BOOK EVIDENCE REVIEW

Originals review

A book by Adam Grant

Good questions, shaky recipes

The Behavioral Scientist

Foreword by Sheryl Sandberg · 4,083 words / 14 min read

Evidence assessed through 13 September 2026 · Book edition and source-copy details below

OVERALL RATING

58%

An editorial assessment, not a percentage of truth.

Scientific Accuracy	**58%**
Reference Accuracy	**67%**
Practical Value	**50%**

Read it this way: A stimulating source of ideas, not a dependable recipe for originality.

Ease of application: Many ideas are easy to try; organizational change requires authority and support.

Confidence in the overall appraisal: moderate. Specific evidence limits accompany the findings.

About This Review

This review combines factual reporting with editorial judgments about the identified book and its evidence. Ratings apply our published rubric; they are not percentages of truth or judgments about an author's honesty. Criticism of support does not itself show that a claim is false. Evidence is assessed through 13 September 2026, with source-access limits disclosed. Read the methodology, book-specific disclosures, and full editorial notice with the review. Corrections and substantive responses are welcome.

Should you rush to be first, or wait for someone else to make the expensive mistakes?

In *Originals*, Adam Grant offers a striking statistic. Market pioneers failed at a rate of 47%, compared with just 8% for slower "settlers." On those numbers, going first looks almost six times as dangerous. [1]

Except the comparison group in the cited study was not all slower entrants. It was **early market leaders**: businesses that had already achieved leadership during the market's early growth. Waiting does not automatically put a company in that group.

That changes the lesson. Comparing everyone who pioneered a market with businesses selected for early leadership cannot tell you the effect of deciding to enter later. The arithmetic is straightforward. The comparison is the problem.

This is *Originals* at its most frustrating. It asks excellent questions, finds memorable stories, and often gives readers useful ideas. But the move from interesting research to practical prescription is less reliable than the confidence of the narrative suggests.

My verdict: read it to expand the possibilities you consider, not to acquire a dependable formula for becoming original.

There is real value in challenging the image of the innovator as fearless, certain, and recklessly committed. There is less value in replacing that cartoon with a new collection of rules that outrun the evidence. The best version of this book would help readers test better ideas, including the ideas in the book itself.

The strongest argument in the book

Grant's most useful message is that originality need not look like the heroic stereotype. You can question an accepted practice while protecting your financial position. You can have doubts. You can seek help, revise a proposal, and work with existing institutions rather than pretending that serious innovation requires total independence. [2]

The book also encourages several sensible habits: generate alternatives before falling in love with one idea, seek informed criticism, give unfamiliar proposals time to become understandable, and create room for real disagreement.

Its examples are varied enough to make those possibilities vivid. That is a genuine contribution. A reader who previously equated creativity with a rare personality type may come away with more ways to participate.

The qualifications deserve attention too. Grant acknowledges costs of procrastination, mixed evidence about first-mover advantage, and controversy around birth order. He recognizes that leading with weaknesses can supply an audience with reasons to reject a proposal. The book is not a

collection of entirely unconditional commands. [3] [4] [1] [5]

The problem is that the memorable recommendation often travels farther than the qualification. A vivid success story can make an explanation feel established. A surprising statistic can make a context-dependent possibility sound like a rule.

The review therefore asks a simple question throughout: **what would a reader reasonably do differently because of this passage, and does the evidence support that move?**

Three claims, three levels of support

Originality does not require fearlessness or reckless commitment. This is the book's strongest central proposition, rated 75%. Credible examples can challenge a claim that a particular personality or dramatic action is necessary. They cannot tell everyone which alternative will work best.

The recommended techniques reliably improve how people generate, choose, and communicate ideas. Some practices have relevant experimental support. Others rest heavily on selected histories or narrow tasks. The broad claim receives 50%.

