Creativity is one of the most mysterious human qualities. Seemingly effortless for a rare few, it can be elusive for the majority. While the most extensive training in the world can’t turn an average Joe into Paul McCartney, these simple techniques can help edge the creative muse closer.

1. Limit your options. Studies show that restricting one’s choices can more effectively trigger creative thought. That’s because leaving every door open makes it difficult to focus on which way to go, while having a more specific target helps you channel your thought process. And the target doesn’t even have to be logical. Recently I was having trouble finishing a chapter of a novel I’ve been writing. One day I got some Chinese takeout and decided to write something based on whatever prophetic words hatched from my fortune cookie. My fortune actually pointed me toward an interesting plot shift that was just what my characters needed.

2. Don’t wait for inspiration. My mother was a talented painter of nature scenes but stopped painting in her early 40s. Whenever I asked her why she didn’t put brush to canvas anymore, she’d tell me that she didn’t feel inspired. Many creative wannabes chant the same response, waiting for a spark to ignite their passion. It’s important to remember that simply working at a task can kindle the fire. Do baseball players in a slump wait to be inspired before they take batting practice? No, they keep swinging away to regain their stroke. The key is to be patient and not worry about whether the work is good or bad.

3. Focus more on the problem than the solution. Imagine you’re lost and keep focusing on the endpoint of your destination rather than on the turns that will get you there. Chances are you won’t get very far. Heed the words of Albert Einstein: “If I had an hour to solve a problem, I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions.” Too often we get overly excited about the “masterpiece” we are going to create before we think about how to start making it.

4. Increase your “distance” from the creative project. According to construal level theory, we generate more creative solutions for tasks when we consider them farther away in distance or in the future. Greater perceived distance from the task, even when imagined, helps shift the balance from concrete thought to abstract thinking (which is more likely to yield creative solutions). As noted by Nira Liberman and Oren Shapira in Scientific American, “Abstract thinking makes it easier for people to form surprising connections between seemingly unrelated concepts.”

5. Work at a coffeehouse. Studies reported in the Journal of Consumer Research revealed that the typical level of ambient noise in a coffeehouse (around 70 decibels) is especially conducive to creativity. “We theorize that a moderate (vs. low) level of ambient noise is
likely to induce…processing difficulty, which activates abstract cognition and consequently enhances creative performance,” noted the researchers. A high level of noise, however, reduces the extent of information processing, thus impairing creativity.

6. Do an intense physical workout. Aerobic exercise can help cause ideas that are buried in the subconscious bubble up to a state of awareness. More study is required to determine how this creativity benefit varies depending on fitness level and type of exercise, but in the meantime here’s Mr. Einstein again, describing the moment he came up with his theory of relativity: “I thought of it while riding my bicycle.”

7. Use the wrong hand to do an everyday task. Using your nondominant hand on occasion can stimulate more creative thought because it fosters greater activation of both hemispheres of the brain. “When a dialog occurs between the left and right hemispheres of the brain, both emotions and thoughts are more fully expressed and understood,” notes Lucia Cappachione (author of The Power of Your Other Hand on her website.

8. Write the end of the story first. I learned this technique in a writing workshop led by award-winning author Roxana Robinson, who said she used this method for writing short stories and found it liberating. This can be an effective way to break free from writer’s block.

9. Treat stray thoughts like gold. Images or ideas that pop into our heads may seem of little value but could be the seeds of creative breakthroughs. That’s why I never leave the house without my trusty notepad and pen in my pocket. When driving, I keep a digital recorder at the ready.

10. Know less, guess more. We’re in an age when information is bombarding us from all directions, relentlessly connecting us to the opinions of others, facts about the world, and what Facebook friends are up to. This makes it difficult to turn off the input. Put that mobile or laptop aside at regular intervals during the day and let your mind drift. Ponder without feeling obligated to click your way to an answer. You may be surprised at what appears on that blank canvas.

11. Look where you’re not going. Being too efficient or purposeful can cut you off from creative ideas. Try this exercise: When walking down the street on the way to a deli or bank, stop every minute or so, do a 360, and take in what’s going on around you. Seeing or hearing something unexpected can give you a fresh perspective and trigger thoughts that would otherwise remain in hiding.

12. Laugh out loud. Laughter helps stimulate activity in the prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex, areas of the brain associated with creativity. It can also boost your mood and help give you a more positive outlook that is also conducive to creative activity. While it helps if you’re actually laughing at something funny, no punchline is required; the mere physical act of laughing provides benefits.

13. Do something mindful. Meditation is a proven way to clear the mind, focus attention, and help us be more in the present moment. It also promotes divergent thinking (when the brain can visualize a task and come up with different ideas on how to perform it), which improves the likelihood of creative problem solving.

14. …or mindless. When faced with a challenging problem, we tend to try to think harder about how to solve it. Sometimes this creates a lot of static under our craniums that increases our frustration without yielding a clear path to the answer. Taking a mental
timeout can have the same effect as a short break during intensive physical exercise. When you start up again, you may find yourself with some fresh insights. My tactic when I’m at a creative impasse: I take out a deck of cards and play a few hands of solitaire. It engages my mind but requires no thinking. Afterward, I feel mentally refreshed and in a better frame of mind for creative problem solving.