



Association problem solving





If free association can lead to interpretation, interpretation makes for more free associations.

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What's it all about?

Free association is useful as a creative problem-solving method. It won't give you a specific answer to your problem but it will help you explore different approaches to it. Association can help generate ideas to lead you to a solution you might not otherwise have considered.

Your mind will make connections between words by using one of three principles:

- **Contiguity:** this is based on an object or idea being near to the one mentioned, so for example zoo might lead to lion
- **Similarity:** which is based on an association that is very like the word stated, for example leek leads to onion
- **Contrast:** where the first word stated prompts a response that is distant or opposite from it, for example hard leads to soft

Campbell's Soups used word association as part of their product development process. They started with the word handle, which generated utensil and then fork. Someone then joked about eating soup with a fork. They then reflected on the fact that you could only eat soup with a fork if it had large lumps of meat or vegetable in it. And so emerged Campbell's Chunky Soups.

What's it for?

In allowing your mind to associate freely with the words, you can generate new ideas; the technique helps create the spark rather than the solution. You are aiming to create a list of words, which might help you to look at the problem or issue differently.

Using the tool

Structured free association attempts to increase the relevance of ideas to the problem you are exploring. Here are the steps involved:

1. Write down a symbol (number, word, object etc) that is related to the problem or issue you are trying to address or some aspect of it
2. Write down whatever is suggested by the first step, ignoring all concerns for its relevance. Don't censor your responses to the problem. Develop at least 20 associations
3. Review the list of associations and select those that seem to have special implications for the problem
4. Using the above selected associations, develop ideas that seem capable of solving the problem
5. If none of the ideas seem useful, go back to step 1 and repeat the process, using a new symbol

What next?

Think about where you would like your business to go next. Associate freely for at least ten minutes and create a list of words. What possibilities do the associations suggest to you?

Quick tips

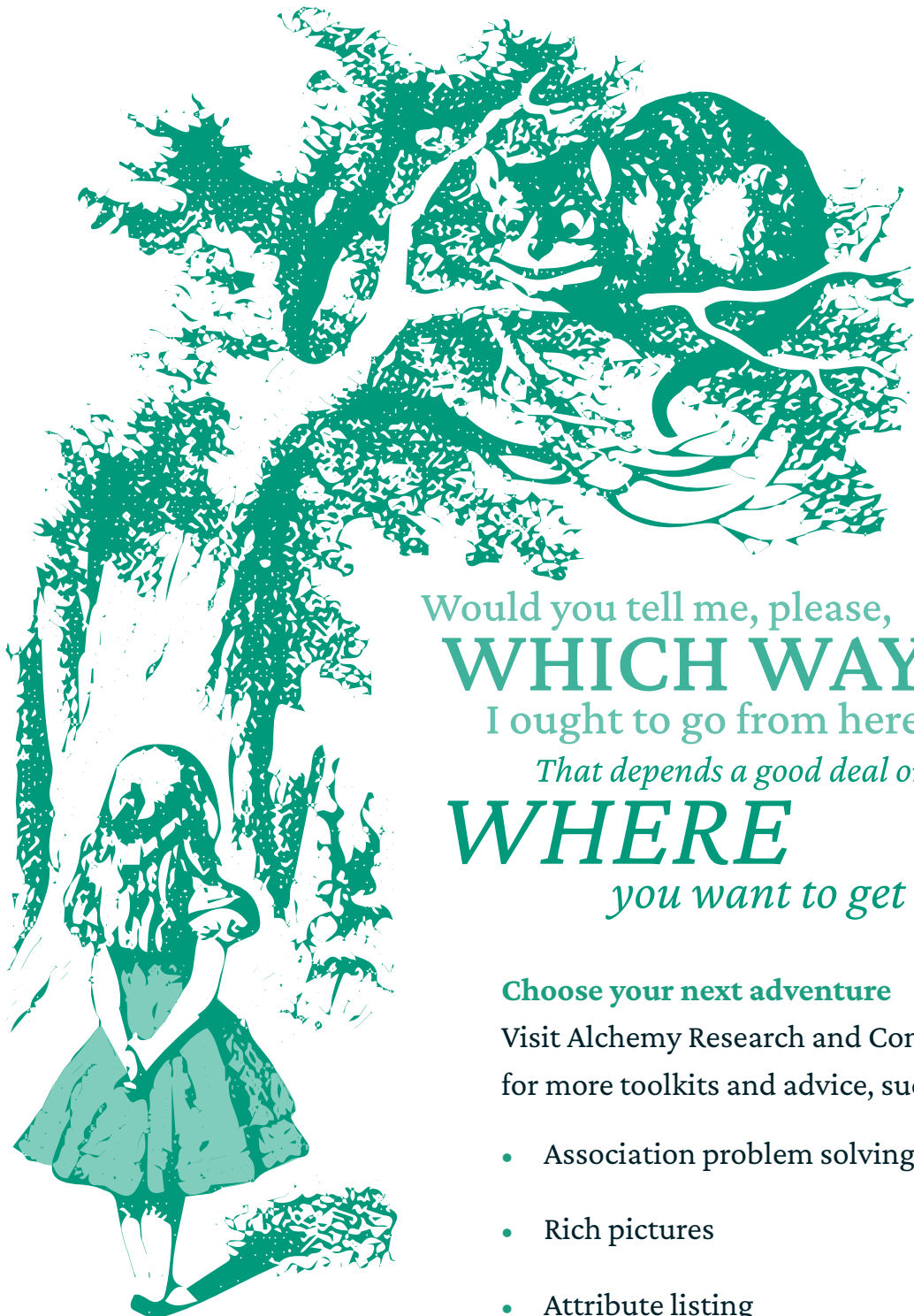
- Keep a notebook with you so you can use free association whenever the need arises
- Practise making free association lists
- Notice when you are trying to make meaning or relevance during free association. Try and clear your mind and just let the associations flow

References

Britzman, D (2003). Five Excursions into Free Association, or Just Take the A Train. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 1(1): pp. 25-37



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I ought to go from here?

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