Parents, teachers, and leaders can cultivate originality through the book's prescriptions. Again, support varies. A finding about helping, a pattern among siblings, and an account of an innovative organization are different kinds of evidence. They do not jointly establish one reliable development program. This claim also receives 50%. [6]

The resulting Scientific Accuracy rating is 58%. That recognizes useful evidence and real insights without treating the whole collection as a proven recipe.

A productive reader should preserve the distinctions. Some claims invite a small experiment. Others would require a consequential career or parenting decision. They should not face the same evidentiary threshold merely because they appear in the same book.

The first-mover statistic cannot answer the timing question

The pioneer example contains two problems.

The first is the selected comparison group. Golder and Tellis's 8% figure concerns early market leaders, not a representative group of all later entrants. Those firms had already achieved something that many entrants never achieve. [1]

Imagine comparing all people who started a business at 25 with people who started later and subsequently became local market leaders. You would learn about those groups. You would not learn how much safer it is for a randomly chosen 25-year-old to wait. The later group was partly defined by an achievement downstream of entry.

The second problem concerns market share. Grant describes surviving pioneers as holding about 10% of the market, versus 28% for settlers. In the cited paper, the 10% pioneer figure includes failures. The figure for surviving pioneers is 19%. The difference between all pioneers and surviving pioneers changes the denominator again. [1]

Neither correction proves that being first is best. The useful lesson survives: pioneering is not a guarantee of dominance. But the study cannot carry the much stronger practical claim that waiting produces the dramatic reduction in failure suggested by the comparison.

Grant does discuss reasons why early entry can help, including patents and network effects, and recognizes mixed evidence. Those qualifications should remain part of the reading.

For an actual business, timing should depend on demand, available knowledge, competitive defenses, resources, and the cost of waiting. Sometimes another firm's mistakes are valuable information. Sometimes the delay hands it a durable advantage. A ratio built from mismatched groups cannot make that decision for you.

Keeping your job can be a sensible strategy—not a guaranteed advantage

The book's staged-entrepreneurship example is more useful when read carefully.

The cited research follows people who combine paid employment with self-employment and later move into full-time self-employment. Compared with direct entry, the staged path was associated with a lower exit hazard, about one-third lower in the reported model. That is a conditional rate over time, not a 33-percentage-point improvement in success. [7]

The practical idea is appealing: retain income while you learn whether the venture deserves a larger commitment. But the group reaching the full-time transition has also been selected. Promising side ventures can justify that move. Unpromising ones may disappear before reaching it.

Learning and selection can both contribute to the result. Treating the association as the pure effect of keeping a job gives the choice more causal certainty than the study provides.

A later Norwegian study makes the picture less tidy. Using a different definition of entrepreneurship and a matched observational comparison, it found that staged entrants spent fewer years classified as self-employed but remained business owners for longer after leaving that employment status. That is not the same population, comparison, or outcome as the U.S. study, and leaving self-employment is not necessarily a business failing. It is another reason to treat the day-job strategy as an option to evaluate, not a dependable survival advantage. [7]

The better prescription is conditional commitment. Preserve runway while testing the opportunity, then reconsider as the evidence changes. A second job can reduce financial pressure. It can also fragment attention and slow execution. The balance will differ across ventures and people.

This is one place where *Originals* successfully expands the menu of legitimate behavior. You don't need to quit dramatically to prove that you believe in an idea. But keeping the job forever is not automatically the more sophisticated choice either.

Ask what uncertainty the staged approach is resolving. Will you learn whether customers pay, whether the work is feasible, or whether you want to spend your life doing it? If the side project is no longer producing useful information, "prudence" can become another word for avoiding a decision.

That final distinction is an application judgment, not a result estimated by the entrepreneurship study. It is how I would turn the research into a useful question rather than a universal command.

More ideas help only if you can do something with them

Grant's case for producing more ideas has an important mathematical intuition behind it: more attempts can increase the chance of a valuable result even if the average attempt stays the same.

