

Understanding Creativity **to Improve** **Your Photography**

Presentation Handout · Joe Edelman

This handout follows the structure of the talk. Each section includes the core idea, the science behind it, and one practical action you can use on your very next shoot.

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01

The Voice That Says “I’ve Got Nothing”

Every photographer hits this moment: you’re behind the camera, looking at your scene, and a voice in your head whispers, “I’ve got nothing.” Nothing original. Nothing exciting. Nothing that feels creative. It happens to beginners. It happens to photographers with decades of experience. It happens to every photographer who wants to make images that matter.

The real problem isn’t a lack of talent. Most photographers think creativity is a gift some people are born with, so they wait for the right gear, the right video, or the right flash of inspiration instead of building the skill on purpose.

“Creativity isn’t rare. It’s just uncomfortable.”

- Creativity has almost nothing to do with artistic talent. It’s a skill, and skills can be trained.
- If you keep repeating the same habits and wondering why your photos look the same, the fix isn’t more gear. It’s a different way of thinking.
- If you’ve been shooting for years, use this handout as a diagnostic on your current habits, not a beginner’s refresher.

02

What Creativity Actually Is

Look up “creativity” in a dictionary and notice something missing: the word “art.” Creativity isn’t uniquely tied to artistry. Here’s a definition that fits photographers better: creativity is problem-solving, often in unique, unusual, and different ways.

Think about it. We photographers are a strange bunch. We spend thousands of dollars on cameras, lenses, and accessories, and then decide a nice picture isn’t good enough — it has to be epic. The moment we see a scene worth shooting, we hand ourselves a problem: how do I make an epic photograph out of this?

01

THE CREATIVE

Solves the problem in a way that’s unique or unusual.

02

THE TECHNICIAN

Solves it with something tried, tested, and proven to work.

03

THE COPIER

Solves it by copying something seen on YouTube. Usually poorly.

“Creativity is the ability to solve problems in a relevant and novel manner.”

03

Ten Reasons Creativity Feels Hard

Science says everyone has the capacity to be creative. So why does it feel so hard? Here are ten reasons — read them and be honest with yourself about what you see in the mirror.

1

Your brain wants efficiency, not novelty.

It's wired to repeat what already works — that's why you reach for the same lens and the same angles.

2

Fear shuts down flexible thinking.

Fear of judgment or wasted time puts your brain in protection mode, and you can't explore new ideas while it thinks you're in danger.

3

Perfectionism is avoidance, not a virtue.

When every shot has to be perfect, you stop taking risks — and originality dies with the risk.

4

Believing creativity is a fixed gift kills your effort.

If you think you weren't "born creative," you never practice it — but research shows it's a learnable skill.

5

Creativity needs mental space.

Constant notifications and scrolling keep your brain out of the quiet, wandering state where new ideas actually form.

6

Ideas rarely arrive like lightning.

Creativity is trial, error, and adjustment. The magic happens after the mistakes, not before them.

7

You can't brainstorm and judge at the same time.

Generating ideas and evaluating them are two different jobs. Doing both at once is like driving with one foot on the gas and one on the brake.

8

Experience can become a cage.

The more you know the "correct" way, the less likely you are to try the wrong way — and the wrong way is where discoveries happen.

9

Rushing produces clichés.

Creativity needs incubation time. Step away and come back. Slow is often smarter.

10

Waiting to "feel ready" keeps you stuck.

Creative confidence comes from doing, not from feeling naturally talented. Believing you can be creative is what predicts whether you become creative.

"Once you understand what your brain is doing behind the scenes, you can work with it instead of fighting it."

04

Ten Habits That Build Creative Output

These habits build a workflow that lets you focus on your subject instead of your gear — and they make it easier to be creative on purpose.

1

Slow down. Let yourself be bored.

Ansel Adams scouted locations with no camera, just a notebook and a viewfinder cutout, so nothing got in the way of seeing.

2

Be open to new experiences.

It's the only way to grow as a photographer or a person.

3

Take risks.

