Culture is NOT a moodboard!



01 / THE DECISION

Start with something somebody does

A skyline, a patterned cup and a familiar song can establish a setting. They cannot tell you what matters to the people in it. When cultural work begins and ends with those signs, the audience is asked to recognise a place rather than a situation. The execution may look informed while having very little to say.

Start with an action and the relationship around it. Who waits before speaking? Who passes an object to whom? What does somebody do to make another person comfortable? What becomes awkward when a service changes an established routine? These questions can expose creative possibilities. They do not automatically produce cultural truths. An action might arise from a practical constraint, an individual preference or a momentary accident.

This guide helps you move from a small observation to a defensible creative hypothesis. The result is a concept that has something specific to show and a clear account of what remains unknown. It is not a substitute for local knowledge, representative research or the people whose lives appear in the work.

Keep visual references, but bring them in after you can describe the human situation. A useful moodboard then helps decide how to express a relationship you understand. It should not be asked to manufacture the relationship on your behalf.

02 / OBSERVE

Record the action before explaining it

Choose one encounter relevant to the brief: joining an event, collecting an order, asking for help or giving something to another person. With appropriate permission, observe what happens before, during and after it. Record the setting, the people's roles, the sequence and the words you actually heard. Do not turn private conversations or identifiable images into campaign material without consent.

Make the record concrete enough that another researcher could distinguish your observation from your interpretation. "She paused at the table and looked at the host" records an action. "She was intimidated by the group" proposes an explanation. Both can be useful, but only the first was directly visible. Even that record reflects where you stood and what you chose to notice.

+ Context: what time, setting and practical conditions might have affected the action?
+ Sequence: what happened just before and just after the moment that interested you?
+ Relationship: what roles or expectations were known, and what are you merely guessing?
+ Exception: who behaved differently, and what might that difference reveal?

Ask an open follow-up about the particular event: "What were you looking for when you stopped there?" Avoid supplying the explanation inside the question. "Were you nervous because everyone knew each other?" can recruit agreement to your preferred story. Preserve disagreement in your notes rather than editing it into a cleaner insight.

03 / INTERPRET

Give the observation an opponent

Write at least two plausible explanations of the same action before selecting a creative direction. The purpose is not to make every project a research marathon. It is to prevent the first elegant sentence from becoming untouchable. A person who waits outside a room might be respecting a speaker, checking the address, expecting a friend or avoiding a conversation.

Then ask what each explanation would imply for the brand. If the obstacle is uncertain permission to join, an invitation mechanism may help. If it is noise, more welcoming copy will not solve it. If people simply prefer to remain with their friends, the supposed problem may belong to the organiser rather than the audience.

01 Write the observed moment without a national, generational or personality label. Add the source and circumstances.

02 Name the interpretation you want to explore, plus a credible competing explanation. Identify the detail that would help distinguish them.

03 Describe the organisation's legitimate role. It might provide access, information, an object or a change in procedure. It cannot claim ownership of the people's culture.

04 Make a provisional creative move. State exactly what somebody would see or do, then identify whose perspective is absent from your reasoning.

A productive hypothesis can stay modest: "In this encounter, a visible invitation may matter more than a general welcome." That sentence directs a test without claiming to explain an entire community.

04 / WORKED EXAMPLE

A welcome that happens at the doorway

> INVENTED TEACHING CASE
>
> Common Room is a fictional cafe hosting conversation evenings. The following observations, interviews and service details are invented for this exercise.

The team wants a campaign about belonging. Its first board contains smiling groups, decorative lettering and photographs of shared tables. None explains how a newcomer joins. In the scenario notes, two first-time visitors pause beside occupied tables, check their phones and wait for the host. Another sits down immediately. One visitor says they did not know which tables were part of the event.

The tempting conclusion is "people here are shy". That turns a few actions into a personality claim. A better hypothesis is that the social permission to join is unclear. Competing explanations remain: the visitor may have been waiting for a friend, choosing a language group or looking for a quieter seat. The immediate follow-up is to ask about that particular hesitation and inspect the room's signage.

The cafe can credibly change the joining process. Hosts can mark participating tables, explain how the event works and invite newcomers to a seat. The creative opportunity is to make that actual invitation visible. There is no need to borrow a regional symbol to make the situation human.

Before developing the route, check whether current guests want open tables and how someone can decline participation. A welcoming experience requires a choice for both the person joining and the people already there.

05 / MAKE THE WORK

Turn the relationship into an encounter

The proposed execution

A poster shows one empty chair angled slightly away from a conversation table. A small event card is attached to its back. The headline reads: "This chair is part of the conversation." The supporting line says: "Common Room conversation evening. Ask the host for an open table, or start with a table of your own." Time, venue and booking details sit in a clear information block.