That is different from proving that quantity improves quality or that additional ideation is always the best use of time. With limited resources, more ideas can displace research, refinement, testing, or implementation. Historical examples of prolific creators cannot settle that trade-off for every project. [8]

A relevant experiment comparing idea-generation processes gives more actionable guidance. An individual-then-group process produced more ideas and better leading ideas than group-only work in the studied tasks. That supports a specific process improvement, not an instruction to maximize the count indefinitely. [9]

For a practical project, I would separate exploration from evaluation. First produce enough different possibilities that you are not merely decorating the first idea. Then ask which option best serves the actual goal, given the evidence and constraints.

The metric should be the quality of the best available option, not the number of items on a whiteboard. Fifty superficial variations can be less useful than one alternative that reveals a mistaken assumption.

This is where Grant's advice is at its best: it loosens premature commitment. It becomes weaker when a memorable quota substitutes for a decision about where more effort would help.

The book's endnote recommending tests of actual customer behavior rather than simply asking people what they want deserves credit. A working test can expose a problem that neither enthusiasm nor a panel of impressive judges notices. [8]

Generating possibilities is useful. Choosing and improving them is work too. Originality requires attention to the whole process, not only its most enjoyable phase.

Creative peers can improve judgment, but they are not the customer

The book describes research in which creators evaluating other people's work could outperform managers or less experienced audiences at recognizing promising novelty. The field work involved circus professionals and a large set of audience responses; laboratory work tested related processes. [10]

This is a useful reason to include knowledgeable peers in an evaluation. It is not a reason to replace the intended user with a room full of creative professionals.

The outcomes matter. Liking, sharing, or making a small donation measures something different from repeatedly using a product, paying a sustainable price, or implementing an idea safely. An audience can enjoy an act without supplying evidence for a business model in another industry.

Roles also carry selection. A large audience can improve the precision of audience-response measurement without turning "creator" or "manager" into a randomly assigned treatment. Experience, interests, and incentives differ between those groups.

The better practical process is plural. Seek independent views from people who understand the craft. Seek information from the people who would use or pay for the result. Compare those forecasts with subsequent behavior.

Disagreement can then become useful evidence. Perhaps an idea is novel but difficult to understand. Perhaps professionals appreciate features that customers barely notice. Perhaps customers like the promise but cannot fit the product into their lives. Each possibility suggests a different next test.

The lesson is not to find the one class of judge that always knows. It is to learn which people provide useful information about which question. That is a more demanding approach than a slogan, but it is also harder for a confident adviser to fool.

Take a break from the problem. Don't confuse that with avoiding it

The chapter on procrastination is one of the book's most easily misused.

Grant argues that delaying completion can leave alternatives open and improve creativity. The research described in the book was preliminary; a later journal article found a curved relationship under specified conditions rather than a general advantage for more delay. Separate incubation research supports benefits from temporarily setting aside a problem after engaging with it. [4]

The word *after* matters. A pause can give a prepared problem room to develop. Repeatedly avoiding the work may leave very little prepared material to develop.

Grant acknowledges that procrastination can hurt productivity and that motivation matters. His account of a famous speech also includes extensive prior practice and tested material. That background should prevent the story from turning into a lesson that great work is best prepared at

the last moment.

Here is the version I would use: start early enough to understand the problem, generate initial possibilities, and schedule a bounded pause before choosing or finishing. Preserve enough time to revise the result.

Imagine two writers taking a day away from an essay. One has researched the question and produced a rough argument. The other has opened a blank document and felt bad about it. The calendar looks the same. The cognitive situation does not.

This is why mechanism matters for advice. The useful possibility is avoiding premature closure or returning with a different perspective. The target is not lateness itself.

A reader should judge the practice by the finished work and the cost of producing it. Feeling relieved to discover that procrastination might be creative is not the same as finding a work process that reliably helps.

A good story about persuasion is still a story

Grant describes a founder who successfully presented weaknesses in his business to investors and potential acquirers. The lesson is memorable: admitting flaws can improve credibility and reduce an audience's resistance. [3]

The missing comparison is equally important. We do not see the same proposal delivered differently to equivalent decision-makers. Several explanations fit the success. The story cannot tell us which ingredient caused it.

