

The 3-5-3 Approach to Designing Creative Training – 2026 update

In 1996 (!), I wrote a piece for ATD (then ASTD) called *The 3-5-3 Approach to Designing Creative Training*. 3-5-3 was just a simple framework I came up with to get learning designers thinking beyond the first idea that came to mind, which was often their default or the “tried and true” method.

With 3-5-3, designers start by describing the first three training methods or instructional strategies that come to mind, and then discard them. Then they brainstorm five additional methods. Finally, they take one previously generated method and describe three ways to structure it. Here’s an example:

Topic: Critical Thinking Skills

3 – Describe the first three training methods or instructional strategies that come to mind, then discard them

- Define five critical thinking principles and then have participants do a matching exercise to identify their understanding.
- Describe three critical thinking principles, like slippery slope, strawman, and false equivalents and have participants find an example of each in an advertisement.
- Share a case study where a manager makes three critical thinking errors and have participants find them.

5 – Describe five additional methods

- Have participants create an advertisement that includes three critical thinking errors.
- Have participants watch a recorded argument between a boss and employee and identify the critical thinking errors.
- Have participants film a video for school children to educate them on a critical thinking error.
- Stage a debate in class and ask the people arguing to use whatever types of errors in thinking they wish. Have those observing hold up a sign when they do that.
- Have participants locate critical thinking errors in an article and identify the evidence they would need in order for that error to be corrected.

3 – Take one previously generated method and describe three ways to structure it

I liked that last idea that involves countering lapses in critical thinking with evidence. So, my last three ideas build off of that idea of using evidence:

- Have participants review some claims that had been made and list the evidence they would need to believe those claims.
- Have participants look at some erroneous claims and then at evidence that would allow them to fix the errors in thinking.
- For each of the erroneous types of thinking, like slippery slope, strawman, and false equivalents, brainstorm 4-5 sources to turn to for better evidence.

3-5-3 can be a helpful prompt for you, or for your AI assistant.

For additional ideas of how to spark some creativity, click the “In the Media” tab at sophieoberstein.com and click the link to my June 2026 ATD blog post.