

UNITED WISDOM

Too many options: how to set criteria for a choice

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *idea generation*

Ralph L. Keeney, *Creativity in MS/OR: Value-Focused Thinking—Creativity Directed toward Decision Making*,1993, publisher abstract, first component of the three-part distinction in the opening sentence. Generating an offer does not yet evaluate it. Actually read primary abstract.

What this article is about

Ilya has fourteen drawing-course pages open. One promises creative freedom, another a rigorous foundation, another an exhibition and another company among artists. He originally wanted to learn to make small observational sketches. After an hour of comparison, he is considering which course will make him a more interesting person. Pages multiply while the decision's subject changes unnoticed. This is a hypothetical scene, rather than evidence that extensive choice always harms people or inevitably overwhelms them.

Sometimes numerous options become difficult because there is no intelligible basis for selection. Until the purpose and material conditions are named, each new attraction can enlarge the task. We examine criteria as a way to give a decision a shape: identify its subject, separate necessary conditions from desirable qualities, check information and retain a comparable set. We offer no universal ranking of a good life. The optional bounded exercise concerns one small decision without promising that a table will decide it on someone's behalf.

I. A collection of offers does not yet define the task

Fourteen pages appear to give fourteen answers to one question. Ilya has not yet specified that question. Does he want basic drawing skills, an enjoyable evening, company or work for an exhibition? These purposes can coexist without having equal weight. When he merely seeks a good course, each offer redefines the task. An exhibition page makes public results central; a friendly group's page foregrounds company. He is comparing both opportunities and different accounts of what he is looking for.

Quantity is not itself a defect. With a specific schedule and teaching format in mind, a long list may help him find a rare match. We infer no universal overload from open tabs. Here the narrower problem is that reasons arrive with each description and lack a clear relationship to

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his original intention. The decision's subject matters alongside the list's size. Three pages may produce the same uncertainty; thirty may coexist with a reasonably clear selection process.

Ilya returns to his first note: learning to make small sketches on walks. This is not a complete specification, but it differs from becoming more interesting in general. He may change his aim. Naming that change matters, rather than silently importing the new subject into the old comparison. Seeking company would lead to another assessment. Seeking observational drawing need not make an exhibition decisive. Defining a task does not forbid new desires; it shows when they actually alter the decision.

The task also has a scale. Ilya is choosing two months of instruction, not settling his permanent relationship with art. One course need not contain every possible direction of life. An unlimited promise can make every finite offer seem inadequate: it provides neither technique, recognition, friendship nor a new identity all at once. Narrowing the subject does not impoverish the person. It separates this decision from questions that purchasing one format cannot honestly settle. That boundary precedes scoring; otherwise even a detailed table evaluates options against an unlimited task.

II. A value and its indicator do different jobs

Ilya values learning and looks for indicators: explained exercises, discussion of mistakes and opportunities to ask questions. The value describes his reason for participating; the criterion helps assess whether a particular offer serves it. Calling learning a criterion is insufficient when every page uses the same word. An observable or clarifiable indicator gives a more definite question. It does not turn the value into a measured quantity: one discussion of a mistake is not a unit of development. It simply improves on asking for the most useful activity among attractive titles.

The primary abstract of Ralph Keeney's1993 paper separates generating ideas, evaluating them and selecting them. It names value-focused thinking as a way of directing the search for opportunities. We use that distinction without attributing detailed procedures or measured effectiveness to the abstract. The unread full article supplies no hidden foundation. Our next step is an editorial argument: state what a decision should serve before asking which offers can serve it, instead of allowing every attractive feature to become another mandatory aim.

An indicator may be weak. Beautiful student work does not establish how much explanation a beginner received or what experience those students already had. A small group does not guarantee attention; a large one does not establish its absence. A criterion should remain connected to what it actually indicates. Ilya can ask about feedback rather than treat photographs as a direct measure of teaching. This does not presume dishonesty. It preserves the difference between a known feature and the broader conclusion he wishes to draw from it.