The book itself supplies sensible boundaries. Revealing an unfamiliar weakness can give someone a new reason to say no. The underlying proposal still needs merit. A tactic that worked for a particular founder in a particular conversation is not a universal pitch format.

One related piece of research also deserves an update. The endnote discusses whether an expert can become more persuasive by expressing uncertainty. A large registered replication did not reproduce the original expertise-by-uncertainty pattern. That was not a test of Griscom's business pitch, so it cannot tell us that admitting a weakness never helps. It does weaken the case for treating an unexpected display of uncertainty as a reliable persuasion technique. [3]

I would retain the candor and stop selling it as a trick. Disclose material limitations, explain what they mean, and show how you plan to test or address them. Honesty is worth preserving even when it does not increase the odds of a yes.

The chapter also discusses repeated exposure. Familiarity can influence liking, but a repetition quota cannot tell you when an audience will accept a business proposal. Understanding, liking, believing, funding, and using are different outcomes. An audience can understand an idea perfectly and reject it for good reasons. [11]

One detail is worth getting right: the invented "Sarick Effect" is revealed within the book as a demonstration of familiarity. It should not be described as an undisclosed fabricated citation. Reading the complete sequence changes the accusation. [3]

That is a useful discipline for criticism as well as product work. Before deciding why someone responded as they did, make sure you have the full sequence and the right outcome. A story's explanatory appeal is not a substitute for those details.

Birth order is a weak guide to originality

The "born to rebel" account is attractive because it connects personality to a feature everyone can identify. Firstborns conform; younger siblings challenge. Family life becomes a miniature theory of innovation.

The broader evidence is less tidy. Large studies have found little support for a general lasting birth-order pattern across major personality traits, apart from small intellectual differences, and research on adult risk-taking has challenged the expected effect. Later findings involving family size and HEXACO traits complicate a blanket claim of no differences, but they do not vindicate the simple younger-rebel story. [5]

Grant acknowledges controversy. Nevertheless, the book's positive conclusion gives sibling position more practical explanatory weight than the evidence warrants.

The baseball statistic makes the problem concrete. Younger professional-baseball brothers are described as 10.6 times more likely to attempt a steal. The authors' clarification concerns an odds ratio based on whether one brother had a higher attempted-steal rate than the other, with a wide interval around the estimate. It is not a 10.6-fold ratio in the frequency of attempts per opportunity. [12]

A binary comparison loses the size of the difference. Having a slightly higher rate and having a dramatically higher rate both count as "higher." The odds of winning that comparison cannot be read as the ratio between the underlying behaviors.

The loose wording also appeared in the source's abstract, so the problem should not be attributed entirely to Grant. But repeating a source's shorthand does not make its natural interpretation accurate.

For parenting, hiring, or collaboration, use the person's actual behavior. Their position in the family is an interesting fact about their history, not a reliable shortcut to their originality.

Praise and dissent need more than memorable rules

Two other prescriptions show the gap between a useful finding and a dependable general rule.

The first is identity language. Calling a child a helper can encourage helping in some experiments. But later work found that such language can backfire after setbacks. Evidence for an immediate boost in helping cannot simply be transferred to a durable creative identity. Grant's endnotes recognize tension with related praise research, which deserves credit. [13]

The later evidence is not uniformly negative. A registered Japanese replication found a smaller benefit from wording about not being a cheater in a coin-flip reporting task. But a broader synthesis of noun-versus-verb studies found only a small average effect and raised doubts about its stability. Helping, cheating, and voting are different behaviors; none of these results establishes a general rule that giving someone an identity label produces lasting good behavior. [13]

The practical issue is what happens after the mistake. If a child interprets one bad drawing as evidence that they are not a creative person, the flattering label has become a more demanding standard than specific feedback about the work.

I would favor truthful feedback about a choice, strategy, contribution, or improvement. Make the next useful action available without making the person's identity depend on a perfect record.

