

BONUS MATERIAL

FROM

How to Find Your
Breakthrough Idea
and Build a Following
Around It

Dorie Clark

**STAND
OUT**

YOUR STAND OUT SELF-ASSESSMENT

139 Questions to Help You Find Your Breakthrough
Idea and Build a Following Around It



You have a contribution to make. But finding your breakthrough idea and spreading it isn't always easy. The following 139 questions, drawn from my book [Stand Out](#), are intended to spark your ideas, prompt new connections, and help you visualize the path forward as you begin to share your ideas with the world.

The initial thoughts you write down may change over time as you progress through [Stand Out](#) and unlock new possibilities. But the most important part is taking the first step. The world needs your ideas. Let's get started. —[Dorie Clark](#)

FINDING YOUR BREAKTHROUGH IDEA

1. What are others in your field overlooking?

2. What are the assumptions underlying your profession? Have they been questioned or tested? If so, how long ago—and have circumstances changed in the interim?

3. What questions do “newbies” in your field often ask that get shot down or dismissed?

4. What would it look like to take those questions seriously?

5. What's the conventional wisdom about how to do things "the right way" in your field? What would it look like if it were actually the opposite?

6. What do most people in your field think would be impossible? Is it really? Or is it just difficult?

7. What research project or initiative would—if you successfully undertook it—change how your field operates?

8. What are three trends shaping your industry? Are they short-term or fundamental? How would you describe them to an outsider unfamiliar with your field?

9. In the coming years, how will those trends change the status quo?

10. What should smart companies or individuals do in order to thrive in the future? How should they prepare? What steps should they take?

11. Are there companies or entities that have handled change particularly well? What can you learn from their example?

12. What innovations or new developments do you know about that most others do not?

13. Where is the locus of innovation in your field? Particular regions or companies or divisions or think tanks? How can you ensure that you stay close to the work they're doing?

14. What personal experience have you had that's changed your view of the world?

15. Think about the jobs you've held, the projects you've worked on, or the body of work you've created. What question logically arises from the ones you've tackled before?

16. What experiences have you had that others in your field most likely have not? How does that difference shape your view of the industry?

17. What are the topics you feel passionate about (even if they don't seem like clear professional moneymakers)?

18. What topics are you a "local expert" in—that is, not necessarily the best in the world, but better or more knowledgeable than those around you?

19. Have other people built careers around any of the above topics—and if so, how? (Homemaking and baking didn't seem nearly so lucrative until Martha Stewart made her mark.)

20. Is there a way you can differentiate yourself from others in your profession?

21. What is the traditional background of influential players in your field?
Is there a way to leverage being the opposite of that?

22. Is there a realm you're interested in where your skill set is rare or hasn't been fully utilized in the past?

23. What weakness can become your strength? Is there an area where you don't have credentials or expertise, and could that become a selling point?

24. What topics within your niche do you want to learn more about?

25. What books, Web sites, or podcasts can teach you the most about them?

26. How can you test out your ideas in a low-risk ways (conduct a survey before creating a product, write a blog post before penning an entire book, conduct an informational interview with someone who has previously done what you want to do, etc.)?

27. Once you've established your expertise in a niche, what are the adjacent areas you could move into?

28. How can you begin to solidify your credentials in the new areas (writing blog posts or op-eds, giving speeches, serving on committees related to those disciplines, etc.)?

29. What are upcoming news events that will make your expertise relevant? (If you're a sports expert, an upcoming Olympics or World Cup could be your opportunity.)

30. How can you capitalize on those moments (reaching out to existing media contacts, etc.)?

31. What area or question do you feel passionate about researching?

32. Think about what research your field could benefit from. What do you—and others—wish you knew?

33. How could you find that out? Think broadly; it could involve field research, case studies, interviews, focus groups, number crunching, or other methods.

34. Are there products, services, or businesses that aren't having reviews written about them? Could you do it?

35. Is there an existing place where you could share those reviews? If not, could you create a venue where people can collect and share information like this?

36. Who are the usual information sources in your industry? Who else is knowledgeable, but doesn't often get asked for their insights or opinions? How can you reach out to them?

37. What on-the-ground field research can you conduct in your area of interest? Who can you visit or interview about their experiences?

38. Is there a hidden “good news story” in your field that most others aren’t aware of or talking about?

39. How can you make sure the research you conduct accomplishes multiple goals (such as helping you with marketing, professional development, or lead generation)?