Some values lack convenient numerical indicators. Ilya wants calm, understandable explanations. A trial session may reveal certain features without certifying the entire future experience. A qualitative note—clear, unclear or needing clarification—may be more precise than arbitrary scores for respect. A criterion is not empty because it lacks a number when its subject is intelligible. Nor does a number make it reliable if it was invented merely to finish the table and produce a single winner without further human judgment.

III. A necessary condition should not disappear into a total

One course occurs while Ilya is occupied; another requires experience he lacks. These are conditions of participation, not small drawbacks beside advantages. A highly rated instructor cannot create free time. Separating such limits from desired benefits comes first. Otherwise a scoring table may let attractive content compensate for something uncompensated in reality: he cannot attend or the format excludes his level. Selection becomes meaningful when it evaluates this proposed participation, rather than an offer's appeal in general.

In the selected opening of A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice, Herbert Simon distinguishes alternatives, consequences and evaluations while considering simplified rational choice. This1955 theoretical work did not investigate Ilya's pages. The relevant distinction is between possible actions and their hoped-for results. Our separation of conditions from desires is an editorial application, not the entire Simon model. His theory does not automatically choose a drawing course for a present-day reader.

A necessary condition needs a reason too. Ilya writes that a course must be ten minutes from home. Is that a real limit or a convenience he prefers? If twenty minutes is manageable, the strict filter excludes suitable formats without justification. If extra travel genuinely conflicts with available time, the limit remains. We prescribe no universal journey length. The point is to avoid disguising a preference as a necessity or treating a real constraint as a minor drawback that prestige or a promise to try harder can cancel.

Some conditions depend on others. If attendance requires a friend to drive Ilya every week, that help is not yet his resource. He may ask when appropriate, but availability remains unestablished until agreement. A hoped-for discount or possible work rescheduling is likewise not a present fact. Criteria should distinguish known conditions from unknown ones. Otherwise the filter is rigorous only on paper: a favorite offer passes through imagined conditions while other options face their actual limits.

IV. Desirable qualities should be named before defending a favorite

Five courses remain after checking access. One has attractive presentation, and Ilya adds a criterion: a contemporary atmosphere. That may genuinely matter. He can ask whether it belonged to the task or arose to justify the offer he already likes. Our example diagnoses no hidden motive. It offers a way to examine a criterion's origin. Naming an attraction is more honest than pretending an independent assessment existed before browsing and now establishes the inevitable superiority of a favored page.

He lists a few desires: explanations of basic techniques, regular exercises, discussion of his sketches and manageable travel. Not all are indispensable. He could accept less company if the teaching fits. The list limits future comparison without prohibiting revision. A new offer may reveal a genuinely relevant quality; criteria can then be updated for every option. An update should not benefit only the favorite. Otherwise apparent general rules conceal a different convenient measure assigned to each offer.

Desired qualities need an order. For learning observational sketching, a pleasant nearby café may be a bonus without replacing appropriate explanations. This is no universal hierarchy of values. Someone seeking a quiet evening could rightly care more about the café. Ilya's criteria relate to his present task. Without that link, weighting becomes arbitrary. Verbal roles may suffice: essential to the subject, helpful for participation or pleasant when relevant conditions are otherwise satisfied. These distinctions need not generate a complicated formula.

Not every adjective deserves a row. Good, capable, strong and professional instruction may repeat one unspecified consideration. Four similar labels give it extra weight merely because the word has multiplied. Ilya can combine them into an intelligible question about explanations and feedback. The list shortens without losing content. Learning remains equally important; repeated names for it disappear. This differs from forcibly reducing the options themselves: he removes duplicate criteria rather than declaring unwanted every opportunity he has not yet evaluated.

V. An unknown quality is not a zero score

One page describes feedback; another merely promises an individual approach. Missing description does not prove missing attention. Scoring the second course zero turns an information gap into an established defect. Giving it a high score out of sympathy makes the opposite error. Unknown can remain a separate state, rather than an embarrassment in a table. It identifies necessary questions and avoids treating documented features of one course as equivalent to hopes about another.

