Borrowed Brain

Facilitator guide · 🟢 SOLO 🔵 TEAM

Your job: get the problem stated in plain words, push for fields far from your own, and hold the group to borrowing the **move** — not copying the surface. Solo, you do this for yourself in a few minutes; with a team, you run it so different people bring different analogies. The whole tool depends on one jump: stop asking how *your* field solves this, and ask who else, anywhere, has the same problem.

🟢 SOLO · 🔵 TEAM — how to read this guide

Sections marked 🟢 SOLO or 🔵 TEAM apply to that mode only; BOTH sections apply to everyone. If you're running this on your own, you can skip anything marked 🔵 **TEAM only**.

The one idea: the problem was never that you ran out of ideas — it's that your industry has trained you to see only its own kind of answer. Borrowed Brain gets you out of your field to find a move someone else already uses, so you leave with an option your own playbook never offered.

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when BOTH

GOOD FIT

Every option the team generates sounds like the last one; the team keeps reaching for its usual way of working; a problem keeps coming back and your field's answers aren't working; you want to open ideation by breaking the obvious-answer reflex.

WRONG TOOL

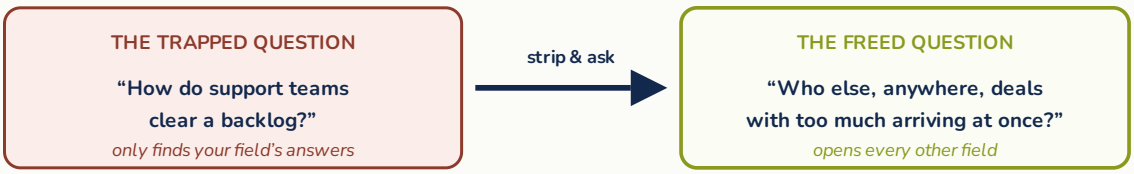
You need to test whether a belief is actually true › Assumption Breaker. You need to rebuild the problem from the ground up › First Principles. You need to see the problem from other people's **view**, not other fields' moves › Break the Frame.

© Witmer

· WHAT IS THE MECHANISM?

The one mental jump BOTH

THE ONE MENTAL JUMP THAT MAKES THIS WORK



The problem was never that you ran out of ideas.
It was that you never left your own industry's way of thinking.

Every industry evolves its own blind spots. Go far — share fewer.

The entire tool is this one jump: stop asking how **your field** solves the problem, and start asking **who else anywhere has the same problem**. Strip the problem to plain words first — that's what lets a distant field recognise it.

· WHAT ARE MY JOBS?

Your three jobs BOTH

This is a light activity, but the quality of the result depends almost entirely on these three — whether you're running it for yourself or for a team. Most of your work is here.

Job	What it means
1 · Strip the problem	Get the problem said in plain words, with no industry terms, before anyone borrows. A problem still in your own jargon only finds your own answers.
2 · Push for distant fields	Hold out for fields far from your own. Every industry evolves its own blind spots — the further away you go, the fewer blind spots you share, so the fresher the borrow. Adjacent fields ("other software teams") hand back what you already know.
3 · Borrow the move, not the surface	Hold the group to the underlying move another field makes — not a copy of what they physically do. This is where most borrows fail; it's your main job once ideas start flowing.

© Witmer

· HOW DO I RUN IT?

How to run it

STRIP › GO FAR › BORROW THE MOVE › TRANSLATE BACK

1 STRIP	2 GO FAR	3 BORROW MOVE	4 TRANSLATE
plain words, any field	2–3 distant fields	the principle, not the props	one option worth testing

Solo: a few minutes, in your head. Team: 15–20 minutes, so different people bring different fields.

The four steps are the same in both modes — what changes is how you run them. Read your column.

🟢 SOLO — a few minutes, on your own

1. Strip the problem ~1 min

Say the problem in plain words, with no work terms. Test it: would a chef understand it? If you can't say it without "ticket" or "deploy", keep stripping.

2. Go as far away as possible ~1 min

Pick two or three fields far from your own. Stuck? Run a fixed list — air-traffic tower, A&E ward, pit crew, newsroom — and ask the stripped question of each.

3. Borrow the move ~1 min

For each field: how would they handle this? Name the move they make — the principle, not the literal tools.

4. Translate back ~1 min

Turn one borrowed move into something you could try. One useful borrow is enough.

🔵 TEAM — 15–20 min, you facilitate

1. Strip the problem ~4 min

Get the team to say it in plain words. Write it where everyone sees it, and agree one stripped version before moving on. This is the step it all rests on — don't skip it.

2. Go as far away as possible ~3 min

Ask each person for one field, so you get range. Push for distance — an air-traffic tower, a pit crew, an A&E ward; not "another tech company".

3. Borrow the move ~6 min

For each field: how would they handle this? Name the move — the principle, not the literal tools. Hold the line: the move, not the surface (see below).

4. Translate back ~5 min

Turn each borrowed move into something to try. Keep the ones worth testing; capture them with an owner.

· HOW DO I STRIP IT?

Strip the problem — the step it all rests on BOTH

If you borrow while the problem is still in your own jargon, you only find your own answers again. Strip it to plain words until it could belong to almost any field.