The second prescription concerns devil's advocates. Research described in the book favors genuine dissent over some assigned opposition roles. But a superior alternative does not make the weaker alternative worthless. A group may lack a genuine dissenter because people are afraid, because alternatives have not been investigated, or because no one currently sees a good objection. [14]

Look for actual disagreement first. When needed, structured challenge can still ask what would make the plan fail, what evidence is missing, or which alternative deserves consideration.

Protecting people who disagree matters more than making the exercise sound authentic. If criticism creates career risk, the instruction to "speak up" is incomplete. The organization must change what happens after someone follows it. The book's discussion of voice is most useful when those consequences stay in view. [15]

There is also a specific finding to stop relying on. Research cited in this discussion suggested that Black women were spared the leadership-status penalty for behaving dominantly that White women received. A high-powered registered replication in 2026 did not reproduce that exception: both groups, as well as men, received a status penalty. This does not overturn the separate research on voice or discrimination. It does mean the original exception is not a dependable guide to who can speak forcefully without paying a price. [15]

Both examples point to the same lesson: evaluate a technique across the sequence that matters. Starting a behavior, surviving a setback, and sustaining useful participation are different challenges.

Performing better can be a different goal from feeling calmer

One of the book's more useful psychological distinctions appears in the discussion of anticipatory anxiety. In the original experiments, excitement framing produced favorable results on some performance measures. The speaking and mathematics experiments included calm prompts; the singing experiment instead compared "I am excited" with "I am anxious" or no statement. Anxiety did not necessarily fall when performance improved. [16]

That is interesting because it separates two goals readers often treat as identical: feeling less activated and performing better. A person might give a better presentation while still feeling nervous. Complete calm need not be the entrance requirement for useful action.

The performance claim is less dependable than the original results alone suggest. A 2025 replication of the speaking experiment again found higher reported excitement in the excited group than in the calm group, but not an advantage in observer-rated speech performance. The study was small and stopped early during the pandemic; it did not retest singing or mathematics. Feeling more excited and giving a better speech are separate results. I would keep the framing as a low-cost option to try, not an established performance boost. [16]

The boundary is the comparison. A brief instruction to feel calm is not the same as a practiced relaxation skill, a full coping intervention, or treatment for an anxiety disorder. The finding supports trying a particular framing in ordinary performance situations, not telling everyone to stop trying to regulate anxiety.

The book's discussion of defensive pessimism offers a related practical distinction. Thinking through a specific obstacle can generate a precaution or a plan. Replaying catastrophe without changing what you do is a different activity. The detailed underlying studies were not fully audited for this review, so I would keep this as a bounded practical distinction rather than a broad scientific guarantee. [16]

This is the kind of material that makes *Originals* worth reading selectively: a different way to understand a familiar problem, followed by an action that can be tried without committing your whole identity to a theory.

What I would actually do differently

Use *Originals* as a prompt to widen your options and improve your tests.

Before committing, generate several genuinely different approaches. Ask what each would have to achieve to be worthwhile. Get independent criticism from knowledgeable people, then test the most important uncertainty with the people and conditions that matter.

For a business, that might mean retaining income while testing whether customers pay. For creative work, it might mean drafting several concepts before refining one. For a team, it might mean collecting independent assessments before a discussion makes everyone converge on the leader's preference. These are illustrative applications, not outcomes guaranteed by the book.

Build in a decision point. More ideas can become avoidance of selection. A side venture can become avoidance of commitment. Another round of feedback can become avoidance of shipping. The virtue depends on what the activity helps you learn and what decision follows.

Treat organizational authority as a real constraint. An individual contributor cannot manufacture psychological safety by adopting a better mindset. A leader who wants dissent needs to make responding honestly less costly and show what happens when criticism is correct.

Keep: questioning defaults, generating alternatives, seeking knowledgeable criticism, testing behavior, and making room for disagreement.

Modify: the prescriptions about timing, repetition, identity language, and staged commitment. Tie them to the problem and the cost of getting the choice wrong.

