the Carnegie Foundation counts her among the “Great Teachers of Our Time.” She is a chair of Design Incubation, an advocacy organization dedicated to communication design research. She has written twenty-three books, including *Nimble*, *Advertising by Design*, and *Designing Brand Experiences*.

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