This is an article about juxting - coming up with ideas by randomly juxtaposing two things and seeing the ways they could relate to each other. For example, when you see a picture of a cake next to a picture of a river, the juxtaposition of the two can give you the idea of a floating patisserie, or of a special cake with twisting canyons for melted chocolate to flow through like chocolate rivers. "But I don't know the first thing about being a pastry chef or sailing a ship," you say. But on the off-chance you did, you could have used one of these ideas or even combined the two to create a business plan with at least a fighting chance at success. You never know what kind of idea you will get through juxting, but you can try again and again until you find something that works for you.

The human brain is exceptionally good at coming up with connections and patterns in random data. This skill is called "pattern recognition." Your brain loves to find patterns in things to help it make sense of the world. Sometimes those patterns are real, other times they're just in your head - but it doesn't matter. The important thing is that your brain finds patterns and connects things that aren't necessarily related. Juxting is the art of using this tendency to find patterns to your advantage in order to solve problems or accomplish goals that you're having difficulty with.

Let's say you're trying to invent a new social network paradigm that aims to connect users to others who are very similar to themselves in their outlook, values and abilities, creating clusters of like-minded people who can work and play well together. But how would such a thing even work? You have no idea, but you can't just sit around and ponder this question. You need to get started. So you start juxting.

The first duo of pictures you are presented with is a mountain and a lion. Lions roar loudly... "Scream it from the mountaintops!" your brain tells you. So you type: "Make a social network that's loud and proud! Like lions roaring and shaking the trees for those who want to join them! Let users boldly proclaim the things they believe in, and click "Agree" or "Disagree" on an endless list of such proclamations made by others. Each belief statement will generate two clusters of people, those who agree with it and those who don't. Your psychological adjacency to any other user can be calculated by how many of those you share versus how many you diverge on."

Alright, that was easy. Your brain had no trouble coming up with at least one idea from the pair of pictures you were presented with. Now you see an ocean and a starfish. An ocean is a vast space full of possibilities, and the starfish attaches itself to any solid surface it can find. A social network that's vast, like the ocean - that allows users to attach themselves to whatever works best. Let users choose the beliefs they care for the most deeply and have the system weigh its adjacency calculations accordingly. This should create a structure that allows people to not only rapidly find like-minded friends, but also to build communities they care for based around central ideas or values.

Next you see a cog and a tape measure. The tape measure measures distances and sizes, and the cogs' teeth have to be the exact same size so that they can mesh together. Maybe a binary Agree/Disagree is too coarse a measurement? Maybe a 5-point or 1-10 scale would allow for more accurate adjacency calculations between users. But then again, maybe the simpler option is better in this case. You'll come back to this.

Next is a fork and a compass. You eat with a fork and explore new places with a compass. Discovering a new food you like is exciting and fun, and all it takes is trying it and seeing if it tastes good. You can then invite your friends to try it too. Users should be able to explore and discover all kinds of beliefs and communities, even ones they totally disagree with. Let them see what kind of discussion and person they encounter there, and they will stay if what they find is congruent with who they actually are.

Now you see a crown next to some vines. The leaders of a cause should naturally arise from its community, so let's have the system automatically amplify the voices of the people it trusts the most, the ones who have consistently and actively expressed interest in and work on the community. This leads to more truth being expressed and accepted by the community, which leads to better clusters and more accurate adjacencies. Let people lead others towards what they believe in, and make sure the leaders of an idea are also the ones who care about it most.

With just five juxts you've arrived at a plausible idea and some core principles for your new system. What will happen with another five? Let's find out.

The next two images are of a man falling and an umbrella. "It's raining men...," as the song goes. It makes you think of an abundance of self-similars: you imagine talking to a hundred or even a thousand people whose interests, views and thoughts closely match your own. You would be a neuron in a megabrain... YOUR megabrain. You decide to make such structures one of the defining promotional points of your new social network.

The next juxtaposition is of a rocket and a wombat. The wombat is a kind of marsupial (a mammal that carries its babies in a pouch) and the rocket is a vehicle that carries things to outer space. They both protect their precious cargo from the hostile outside environment. If you were to launch a new idea into the world, you would want it to have a safe place to grow in. And what better place for that than a group of people who think the same way and want the same things you do? You decide to make this another promotional point of your new social network and initially gear it towards creatives and innovators as a powerful way to find collaborators and co-founders.

Next up is a clown and a cash register. They both have distinctive sounds associated with them - the clown has his clown horn (meep-moop) and the cash register its bell (ka-ching). These sounds are so recognizable that upon hearing them you instantly think of ridiculousness or money. That fact makes you contemplate just how powerful and important sound design is. You decide to make it a priority in the development of your social network's user interface. The right sounds encourage people to do the right things, and this will serve as a core element of the system that helps people find and connect with like-minded others, as well as another promotional point that helps you stand out from the crowd.

The next images are that of a wave and of a chess board. The black and white sides advance towards each other as the wave does towards the beach, then intermingle as the foam does upon the retreating waters. Inspired by this interplay, you decide your social network should also expose its users to those somewhat or even very much unlike them. In fact, one of the main purposes of your network should be to provide a place for people to connect with those who think differently to them. Just as the system can find those who are your mirror reflection by minimizing adjacency distances, so it can find your very antithesis by maximizing them, as well as anything in-between.

The next juxtaposition of images is that of a UFO and an eye. UFO sightings - that most unconfirmable of events, an obsession for some but a mere curiosity for others. The discrepancy makes you realize that a huge cluster of people fascinated by the exact same types of things as you would be an immensely powerful source of entertainment and information, a far better content aggregator than Reddit or Hacker News could ever be. Another feature to prioritize and a great promotional point, one sure to send VCs salivating should you ever need their help bringing this to life.

So here you are, ten juxts later, with a fairly clear idea of what your network will promote and how. With every single pair of things you tried to juxt, you succeeded and gained a usable idea. Where will another five get you, or another five hundred?