

SURPRISE!

When something unexpected happens — think back to “Luke, I am your father.” — there’s a brief window when we’re making sense of it. Is Darth Vader really Luke’s father or is he manipulating him? Does Luke believe him? Did Yoda know? Will Luke join the dark side? While people are caught unaware, they’re highly observant, taking in new information, thinking intensely about it, and it all happens very quickly — within seconds. We can use this to our advantage to bypass people’s preconceived ideas about politics, activists, elections, and more. When we catch people off guard, we have an opening to present new ideas and get around people’s defenses.

Our only risk with surprise is, it’s weird. When it’s *ordinary*, no one pays attention. But when we get *too out there*, it just becomes nonsense to be brushed aside. To find the sweet spot, you have to push the boundaries.

EXERCISE:

ELEMENTS OF SURPRISE

10-15 MIN

To locate the point between legibility and illegibility, we find it useful to define the outer edges and then calibrate accordingly: go too far and then roll back.

PART I

1) Select a tactic to work with. Don’t worry if the tactic is not very “creative.” For this exercise it’s even better if what you start with wouldn’t raise eyebrows at a staff meeting. Describe the tactic and, if you’d like, draw a quick sketch of it.

2) How could you change your tactic to make it really surprising? What could you do to take what was ordinary and make it out-of-this-world extraordinary? Write down as many ideas as you think of — **focus on quantity, not quality**. Spend about five minutes. You may want to consider:

- An atypical time, date, or setting
- Unexpected guests or participants
- Bizarre costumes, strange sights, alluring sounds, or choreographed movements
- Unusual allies or partners
- Unanticipated entrances or exits, beginnings or endings

3) Review your list and **identify what is most aligned with your message, intentions, and objectives**. Choose one idea to move forward with and add the surprising element to your description and/or picture.



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4) Take a look at what you've created. Put yourself in the place of a passerby. **Would you be surprised if you came across this?** What might you think? What would you learn? What questions might you ask? Would you feel intrigued or just confused?

PART II

1) Take the element you introduced that made your piece a surprise and ramp it up to the point where it is likely illegible. In other words: **take what was surprising and make it absurd**. Take what stretches the sensible and make it nonsensical. Go all out! For example, if you added a couple of dancing robots, perhaps now you need an entire Broadway show put on by robots, on top of a spaceship. Describe and/or sketch what this would look like

2) Next, put the process in reverse: **scale things back so that your surprise recedes into the background** — so it's no longer surprising. Make your piece so legible that it risks not even being noticed. Describe and/or sketch.

3) Finally, take what you've learned and go back and re-sketch your original "surprising" tactic so that it's legible and it falls in the range between being surprising enough to get noticed and stimulate thought — but not so surprising that it's impossible to understand.

Keep tweaking until you find your sweet spot.