40. Can you create a system to leverage your time investment in research (getting help with certain areas of the research, writing, or publicity process)?

41. How can you spread the results of your research even more widely?
Are there ways to create spinoff content (e-books, infographics, SlideShares, etc.) from the original research?

42. How can you leverage your past training to bring a new perspective to your current endeavor?

43. Could the perspective of another field shed light on the questions you're working on now? What would mathematicians (or chemists or philosophers or political scientists) say about the problems or opportunities you're facing?

44. Thinking beyond what you're doing now, what other areas have you always been curious about? Are there a lot of people with your background in those fields, or could you contribute a unique perspective?

45. Have technological advances made something possible in your field that wasn't before?

46. How can you gain the skills you need to take full advantage of that?

47. What questions are you able to ask (and perhaps answer) now, that you couldn't before?

48. What change or trend is most upsetting to the elite in your field? Why are they so upset—and can you get in on it?

49. How have other industries solved this problem? How can you learn more about the techniques they use (informational interviews, reading business books, etc.)?

50. Can those strategies be imported into your company or field? What would that look like? What would be easy or hard to fit into the existing culture?

51. How could you tweak the ideas so they're even more effective?

52. Are there parts of your background or resume that you consider "irrelevant" or out of place? How can you integrate them back into your professional life in a new way?

53. How can you see the challenges in your field through someone else's eyes? What would a woman say? Or a child? Or a rock musician? Or an environmentalist? Considering their perspectives may allow you to see the issue very differently.

54. For one month, how can you consider every new idea you come across as a lens through which to view your industry?

55. Has the overall nature of your field been articulated? If not, could you do it?

56. Is there an aspect of your field that hasn't been adequately defined or codified?

57. What problems seem mysterious?

58. How are we defining the problem, anyway? Are there limitations to that definition?

59. What secret would you most like to figure out?

60. What phenomenon do you wish you understood?

61. Have you noticed a cluster of related phenomena? Can you group them together or give them a name?

62. How can you help others in your field do things better or more efficiently?

63. What are the principles behind the best practices you espouse? Can you explain the underlying premise of your philosophy?

64. What are the simple things that are stumbling blocks for too many of your colleagues? What's holding back their progress?

65. Can you break your recipe for success into discrete steps?

66. Have you read all the seminal books in your field? If not, make a list and start reading them. What did they leave out? What additional knowledge could you contribute?

67. Is there a way to distill your field's fundamental knowledge? What are the most essential pieces you'd put into a short guide?

68. What do most people misunderstand about your field? What errors do they make, and can you help redirect them?

69. Can you create an “operating manual” for your area of interest?
What does everyone need to know or do? What are the steps they should follow?

BUILDING A FOLLOWING AROUND YOUR IDEAS

70. How can you make it easy for others to learn about and share your message? Are there tools you can create (such as recommended reading lists)?

71. How can you leverage the power of organizations you’re affiliated with to get momentum for your issue?

72. Are there communication mechanisms (such as newsletters or conferences) or public platforms (resolutions, endorsements) you can use?

73. Who do you respect among your peers? Make a list of them—people you know who work in your industry or sphere. For each, write down one action you can take in the next one to three months to deepen your relationship (schedule a call, take them out for lunch, connect at an industry meeting, etc.).

74. Could you benefit from developing an active peer group? Who would you want to invite into your group? Which colleagues would fit together best? Are there shared interests or values? Don't immediately announce your idea and issue invitations; create informal opportunities for them to mingle to see if there's chemistry and a positive exchange of ideas.

75. What rules or shared understandings would be most important, from your perspective?

76. What kind of insight or help are you hoping to receive—and what kind could you give to others?

77. Who are the well-known people you'd most like to connect with? Make a list. How can you begin researching them in depth (read their books, subscribe to their e-mail newsletter, etc.)?

78. What strategies can you use to make a connection (interview them for a podcast series, join an organization where they're involved, attend a conference where they're speaking, etc.)?

79. Once you've made a connection, how do you plan to stay in touch and keep the relationship alive?

80. How can you add value to these high-level contacts? What do they actually need (publicity for their upcoming book, connections to other thought leaders or reporters, restaurant recommendations, introductions to potential clients, advice about an upcoming trip they're taking, etc.)?

81. Is there a new online channel or platform that you can use to connect with people? (They may be particularly inspired to sign on because they'd like to learn about it.)

