

How to Develop Mind Maps™

MAP YOUR IDEAS VISUALLY, AND DISCOVER THEIR INTERRELATIONSHIPS

by Ian Demack

In my writing I am acting as a map maker, an explorer of psychic areas . . . a cosmonaut of inner space, and I see no point in exploring areas that have already been thoroughly surveyed.

William S Burroughs

...a storm centre of meanings, sounds and associations, radiating out indefinitely like ripples in a pool...

Northrop Frye

INTRODUCTION

Mind mapping helps us generate new ideas, map them visually, and explore the relationships between them. As writers, we can use mind mapping to:

- Encourage new ideas, images and emotions to emerge from the unconscious
- Take notes when conducting research from primary and secondary sources
- Delve into the relationships between images, characters, settings and themes
- Develop compelling and realistic plots.

Mind mapping can be as simple as we like, or we can use more advanced mind mapping techniques to explore our ideas in depth.

CLUSTERING

In *Writing the Natural Way* (J. P. Tarcher, Inc, 1983, 2000), Gabriele Rico suggests a spontaneous form of mind mapping called clustering. She describes clustering as ‘the doorway to your design mind.’ The principles are easy to apply:

- ***Write a simple word or phrase in the centre of a blank page, and encircle it.***
This word or phrase is the nucleus. An evocative phrase will result in more compelling images or ideas emerging. The use of the circles and lines introduces a visual element, which encourages more lateral thinking.
- ***Using free association, radiate out from the nucleus.*** Write down the words that occur to you, and draw circles around them too. Draw arrows linking the nucleus to

Geographers...crowd into the edges of their maps parts of the world which they do not know about, adding notes in the margin to the effect that beyond this lies nothing but sandy deserts full of wild beasts, and unapproachable bogs.

Plutarch, *Life of Theseus*

It is not down in any map; true places never are.

Herman Melville

these new ideas. This adds a sense of movement and growth to your page.

- ***Keep moving from the centre out.*** If you find yourself stuck, doodle a little, or write down anything that comes to mind, no matter how ridiculous it seems.
- ***After a couple of minutes, everything should fall into place.*** Now it is time to turn your cluster of words into a written vignette or poem.

The spirit of clustering is the same as the spirit of free-flow writing. The process elicits the same carefree, spontaneous attitude, allowing all those ideas bottled up in your unconscious mind to flow out onto the page.

MIND MAPPING

Tony Buzan is one of the chief proponents of mind mapping. He has written or sponsored a number of books on the subject. His approach to mind mapping is more detailed than Gabriele Rico's. While clustering is a useful tool to use when first generating ideas, mind mapping is probably better suited to refining ideas. Buzan's main principles of mind mapping are:

- ***Begin with an image (rather than a word) at the centre of your page.*** Using an image engages the artistic mind. This image, of course, represents your topic.
- ***Use images and symbols throughout the mind map.***
- ***Each word or image should sit alone.***
- ***Connect each word or image from the centre out.*** The connecting lines are thicker at the centre of the page, and thinner as they move out.
- ***Scale the lines to the same length as the words or images.***
- ***Develop your own colour code in your mind maps.***

A personal caution: while some of Buzan's ideas are useful, it is possible to become too hung up on following the rules, at the expense of developing your ideas. It is also possible to invest a lot of time in beautifying your mind map. Remember: the mind map is a tool you use to assist your writing. It is not an end in itself.



Mind maps can be messy and spontaneous. The main point is to capture your ideas and their interrelationships. Sure, this mind map does not follow all of Tony Buzan's guidelines—but it did help me to explore the importance of tension in writing. Feel free to make your own rules!

MULTIPLE POINTS OF VIEW

There is little value in only one point of view.

Gregory Bateson

To expand your vision, simply change your point of view.

We tend to take our perspective for granted. Once we have mapped out all of our ideas, we think we have finished. But what would happen if you approached the same question from your mother's point of view? Or your children's? Or that annoying guy from Accounts

Every crowd has a silver lining
P. T. Barnum

There is a great deal of unmapped country within us which would have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms.
George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*

Receivable who wears an all-too-obvious toupee? You could adopt the persona of a historical figure like Queen Elizabeth I or P. T. Barnum, a movie star, or even Santa Claus. Put yourself in their curly shoes or their bad hairpiece, and start another mind map. You'll see the world afresh—I guarantee it!

FRactal Mind Mapping

So you begin a new mind map from P. T. Barnum's point of view. Suddenly, you remember the story of the Egress,¹ a popular (and profitable) attraction at his American Museum on Broadway. You see how this anecdote might enrich your story, so you begin another mind map with 'TO THE EGRESS' marking its centre. This allows you to explore the relationship between the Egress and your larger work in greater detail. By marking the links between your mind maps in coloured ink, you can keep track of the subsidiary mind maps you use to capture your overflowing ideas. Like factals, mind maps lend themselves to infinite expansion. The trick is in knowing when to stop, and start writing your next chapter!

Using Mind Mapping to Refine Your Vision

One of the most valuable uses of mind mapping is defining relationships. If you are mapping a complex plot or the interactions between your characters, try using Post-it notes on a sheet of butcher's paper or a whiteboard. This way, you can move your Post-it notes around to define the interrelationships. You can also use different coloured Post-it notes to represent different aspects of your writing project: pink to list your characters' behaviour, for example, and yellow to describe their hidden motivations.

Computer-Based Mind Mapping

There are a number of computer-based mind mapping programs, such as Inspiration, ConceptDraw MINDMAP, and NovaMind. While these programs lack the immediacy of clustering or hand-drawn mind maps, they may be useful for preparing presentations. If you are interested, it is worthwhile downloading trial versions before you buy.

DRAWING IT ALL TOGETHER

Choose the clustering or mind mapping techniques that work best for your situation. If you are working to overcome writer's block, clustering can help inspire your writing. To develop writing projects in more detail, use or adapt some of the more sophisticated mind mapping tools. Feel free to experiment until you find the techniques that best match your personality and your purpose.

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I welcome your suggestions, comments and questions.
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¹ Frustrated by the crowds lingering inside his museum, and the queue of punters outside with quarters jingling in their pockets, P.T. Barnum instructed his signwriter to paint 'TO THE EGRESS' above the exit. Assuming that the Egress must be another highly exotic animal, his patrons pushed through the door, only to find themselves out in the street, with the door locked behind them. Legend has it that many of his victims paid to enter the museum a second time, so they could enjoy watching others fall for the same prank.