A question helps when different answers could alter selection. Ilya asks whether each beginner's sketches are discussed and how often. If that work matters to him, the answer may retain or exclude the course. The instructor's favorite artist might interest him without resolving this gap. This does not forbid curiosity. It separates exploring a subject from preparing a specific choice. Further reading can remain interesting without every page being represented as a necessary step before a decision is allowed to exist.

An answer also has a particular scope. Discussing one work at month's end differs from regularly discussing every sketch. A small-group description does not automatically specify how much explanation is provided. Another clarification may be needed if the subject stays unclear. Endless reformulation after a sufficient answer is unnecessary. The aim is to establish the available format's content. An organizer's courtesy and a letter's length cannot replace a connection between the precise question and what the answer actually says.

Sometimes an answer is unavailable. Ilya then considers the known course, a bounded trial of another or ending the comparison. No path is universal. When a material condition cannot be checked, he may decline an option. That differs from claiming its unknown quality is bad. Precision preserves both statements: the course might suit him, but he currently lacks grounds for counting on the content he needs. The refusal concerns his decision under these conditions, not the teacher's final reputation or the worth of every opportunity at that school.

VI. Scores help only when their differences make sense

Signs and brief descriptions may help Ilya see what is known. Numbers can too, without gaining authority merely through addition. Seven and eight for feedback should differ in some intelligible respect. Unexplained differences with decimal precision conceal uncertainty. Ordering need not be abandoned. A coarser scale—fits the subject, partly fits or not established—may be better. It promises no objective ranking, but avoids inventing a tiny proven difference between similarly described offers.

Double counting is another risk. Regular discussion and an instructor's attention may reflect the same known fact. Adding a third score for personal approach gives that feedback triple weight. The arithmetic may be correct; the problem is what has been added. Looking at the evidence underneath each row helps. Combining repeated indicators makes the table more meaningful. A separate quality should have a separate basis that does not disappear when neighboring rows are checked.

Not every feature can compensate for another. An inaccessible schedule stays inaccessible despite a high total. A shorter journey might compensate for a less convenient practice space if both remain acceptable. The task determines that distinction, rather than a universal arithmetic rule. Necessary constraints have already been separated; desirable combinations

can now be discussed. Numbers acquire no authority to cancel a material boundary. Several suitable options may remain when evidence supports different combinations without establishing a uniquely superior one.

After calculating, return to words. Why this course? A higher total alone still does not name the reason. Suitable exercises, known feedback and a feasible schedule describe an intelligible relation that the table helped reveal. This is our limited criterion of usefulness, not measured effectiveness. The same result may arise without numbers. A reader may discover that quantitative ordering does not suit the task and retain a short qualitative comparison. Declining unnecessary precision does not mean declining careful thought about important conditions.

VII. Creating an option and evaluating it occur at different moments

If five courses fit poorly, Ilya could consider independent sketching with occasional consultations, a short introductory session or a different day. A new question appears: can a suitable opportunity be created rather than chosen among open pages? Its conditions require separate checking. An imagined good format is not an available offer yet. Keeney's abstract distinguishes generating from evaluating ideas. Our application does not promise that reconsidering a list lets anyone arrange a perfect activity.

Each thought need not immediately become a commitment. Ilya may imagine a friend wants to sketch and subsequently ask about willingness. Until an answer arrives, a shared activity is an idea. New possibilities can arise without promises made on someone else's behalf. Evaluation must precede accepting action: resources, content and agreed conditions still matter. Distinguishing moments is no excuse to defer checking forever. It merely avoids rejecting every idea before its proposal and available evidence are understood.

A new option can restore the old difficulty. Independent drawing is flexible but lacks explanations; a consultation fits the subject but its time is unavailable. Creating an alternative has not completed the task. The useful search result can be acknowledged and evaluated under the same criteria. Ilya's own idea need not receive privileged access through a filter applied to others. Authorship does not establish suitability. Its worth here depends on actual conditions and fit, rather than the pleasant feeling that he invented his solution.