82. What are the strongest brand affiliations you possess? Have you worked for a prominent company, written for a major publication, attended a prestigious school, won a major award, built relationships with prominent leaders, etc.?

83. When was the last time you logged onto your LinkedIn profile (you have one, right)? Update it with your relevant affiliations to make it easier for people to find you, and to showcase your background.

84. If you don't currently have strong brand affiliations, what's your target list? It may be too late to attend an Ivy League college, but with effort, you can certainly get a blog or op-ed published in a major newspaper, or take a leadership role in a prominent civic association.

85. What other organizations do you care about or would you like to get more involved with (such as business networking groups, the local chamber of commerce, etc.)?

86. What are the ways you can “go deep” with your key affiliations? Is there a way to volunteer your time or get more involved?

87. Are there ways you can maximize the networking potential of your affiliation? Can you volunteer for the membership committee (where you have to reach out and connect with participants), rather than a more behind-the-scenes role?

88. What charitable causes are you most passionate about? Where could you get involved? What skills could you bring to the table in helping them? Set aside an hour in the next week to do online research and determine which nonprofits may be a good fit.

89. Are any of your contacts are involved in the causes you're interested in? You can research this on LinkedIn or other social networking sites and, if yes, you can make a plan in the next month for an informational interview to talk about their efforts.

90. Is there a way you can integrate charitable involvement or giving into everything you do professionally (such as making a donation for every completed sale)?

91. How can you encourage your clients, colleagues, or even competitors to get involved in charitable pursuits as well?

92. Within the next three months, make a plan to join or get involved in a charity you care about.

93. What do you want to write about? If you don't already blog, make a list of possible topics. Try to come up with ideas for ten to twenty posts at the outset, to get you started. Think about the most common questions people have about your field, misconceptions people hold, emerging trends you see, or interesting shortcuts or ways to "hack the system." What tips have enabled you to be successful? What current news stories have implications for your industry?

94. In the next week, set aside ninety minutes on your calendar and write a post. You can share it on your own blog (if you have one) or via LinkedIn. See what response you get. What ideas do readers seem to connect with?

95. What blogs do your target audience read? Make a list of outlets you'd like to write for, and research online to find the e-mail address for their Web editor.

96. Ask your friends or search LinkedIn: do you know anyone who writes for those publications? If so, see if you can score an introduction. If not, write to the Web editor cold, send him/her a few links to existing posts you've done (so they can make sure you write well), and offer a few catchy suggestions about what you'd like to write for them. Reach out to at least two in the next month.

97. Where is your audience now? What are they reading/listening to/ watching?

98. What social channels does it make the most sense for you to prioritize, based on what your audience is consuming and your own personal preferences? (It's no good forcing yourself to make online videos if you hate being on camera.)

99. What new platforms are emerging? Can you jump onboard now, before the competition catches on?

100. What sort of content should you create in order to attract people to your ideas?

101. Who are the key reporters in your field? Create a media list. Write down all the newspapers, industry journals, bloggers, TV and radio outlets, etc., that have influence in your industry. Now go online and identify the right reporter(s) for each, and create a spreadsheet with their e-mail and phone contacts.

102. How can you make those connections? Start following your media list on Twitter or your preferred social channel. Make a plan to retweet their stories or comment regularly to start building a relationship.

103. How can you reach more people with your ideas? Think big.

104. Can you repurpose your content into a variety of new forms, such as infographics, podcasts, SlideShares, videos, tweets, Instagram images, etc.?

105. Challenge yourself: how can you take one piece of content and distribute it on five or even ten different channels? For instance, you could record a podcast interview, write a blog post based on your conversation, tweet out the best quotes from the interview, create a SlideShare explaining a key concept that was discussed, and create a one-minute online video explaining your biggest takeaway from the conversation.

106. If a book could serve as a calling card for you, what message would you want it to convey? What does the world need to hear?

107. In addition to spreading your message, how could writing a book help you achieve your professional goals (attracting clients, standing out during a job search, etc.)? How does a book fit into your objectives?

108. How will you make time for writing a book? If you're serious about the idea, set aside time on your calendar and test out different writing strategies (times of day, amounts of time) until you learn what works optimally for you.

