Review: Six Thinking Hats

One of the most interesting aspects of writing a great deal is that I've found that writing works much better if you break it down into littler pieces. First comes the brainstorming: what basic idea is behind this piece? What basic elements do I need to convey? Then, organization: what order should these pieces go in? How can I make an orderly progression from the basic understanding at the start to a new understanding at the end? Then, application: how can I make it seem real and tangible? Then, criticism: what's wrong with the ideas, and how can I improve them? Then, finally, I write the whole thing, taking all of those little pieces and combining them together into something (hopefully) smooth, readable, and thought provoking.

Discovering this process on my own over time was exciting. Sure, it's an extension of the writing process I learned from my high school English teacher, but then it was just a process to follow, not really something that I understood as an aid to make my thinking and writing better. It was exciting because, by breaking it down in this fashion, *it made me think in a certain way about each stage of the writing*, almost as if I were using a completely different part of my brain.

This is almost exactly the premise of Edward de Bono's book *Six Thinking Hats*. The entire premise of the book is that **problems are best solved by thinking about them in an orderly fashion, by intentionally looking at the problem and the solution with intentionally different angles, then switching to new angles.** He refers to these "angles" as thinking hats – each one tied to a certain way of thinking about a situation.

Using the Hats
Obviously, the "six hats" metaphor is intended to indicate six different ways of looking at a problem. De Bono suggests a bunch of different ways to use the hats: individually or in groups, singly or in sequence, and in varying sequence. The real key is to realize that **when you run into a roadblock in solving a problem, putting on a different "hat" might help** – in other words, step back and make a tangible effort to look at the problem in a specific way. In other words, when you're stuck, try one of the following six approaches (or have someone else apply that approach) to tackle the problem.

Each of the sections below offers a ton of examples and supporting information for each way of thinking about a problem, well worth reading through if you're intrigued.

The White Hat
The white hat refers to the simple gathering of facts. It's neutral and objective. All you're trying to do with the white hat is just gather information.

I put on the white hat when I'm researching something. If I come to a spot where I realize I'm out of my realm of expertise, it's time to step back and just gather facts and look at them to see that I understand what they're saying, then perhaps go back and gather more facts. If I'm at the library, the white hat is on. If I'm doing intense reading, the white hat is usually on.

The Red Hat
Red hat thinking is geared toward the emotional side of things. How does this particular fact make you feel? What is your emotional response to the situation?

I use the red hat when I'm thinking of real-life examples of how something's going to work, particularly when it affects my family or myself. When I'm writing a heartfelt anecdote about my children or my grandfather, relating those facts to their lives, the red hat is firmly in place.

The Black Hat
The black hat comes around when you're playing the devil's advocate, trying hard to find flaws in thinking and being very careful about absorbing new ideas. The critic wears the black hat constantly, making what he or she is reviewing win them over by overcoming the negatives.

My black hat comes out of the closet when I've collected the facts I need for an article and have already decided on how it will progress. At that point, I try hard to pick some holes in it. What's wrong with this article? Will it be any good? Does this idea make sense? Is it actually supported? Does this piece actually fit with everything else? I'm *trying* to poke holes in things, in order to make the end solution better.

The Yellow Hat
The yellow hat is the "positive thinking" hat, looking at the best possible outcome of the situation. Yellow is almost the opposite of the black, because while black looks for the problems, yellow looks for the best case scenario, the reason why all of this will pull together and work, and the big rewards when it does click.

I use the yellow hat when I see the message getting lost in negativity. In the end, personal finance is a positive thing, but there are many negative pieces to the puzzle. When something feels overly negative, I put on the yellow hat and see where it fits in a broader context of positive personal finances.

The Green Hat
The green hat is the brainstorming hat, where you just pull out ideas and throw them on the table. It doesn't matter whether they're good or not (black hat will work on that) or whether they're supported (white hat, please!). The purpose is simply to get some fresh ideas out there.

Most of my posts start off with the green hat – they begin as jottings in my notebook. I try to wear the green hat as much as possible, looking everywhere for ideas and recording them when they come up. In fact, my green hat is usually on whenever I'm not actively engaged in the process of writing – I'm just brainstorming along the path of life.

The Blue Hat
The blue hat is all about organizing and planning. Are things in a sensible order? What sort of structure needs to be here to complete the project? Does the first step go before the second step?

I use the blue hat when I pick out brainstormed ideas (from my green hat thinking) and combine them with facts that I've researched (white hat thinking). These need to come together in some sensible order – how do the facts line up to present a case? I also use my blue hat when actually planning my daily schedule.

Some Thoughts On Six Thinking Hats
More than anything else I've ever read, the "six thinking hats" metaphor really clicked with how I think. I had never considered it in the sense of discrete ways of thinking before, but nearly the entire book made sense to me. Prior to it, I had focused mostly on creative thought – green hat stuff – but I

hadn't considered how important the other hats were and how I had to use them all to really pull things together.

The author needs to get his ego in check a bit. While there is a lot of compelling information here, the preface is almost insufferable. "The Six Thinking Hats method may well be the most important change in human thinking for the past twenty three hundred years." Come on, that's a bit over the top. It almost made me close the book right then and there.

While conceptually good, the metaphor goes a little far. Some of the examples of how to use the hats in meetings go a little far. Literally mentioning the hats is a bit over the top, and I can't conceive of people actually doing that. While it makes for a great metaphor within the book, I'm not sure it stretches into the real world.

Is Six Thinking Hats Worth Reading?
Six Thinking Hats is a *very* compelling book, broken down into perfect little bite sized pieces for contemplation. The overall concept that de Bono lays down, about how to separate out the pieces of your thought process and put effort into using different aspects or varying up the order, is a very strong one, indeed, and matches the way I think better than any other book I've read.

Because of that, I'd say *Six Thinking Hats* is worthwhile reading for *anyone* in a career that utilizes thinking skills.

That doesn't mean I think that everything in it is right on. The book takes using the metaphor a bit far. While the tools can be very useful within your own head – and can be very useful when used in conjunction with others – sitting in a meeting talking about "putting on your red hat" doesn't really help anyone at all. In short, **utilize what the book says in between your own ears more than anywhere else**. Make an effort to understand how you're thinking and try hard to slip on a different hat on occasion – it can really help.