TOO NARROW — STILL IN YOUR JARGON

"Reduce the ticket backlog" — only support teams have "tickets", so no other field can recognise it.

STRIPPED — PLAIN WORDS, ANY FIELD

"Too much is arriving at once to handle." An air-traffic tower, an A&E ward, a kitchen at the dinner rush all know this problem.

🔵 TEAM **Stripping it in the room:** ask "what is this, underneath, with no work words in it?" Take out every term specific to your field, and agree one plain-words version before anyone borrows.

© Witmer

· WHAT MAKES A GOOD BORROW?

Borrow the move, not the literal tools BOTH

This is the biggest thing to get right, and the one most groups get wrong. A good borrow takes the **move** another field makes — the principle behind what they do. A bad borrow copies the **surface** — what they physically use, which rarely transfers.

THE SAME BORROW — DONE WRONG, THEN RIGHT

COPYING THE SURFACE ✗

"A hospital adds more nurses when it's overwhelmed — so we add more engineers."

That's just "hire more people" in disguise. You copied what they **have**, not how they think.

the props — rarely transfers

BORROWING THE MOVE ✓

"A hospital doesn't treat patients in arrival order — it triages by severity. So we triage work by impact, not by who shouted first."

A principle that transfers — it gives you what your own field wasn't.

the principle — this is the borrow

The question that gets the move: not "what do they have?" but "what do they do differently, and why does it work?" If the borrow comes out as "hire more / buy more / add more", it's a surface copy — push again: "what's the principle underneath?"

· HOW DO I READ THE ROOM?

Reading the room — the tells 🔵 TEAM ONLY

Skip this if you're running solo — it's about steering a group.

IT'S WORKING WHEN YOU HEAR

"Interesting — how do they actually do that?" · "What if we…" · "That reminds me of how…" · people building on each other's analogies.

IT'S STUCK WHEN YOU HEAR

"That won't work here." · "We're different." · "That's not our industry." · jumping straight to why a borrow can't work.

When you hear the "stuck" lines: they're judging feasibility too early — killing borrows before they're explored. Keep the discussion open: "we're not deciding if it works yet — just, what's the move they make? We'll test fit afterwards." Keep borrowing and judging in separate steps.

© Witmer

· WHAT DOES A GOOD RUN LOOK LIKE?

A worked example — and what good looks like BOTH

The problem, stripped: a support team is overwhelmed — "too much is arriving at once to handle." The facilitator pushes for a distant field and someone offers a kitchen at the dinner rush. The move a kitchen makes: one expediter triages every order; cooks don't self-assign. Translated back: one person triages incoming work by impact; the rest don't pick their own. Notice the borrow is the **move** (one person triages; others don't self-assign), not the surface ("hire more cooks"). That's what made it useful — an option the team's own playbook never offered.

A GOOD RUN

The problem was stripped to plain words; the fields were genuinely distant; the borrows were moves, not surface copies; and you leave with one or two translated ideas worth testing — ideas your own field wasn't generating.

A HOLLOW RUN

The problem stayed in jargon, the fields were all adjacent, and the "borrows" were "hire more / buy more". You end with the same options you started with, disguised. Fix: strip harder, go further afield, ask for the move.

· HOW DO I MAKE THIS A HABIT?

The habit to take back BOTH

THE HABIT

"Whenever you feel yourself reaching for 'best practice', ask one more question first: who outside our industry solved this years ago?"

This is the real prize: not one borrowed idea, but a reusable thinking habit. A person who asks "who else has already solved this?" before defaulting to their field's answer keeps escaping their industry's blind spots, problem after problem.

· WHAT IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?

Edge cases

What happens	What to do
Everyone chooses similar (adjacent) fields	Stop accepting adjacent fields. Ask the stripped question — "who anywhere deals with this?" — and name one far field yourself to break the pattern. One distant borrow usually frees the rest.
"I don't know anything about that field"	Almost guaranteed. You don't need expertise — only enough to answer "how would they roughly handle this?" A layperson's picture of an A&E triage or a pit stop is plenty; the borrow is the principle, not the detail.
No borrow feels useful	Usually the problem wasn't stripped enough, or the borrows were surface copies. Re-strip to plainer words, then ask for the move, not what the field has.
The team gets stuck translating back	Don't force a polished solution. Ask "what's the nearest version of that move we could try here?" A rough translation worth testing beats a perfect analogy that goes nowhere.

© Witmer

Solo, and you can't think of distant fields	Run through a fixed short list — air-traffic tower, A&E ward, pit crew, newsroom, firefighting crew, military logistics, nature — and ask the stripped question of each. The list gives you the distance you need.

· WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym BOTH

If instead...	Use this
you need to test whether a belief blocking you is actually true	**Assumption Breaker** — test what's fixed versus only assumed.
you need to rebuild the problem from its basics	**First Principles** — strip to what must be true and build up.
you need other people's viewpoints, not other fields' moves	**Break the Frame** — see the problem through different eyes.

Rule of thumb: Borrowed Brain reaches **outward** — to distant fields — for a move you can borrow. Break the Frame shifts viewpoint on the same problem; First Principles digs downward to rebuild it. Reach out, shift across, or dig down.

© Witmer