109. What's your angle? You'll probably need to narrow down your topic by focusing on a particular aspect of your field or expressing a point of view. Purchase a book like Jeff Herman and Deborah Levine Herman's *Write the Perfect Book Proposal: 10 That Sold and Why, 2nd edition*, to learn what's required to create a solid proposal. Even if you plan to self-publish, rather than submit your proposal to a traditional publisher, the discipline of answering the questions can be useful. Write down two or three angles and test them by talking with friends and colleagues. What do people respond to the most strongly? What seems to be missing from the conversation?

110. Which people, or types of people, would most benefit from being connected to each other?

111. What challenges do they face? What questions do they need answered?

112. How can you be helpful to your community? What kinds of assistance would benefit them most?

113. How can you help them connect with each other—and you? What’s the best method to bring them together (online, in person, via Skype, a combination)?

114. What needs or concerns does your peer group or community have? How can you help them (e.g., win publicity, obtain new clients, answer legal questions)? How can you add value to their lives?

115. What opportunities can you create, online and off, for your community to connect with one another? How can you spark interaction and conversations?

116. What tools can you create to make it easier for them to accomplish their goals?

117. What will you do to support and encourage the next generation of talent?

118. Could you take on an intern, or group of interns, to help with a project? What would it look like? How could you create a great learning experience—for them and for you?

119. Alternatively, would you be interested in interning or apprenticing for someone else? Whom would you choose? What would you like to learn?

120. Who would be your ideal mentor? How will you get noticed by that person and build a relationship with him or her? How can you add value for him or her as well?

121. What would motivate busy people to want to come to your events or join your cause? What's in it for them?

122. How can you make your group more inclusive and welcoming to all? What will you do to help others take ownership of the idea or issue and get actively involved?

123. How can you make your ideas fun? Set a timer and brainstorm for fifteen minutes.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

124. What activities make you feel most energized or creative (exercise, meditation, brainstorming with a journal, etc.)?

125. How can you build time for that reflection into your schedule? Take your calendar and start by blocking out one hour in the next week simply to think.

126. What strategies will you use to tap the power of unconscious thought? Instead of sitting at your desk and pounding away at a problem, go to the gym or take a shower.

127. What are you missing? At least once a day when you're out of your house or the office, make a point of noticing your surroundings. What do you see? What objects or concepts could illuminate your situation?

128. What should you be reading? Make a list of newspapers, magazines, or journals you want to read regularly. Buy a subscription and make time on your calendar. Whether you read them on the exercise bike, while you're eating lunch, or just before bed, make a point to do it.

129. When can you “turn off” temporarily? Even the simple act of turning off your smart phone during dinner can help you engage better in the present moment.

130. How can you bring more serendipity into your life? Start by paring back your schedule and leaving room for the unexpected. Make it a rule to leave at least one hour unscheduled per day, to allow room for emergencies—or lucky opportunities.

131. How can you meet people you normally wouldn't come across? At the next conference you attend, make a point of seeking out and striking up conversations with people who are wearing green (or red or purple) that day.

132. Are you overthinking what you can get out of each meeting or encounter? Step back and appreciate people for who they are, rather than immediately wondering how they can help you or if the conversation is a “good use of your time.”

133. How can you best communicate the value of your work? Who would be most receptive to that message?

134. What can you start doing now, for free, that will eventually lead to paid work? What’s your strategy for converting those opportunities into revenue over time?

135. Do you feel confident enough to start monetizing? If you're concerned that you don't deserve it, or worry that you're selling out, that ambivalence will come through to others and you won't be successful. Reach out to successful, trusted colleagues for a reality check. Are your concerns justified, or are you holding yourself back?

136. Can you segment your work so that some parts are expensive and other parts are free or low-cost (ensuring that people of different means can access your ideas, and helping you expand your audience for the future)?

137. Are you charging enough for your work? Remember that in many contexts, price creates the perception of quality.

138. Where will you “go deep” in your hard work? You can’t excel in every area. What will you emphasize?

139. What’s holding you back? What are you afraid of, and how will you overcome it?

BONUS QUESTION

What are you going to do today to get started? It’s easy to come up with ideas and make amorphous future plans. But what are you going to do right now to start finding your breakthrough idea, honing it, and bringing it to the world?

Congratulations on moving forward with developing and sharing your ideas. To get the full story, you can purchase [Stand Out](#) (you might also like my previous book, [Reinventing You](#)). You can access more than 400 free articles on my website, dorieclark.com, and connect with me on Twitter [@dorieclark](#). Good luck, and best wishes.

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