Sometimes the existing list suffices. A course that fits the material subject and conditions may make twenty additional invitations unnecessary for this choice. That does not assert that better opportunities do not exist. Ilya can consciously finish the task with a suitable known offer, leaving the world larger than his list. An exhaustive market survey is not a condition of every small decision. The limit should be named honestly: a format has been found for this trial,

rather than the uniquely best course everywhere. Action then requires neither invented finality nor endless research for completeness alone.

VIII. Another person's answer has a particular subject

Ilya shows his list to an artist friend. She says one teacher explains perspective well. This bears on observational drawing. Then she observes that another school is more prestigious. The fact might be correct without having an established role in his task. An authoritative recommendation need not answer the present question. Respecting her experience can coexist with distinguishing her comments. Her contribution does not replace deciding what he wants to learn and what voluntary workload he can accept.

Advice can refine a criterion. She explains that the label academic does not guarantee feedback, while descriptions of exercises are more informative. Ilya can update the question for all remaining programs. That clarifies an indicator's relation to the subject rather than submitting to her taste. Another comment may express her preference for strict instruction. It is legitimate but need not settle his decision. Advice contains different kinds of content; the task is not to accept or reject an entire person along with every useful and optional remark.

If she does not know a particular course's conditions, that limit remains. General experience does not establish its present schedule, price or group format. Ilya may check with the organizer. The organizer's description likewise does not make that person the sole competent judge of all educational approaches. Different sources of answers have different domains. Recognizing them avoids collecting identical endorsements. A relevant information gap needs someone who knows that subject, rather than a general impression that enough confident voices support a favored opportunity.

Discussion remains voluntary. Ilya need not display his whole private note or explain every exclusion. If advice turns into mockery, pressure or a demand to prove maturity, this exercise does not require continuing. A small course decision need not become an examination before all his acquaintances. Under threat, safety and suitable support matter more. Freedom to seek advice includes freedom to limit discussion. Otherwise criteria meant to clarify his decision become material through which someone else claims authority over his time and evaluates his whole person.

IX. A suitable choice does not guarantee a suitable experience

Ilya chooses a course meeting relevant criteria according to available information. The first session brings new facts: explanations are clear, but home exercises take longer than expected. A well-prepared choice does not make every outcome pleasant or eliminate uncertainty. There are now new grounds for checking. Comparing them with the original subject and conditions is more precise than immediately declaring criteria useless. They supported selection under what was known; experience adds what the earlier description did not establish in every detail.

If workload exceeds what he can accept, the actual participation and exit terms need examination. A commitment cannot be renamed a reversible trial because that would suit the exercise. We establish no refund entitlement or contractual dispute procedure. Ilya can clarify available options without promising future resources to defend his earlier choice. Continuation may suit him or not. Honest reconsideration considers new facts while preserving what was known before. His original reason may have been reasonable even though experience requires a different next step.

Experience may expose an inadequate criterion. Ilya checked whether feedback existed without clarifying its accessibility to a beginner. That is a useful question for future choices, rather than an accusation against his general ability to think. A specific question can be added while retaining useful distinctions. Revising one criterion does not prove the initial task false or all the information worthless. Experience accumulates when a real gap is named, instead of a disappointing result prompting endless revision of every rule without identifying what actually needs clarification.

A successful evening has limited meaning too. It establishes that the first session suited him, rather than certifying the city's best course or every line in the table. He can continue without such a broad conclusion. Modest interpretation works both ways: inconvenience need not become complete defeat, and pleasure need not prove a universal method. Criteria remain tools for intelligible comparison. They should not promise that all life after a decision will conform to the words, numbers and expectations available before experience.

X. Finishing selection keeps the reasons visible

Ilya began by seeking the best course among fourteen attractive pages. His result is now more specific: a format for beginning observational drawing, known necessary conditions, clarified feedback and additional qualities assessed within the task. This is neither complete market knowledge nor a final decision about his creative identity. That boundary may suffice for a limited choice. He can finish without claiming all other programs worse in general or promising that future experience will require no further question or change in participation.

