

SCAMPER Creative Thinking Tool

What is SCAMPER?

Ever found yourself staring at a product, service, or process, thinking "this could be so much better, but where do I even start?" SCAMPER is your creative companion for those moments. It's particularly brilliant when you're not starting from scratch but want to breathe new life into something that already exists.

Think of SCAMPER as having a conversation with your idea—asking it probing questions that help reveal hidden possibilities. This technique gives you a systematic way to explore improvements without getting overwhelmed by endless possibilities.

How to Use SCAMPER

SCAMPER is an acronym that represents different ways to approach creative problem-solving. Think of each letter as a different lens to look through—each one will show you possibilities you might have missed:

S - Substitute

What if we swapped this for something completely different?

Replace components, materials, or people with alternatives.

Real Examples:

- **Coca-Cola Zero:** When health-conscious consumers abandoned sugary drinks, Coca-Cola asked: "What if we substituted the sugar but kept everything else exactly the same?" After years of testing aspartame and acesulfame potassium blends, they created a zero-sugar cola that tasted like the original. By calling it "Zero" instead of "Diet," they removed the feminine associations and opened the market to everyone.
- **Nike FlyEase:** Designer Tobie Hatfield received a letter from Matthew Walzer, a teenager with cerebral palsy who struggled with traditional laces. The team asked: "What if we substituted the entire lacing system?" They developed a wraparound zipper system that worked one-handed, creating convenience for millions—not just those with disabilities, but elderly people, busy parents, and athletes wanting faster transitions.
- **Tesla's Dealership Revolution:** Elon Musk substituted the entire traditional dealership model with direct sales through Apple store-style locations. By eliminating the middleman, Tesla gained consistent pricing, better customer education about electric vehicles, and valuable direct feedback from buyers.

C - Combine

Merge elements, ideas, or purposes

Which features could work together? What if you blend two unrelated concepts?

Examples:

- PayPal merged payment processing with social connections for peer-to-peer transactions
- Airbnb combined spare rooms with hotel-style bookings to create a new hospitality category
- WhatsApp combined phone contact lists with messaging to create a new communication platform

A - Adapt

What can we borrow from somewhere completely different?

Adjust for a new use or purpose by learning from other fields.

Real Examples:

- **Uber's GPS Inspiration:** Travis Kalanick was frustrated waiting for taxis, never knowing if they'd show up. He realised the military had solved this problem with GPS tracking, and pizza delivery companies like Domino's showed customers where their order was. Uber adapted this transparency for transport, transforming an anxiety-inducing wait into a predictable, trackable experience.
- **Gore-Tex's Space Technology:** When NASA needed materials to protect astronauts from space's extreme conditions, they developed Teflon-based membranes. Bill Gore adapted this space suit protection for hikers, modifying the membrane pore size to be smaller than water droplets but larger than water vapour molecules—solving the age-old problem of staying dry without overheating.

M - Modify

Change size, shape, colour, or other attributes

What if you made it larger/smaller? How could you enhance its features?

Examples:

- Amazon modified the Kindle's screen technology to reduce eye strain and mimic paper
- Mini Cooper modified the classic car design to create a modern, premium small car
- Samsung modified traditional phone screens to create foldable displays

P - Put to Another Use

Find new ways to use existing things

What else could this be used for? Who else might benefit from this?

Examples:

- **Ford's Plastic Bottle Innovation:** Ford uses 1.2 billion recycled plastic bottles annually—about 250 bottles per vehicle—to create underbody shields and wheel liners. This repurposing reduces manufacturing costs, diverts millions of bottles from landfills, and creates lighter, more aerodynamic parts that improve fuel efficiency.
- **Toyota's Circular Manufacturing:** Toyota repurposes various waste streams in their manufacturing process, using recycled materials for sound-dampening components, floor carpets, and interior trim pieces whilst maintaining quality and safety standards.

E - Eliminate

Remove elements or simplify

What features are non-essential? How could you streamline this?

Examples:

- **Apple's Headphone Jack Removal:** Apple eliminated the traditional 3.5mm headphone jack from iPhones, initially facing massive resistance. This elimination freed up internal space for larger batteries, improved water resistance, and accelerated the wireless audio market from niche to mainstream.
- **Netflix's Late Fee Elimination:** Netflix eliminated late fees that traditional video rental companies relied upon for revenue (Blockbuster generated 16% of revenue from late fees). This eliminated customer frustration whilst building a more predictable subscription-based business model.
- **Tesla's Instrument Cluster Elimination:** Tesla eliminated traditional dashboard clusters in favour of a single central touchscreen. This reduced manufacturing complexity, enabled over-the-air updates, and created a minimalist aesthetic that differentiated Tesla whilst allowing rapid interface improvements.

R - Rearrange

Change order, layout, or sequence

What if you reversed the process? How could components be resequenced?

Examples:

- **Toyota's Just-in-Time Manufacturing:** Toyota rearranged traditional manufacturing by reversing the sequence from "build inventory then sell" to "receive orders then build." This reduced warehouse costs by 75%, minimised waste, improved quality control, and increased flexibility to respond to market changes.
- **Amazon's Robotics Revolution:** Amazon rearranged warehouse operations by reversing the traditional model where workers walk to products. Instead, robotic systems bring products to stationary workers. This increased picking productivity by 50%, reduced worker fatigue, and enabled 24/7 operations.

Running a SCAMPER Session

Getting Started (10 minutes)

Write down your challenge clearly in plain English. Gather your team in a comfortable space with wall space for sticky notes.

The Creative Journey (30-45 minutes)

Take your challenge through each SCAMPER letter, spending 5-7 minutes with each one. Think of yourself as an explorer rather than a judge—ask "What if?" instead of "That won't work."

Bringing It Together (20 minutes)

Group similar ideas and pick your top 3-5 that make your team lean forward with excitement. These are worth exploring further.

Your Creative Rules

- **Defer judgement:** Save evaluation for later
- **Encourage the wild:** The idea that makes you laugh might be the breakthrough
- **Build on each other:** Ask "What if we also..." rather than "But what about..."
- **Stay focused:** Gently bring conversations back to your challenge
- **Go for quantity:** Ten mediocre ideas often lead to one brilliant insight

What Happens Next

Within 48 hours, evaluate your best ideas against your goals. Build quick, cheap prototypes and test them with real people—their reactions will tell you everything you need to know.