Replace: the first-mover comparison and the broad birth-order explanation as decision guides. They are too easy to remember in a form the evidence cannot support. [17]

The full appendix assesses all 30 closing recommendations, including the useful ones. The point is not to let one statistical error stand in for the entire book. It is to turn an uneven collection of prescriptions into a clearer account of what a reader can responsibly try.

Why the rating is 58%

Scientific Accuracy: 58%. The rejection of the fearless-genius stereotype is useful and defensible. The broader claims about dependable techniques and cultivating originality exceed the support of several underlying studies.

Reference Accuracy: 67%. Extensive notes generally make the evidence traceable. Important exceptions concern descriptions, comparisons, and the inference from a finding to a prescription.

Practical Value: 50%. Many ideas warrant low-cost experiments. The uncertainty increases when they become consequential instructions for business timing, organizational dissent, or parenting. [18]

The overall rating is the equally weighted average of those categories. It describes this review's appraisal, not the percentage of sentences that are correct.

There is a good reason to read *Originals*: it can make you reconsider the supposedly necessary conditions for doing something new. You may have more options than the stereotype allows.

Keep that openness. Apply it to Grant's advice too. A book about questioning defaults should survive having its own recommendations questioned.

> **Want to inspect the evidence?** The technical appendix contains the full claim register, chapter assessments, source audit, score calculations, limitations, and evidence assessment. The reader essay and appendix make the same numerical judgments; they serve different reading needs.

Evidence notes

Each note links to the relevant passage of the technical appendix, which identifies the relevant book passages, original research, and source-access limitations. The evidence assessment includes relevant replication findings, syntheses, corrections, and access checks. These notes do not certify that every underlying dataset was reproduced.

1. C13 · First movers, “settlers,” and a misleading denominator. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
2. The strongest fair reading. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
3. C09 · Leading with weaknesses. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix. Includes the 2024 registered expert-uncertainty replication, distinct from the weakness-led pitch case.
4. C12 · Procrastination or incubation?. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
5. C18 · The “born to rebel” account needs major revision. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
6. Three central scientific claims. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
7. C02 · Keeping a day job and entrepreneurial survival. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix. Includes the mixed 2021 Norwegian staged-entry follow-up.
8. C04 · More ideas, better chances—not an unlimited free lunch. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
9. Girotra, K., Terwiesch, C., & Ulrich, K. T. (2009 / 2010). Idea Generation and the Quality of the Best Idea . 2009 working-paper version, subsequently published in Management Science (2010). Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
10. C05 · Fellow creators as forecasters. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
11. C10 · Familiarity, repetition, and acceptance. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
12. C19 · What the 10.6-fold baseball statistic actually means. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
13. C21 · Identity praise: an initial boost can coexist with fragility. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix. Includes favorable Japanese cheater evidence and the broader 2024 noun-versus-verb synthesis.
14. C24 · Authentic dissent versus an assigned devil’s advocate. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
15. C08 · Voice, credibility, and unequal room to dissent. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix. Includes the 2026 registered replication of the dominance-backlash exception.
16. C26 · Excitement and defensive pessimism. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix. Includes the mixed 2025 speech replication; singing and mathematics were not retested.

17. Audit of all 30 Actions for Impact. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.
18. How the ratings were determined. Detailed assessment, source references, and access limits in the technical appendix.

Disclosures and corrections

How we research and score these reviews.

Relevant interests: Hreha wrote the commercially available behavior-change book *Real Change* and offers behavioral-science services. These are potentially competing commercial and intellectual interests. Additional relationships, funding, review copies, sponsorships, and affiliate arrangements have not been comprehensively established; no blanket absence-of-interests claim is made.

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Corrections: Send the passage, proposed correction, and sources through the contact form. Substantiated factual errors will be corrected; material changes after first publication will be dated. See the book-specific evidence assessment and read the full editorial notice for scope, score interpretation, professional-advice limitations, attribution, and correction policy.

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Evidence assessment: This review includes the study-integrity assessment described in the technical appendix. The nine scoring inputs follow the published rubric.