The remaining number of options is not the sole measure of usefulness. Two may remain and require comparing meaningful features. None may remain, making refusal of the present list an honest result. One may fit. Criteria do their job when the reasons for retaining or excluding options become clearer. They need not manufacture a winner at any cost. That differs from treating a table as successful only after it supplies one largest total, even when unknowns, duplicates and imagined conditions produced it.

This framework does not demand filters for every living experience. Walking need not require route rankings; reading can follow curiosity; looking at drawings need not prepare a decision. Criteria suit a wish to bound a particular choice and preserve its reasons. They need not continuously evaluate each free hour. A meaningful life exceeds what fits a table. The tool itself has a subject and a time for use, beyond which it may be unnecessary. Freedom from excess assessment should not require another intricate ranking of ways to be spontaneous.

A finished decision can leave a brief checkable account. What was sought? Which conditions were necessary? Which qualities were desired, and why? What was clarified, what stayed unknown and what extent of action was accepted? A few words or a mental note may suffice. No public report is required and regret's absence is not promised. Unlike the initial list, this account belongs to the decision's subject. A new attractive page can change it through a stated reason, rather than persuasive presentation and another promise of a good life without a clear extent.

What this means in practice

If you wish, use a small, safe choice of a voluntary activity or ordinary object. The exercise may be skipped, altered or stopped without explanation. It does not settle serious risks, obligations or coercive situations, and is not a proven universal method.

Name the subject in one intelligible sentence and specify its present extent. Separate necessary conditions from desirable qualities. Identify the concrete indicator of each quality; retain unknowns as unknowns. Where an answer is needed, choose a question that could alter selection. Check whether several rows repeat one fact or a favorite passes on conditions merely imagined.

After comparison, try describing the reason in words without a total. The limited result is a more intelligible set of suitable options, or their honest absence. A good experience, saved time and a unique winner are not guaranteed. Stop discussion under pressure, threat or demands for private disclosure; safety matters more than continuing. Where action involves obligations, its actual conditions require separate examination and cannot be called reversible merely because the table's author wishes it.

Key quotation

> *idea evaluation and idea selection*

Ralph L. Keeney, the same1993 abstract, the next two components of the opening distinction. The short fragment supplies no detailed procedure or evidence for our exercise's effectiveness. Actually read primary abstract.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Shared subject and limit
Keeney ↔ editorial selection	Generating opportunities differs from evaluating and selecting them. The abstract does not supply a detailed procedure.
Simon ↔ task description	Alternatives, consequences and evaluations differ. Our list of conditions is not the entire theoretical model.
Value ↔ criterion	A meaningful subject needs an intelligible indicator. That indicator does not measure someone's whole value.
Necessary ↔ desirable	Some conditions cannot be compensated by advantages. The task determines this, rather than a universal weight.
Choice ↔ experience	Available information helps selection without guaranteeing future content or a pleasant outcome.

Sources

1. Ralph L. Keeney. Creativity in MS/OR: Value-Focused Thinking—Creativity Directed toward Decision Making. Interfaces23(3),1993,pp62–67. We actually read the complete publisher abstract and publication details. The full paper was not read; a university PDF opened without available text or an image and is not claimed visually inspected. A narrow distinction between generation, evaluation and selection, without a claim of experimentally demonstrated effectiveness.

2. Herbert A. Simon. A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice. Quarterly Journal of Economics69(1),1955,pp99–118,doi10.2307/1884852. Selected introduction, alternatives/consequences/evaluations and opening simplifications contexts were read on

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Tags

choice, options, criteria, task, aim, values, limits, necessary conditions, desirable qualities, selection, information, unknowns, indicators, evaluation, scores, double counting, availability, schedule, learning, Keeney, Simon, alternatives, consequences, decision, trial, experience, reconsideration, voluntary participation, freedom, United Wisdom

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