Inside the cafe, the same card identifies tables that have agreed to welcome newcomers. The host explains the arrangement on arrival. A short film can show the actual sequence: a visitor notices the card, checks with the host, and is invited to the seat. The decisive moment is permission being made visible, not a montage that labels everyone connected.

The brand's role is practical: it organises and hosts the encounter. Do not imply that the cafe has discovered a universal formula for community. If hosts cannot maintain the arrangement, revise the service or withdraw the promise. The campaign cannot compensate for a welcome that disappears once a person arrives.

Review the rough with people who join, people who host and people who prefer not to participate. Ask what the card seems to permit and whether it creates unwanted pressure. That review may change the words, the visible action or the entire mechanism. Its value is in exposing meaning, not securing unanimous applause.

06 / TRY IT

Replace the cultural shortcut

Invented exercise: a neighbourhood workshop promotes shared making sessions. The draft rationale says, "Our community values togetherness, so show everyone building one giant object." The scenario notes are less tidy. Some visitors enjoy collaborating; others bring a personal project and ask a neighbour for help only when stuck. Rewrite the observation, propose a competing explanation and sketch a more precise invitation.

A model response

Observation: people work separately but sometimes ask nearby makers for help at a difficult step. Interpretation: the workshop may offer a useful form of company without requiring constant collaboration. Alternative: visitors may simply need access to tools, with conversation incidental. A follow-up should ask what made the help easy to request and whether people would attend without the shared space.

A possible poster pairs two adjacent workbenches: different projects, one hand passing a clamp between them. The line is "Your project. A hand when you need one." Supporting copy explains the sessions and the help actually available. It does not promise expert support unless the workshop provides it.

This answer protects both independence and exchange. It is not automatically better because it is quieter. It is better matched to the supplied actions. The original collective-build idea could still work for a different brief, audience or event. Judge the fit rather than turning this example into another rule about what a community wants.

07 / WORKSHEET

From observation to creative possibility

Use one sheet for one encounter. Include a counterexample even when it complicates your preferred route. Keep names and identifying details out of a shared creative worksheet unless there is a clear reason and permission to include them.

What action did we observe, in what setting, and through which source?

What are our preferred and competing explanations?

What useful role can the organisation actually provide?

What will somebody see or do in the proposed execution?

Who should challenge it, and what finding would change the route?

08 / REVIEW

Specificity needs an evidence boundary

Read the rationale and underline every sentence beginning with a group label: "young people", "families", "Arabs", "locals" or any other collective name. Ask whether the evidence supports that breadth. Often the useful part can be expressed as a situation rather than an identity: a newcomer arriving after a group has formed, or a host explaining an unfamiliar process.

+ Can we point to an actual action rather than a collection of cultural props?
+ Have we separated the observed event, our explanation and the invented creative expression?
+ Does the execution preserve people's agency, including the ability not to participate?
+ Does the organisation provide what the idea promises, and is that role visible?
+ Have relevant people challenged the meaning in the actual language and setting?

These are working questions, not a certification that an execution represents a culture correctly. One consultant, one participant or one bilingual colleague cannot speak for everybody. Local review can expose specific problems; broader claims need broader evidence. If the work touches a contested symbol or a sensitive relationship, involve people with relevant lived and professional knowledge before finishing the treatment.

The next action is to take a rough execution back to the encounter that inspired it. Find out what it communicates without your explanation. Keep the detail that makes the relationship recognisable, and remove any claim that reaches further than your evidence.

READING / PRACTICE / CONTEXT

Where the thinking starts

The methods, teaching scenarios, exercises and worksheets here are original synthesis. The books below inform particular decisions; their authors do not endorse this guide. Page references locate the supplied PDF editions and may differ from printed page numbers.

Jon Steel / Truth, Lies, and Advertising: The Art of Account Planning

PDF pp. 15-17

Attention to people's relationship with a category informed observation and questioning. The guide's record, hypotheses and invented cafe case are original synthesis, not findings from Steel's research.

John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb and Richard Hollis / Ways of Seeing

PDF pp. 5-8; creator credits p. 166

The discussion of looking as selective and images as constructed viewpoints informed the distinction between recording and interpreting. Original pages were visually inspected; the cafe exercise and cultural review method are new synthesis.

Make the tools your own

Read the worked example, try the exercise before its model response, then use the worksheet on a real assignment. Print the worksheet at 100% or annotate a copy digitally. Check your actual product facts, audience context and production conditions before applying the advice.

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