Step outside your comfort zone. Don't confine yourself to a box.

4

Don't worry what other people think.

Shoot for yourself and find the people who like what you do.

5

Stop looking at other people's photography.

The best work often comes from an audience of one: you.

6

Enjoy the task.

Find the genre that's actually your passion. Chasing the wrong genre for the money wastes your time and your creativity.

7

Learn to collaborate.

Work with people who bring different views, ideas, and backgrounds than yours.

8

Practice, practice, practice.

The single most important habit here. Don't be a YouTube-dreamer photographer — you have to actually take pictures to get better.

9

Learn how to ask for advice.

"Is this good?" and "CC welcome" aren't real questions. Ask specific ones you can actually act on.

10

Remember habit #8.

It's worth repeating because it's the one most people skip.

TRY THIS > Pick one habit from this list you're not currently doing, and build it into your next three shoots.

05

Two Modes: Divergent and Convergent Thinking

Ideas don't show up because you're blessed or magically inspired. They show up because your brain connects things, usually at the strangest times. Lin-Manuel Miranda found a key idea for Hamilton relaxing in a hammock. J.K. Rowling plotted Harry Potter on a delayed train. Your best ideas rarely happen when you're stressed. They happen when your brain has room to wander.

That's because your brain runs creativity through two different modes — and most photographers run them at the same time, which is exactly why they freeze up.

01

DIVERGENT THINKING

The “what if” mode. Loose and messy, it doesn't care whether an idea is good, bad, or weird. Its job is to throw possibilities on the table.

02

CONVERGENT THINKING

The “which one actually works” mode. It's the editor, the analyzer, the decision-maker.

“Most photographers jam these two modes together, and that's why they freeze up. It's like driving with one foot on the gas and one foot on the brake.”

Research from psychologist J.P. Guilford backs this up: separating the two modes — imagining first, refining later — measurably boosts creative output.

06

The Three-Habit Creative Workflow

You don't need academic charts to train your brain to work this way. You need three simple habits, borrowed straight from advertising agencies, production studios, and think tanks, that work just as well for a solo photographer.

1

BUILD AN IDEA LIBRARY — divergent thinking made simple

Any time something catches your attention — light, color, a gesture, a movie scene, a lyric — save it. Screenshot it, write it down, snap it with your phone. You don't need to know why it inspires you yet.

2

REVIEW YOUR SPARKS WEEKLY — convergent thinking

Give yourself ten minutes once a week. Open your screenshots and notes and look for patterns, combinations, and things that “go together.” Half the time nothing happens. The other half is where you get the “wait, what if I ...” moment.

3

ADD SOMETHING UNEXPECTED

Your brain can't make new connections from the same routine. Read something random, watch a movie you'd never choose, drive a different route, walk through a store you've never been in. Novelty wakes up divergent thinking.

“This is exactly what Steve Jobs meant when he said creativity is just connecting things.”

Putting it together: collect ideas (divergent) → review and connect them (convergent) → add unexpected input. Then — and only then — pick up the camera.

TRY THIS > Start your idea library today. The next time something catches your eye for no clear reason, save it. Don't ask why yet.

07

Preparation, Not Inspiration

One last piece of advice: if you're not failing, you're not learning. If you're not learning, you're not improving. And if you're not improving, no one will care about your work — not even you.

While you do this work, keep track of your WHY. Why did you pick up a camera the first time? Why did you get hooked on photography? Why do you shoot what you shoot? Follow your heart, not the minds of others spouting outdated, ineffective rules.

Have fun. There's no right or wrong, and there are no rules. Don't be afraid to suck. Screw things up, learn from it, take chances, shoot in raw, edit aggressively, and don't let anyone tell you that you shouldn't.

“Ideas don’t come from inspiration. They come from preparation. You don’t wait for creativity. You train it. You feed it. You give it space.”

I hope you found something in this talk you can use behind the camera.

Now go pick up that camera and shoot something.

Your BEST shot is your NEXT shot.

— Joe Edelman



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