

Mind Map and Write Your Dissertation or Publish: April 20, 2005

Mind Maps are liberating for your left brain. Learn how a Mind Map can get you unstuck!

Mind Mapping -- Use Your Brain's Natural Style to Finish Your Dissertation or Publication

Do you ever feel like you have some great ideas, but when you sit down to write them, they're not so great? Or even worse, you can't really get a sense of what the ideas were?

In one of my ABD coaching groups we have been discussing the difficulty of translating partly formed ideas into words on paper. One technique that makes use of a normally underutilized part of our brain is called "Mind Mapping."

What is a Mind Map?

Tony Buzan, who created the word "Mind Map" and has written extensively on it, describes it as a powerful graphic technique that makes use of the way our brains naturally work. He says it has four characteristics.

- The main subject is crystallized in a central image
- The main themes radiate from the central image as branches
- Branches comprise a key image or key word printed on an associated line.
- The branches form a connected nodal structure

How Do You Mind Map?

Mind mapping is best done in color. If you have some markers or colored pencils, and a sheet of white paper, you're ready. If you don't, just use what you have.

Start with the central idea that you are trying to wrap your mind around. It could be the big picture (e.g. your next chapter) or a smaller idea (e.g. the next few paragraphs.) Write it down in one or two words at the center of the paper, and draw a circle around it. If there is a symbol or picture that you can put with the words, sketch that in. The idea is that you are activating the non-verbal side of your brain. The quality of what you draw is not important, since you will be the only one seeing it. The same is true for the ideas you come up with. Don't edit, just put in what comes to mind.

There are no rules for the way to proceed from here. I tend to break rules, anyway. The way my mind works, I start thinking of related ideas, categories, and ideas, which I write in little circles surrounding the circle in the middle. I then use lines to connect them.

Tony Buzan likes to draw curved lines emanating from the center, and write the related or associated ideas on the lines.

The result looks like a tree emanating from a central spot. My technique looks more like a bunch of lollipops.

As you continue to add associated ideas to your outer circles or branches, you continue to draw the connections. You will notice as you fill them in that there are cross connections that appear. I find it helpful to draw lines between those interconnecting ideas.

How Does a Mind Map Help?

The brain is an associative network, and the right hemisphere (in most people) is responsible for non-verbal, visual, associative and much creative thinking. Normally when writing, we are mostly making use of our left hemisphere, which tends towards the analytical, one-thought-at-a-time approach. Our internal thoughts, however, are not shaped like that. Thus we have a roadblock as we try to get our brilliant thoughts on paper.

By using a Mind Map as a starting point for thinking, you can bypass the blockage and feeling of overwhelm caused by overly analytical thinking. The Mind Map allows you to see more than one thought at a glance, and in doing so helps clarify your thinking. It shows the way ideas are interrelated (or less related than you thought.) It allows more access to creative, non-linear parts of your brain.

How Can Grad Students and Professors Use Mind Maps?

At this point, you're probably thinking, "How is it that Gina writes so brilliantly and clearly? How does she keep all her creative thoughts straight?" Well, here's the secret. Now that you know how I prepared this article, you'll realize it's not my high IQ but my Mind Mapping skills that got me where I am today.

Having seen my Mind Map, you know what I'm about to say, but here goes. Here are some helpful ways to make use of Mind Mapping.

- Use it for brainstorming ideas for your proposal or new research project.
- Make a Mind Map of your next chapter or the one you're currently stuck on.
- When planning your career, make a Mind Map to show the pros and cons of your available options.
- Use a Mind Map to take notes.
- Mind Mapping can help keep you awake and interested in your subject.
- Prepare for an upcoming meeting with a Mind Map.
- Use it in teaching, both to prepare classes and for handouts.

Play around with Mind Mapping. You'll find it's a refreshing break from the one-foot-in-front-of-the-other way that we approach many things in life. If you want to share them with me, I'd love to see them!

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Gina is a dissertation and tenure coach. She helps academics, from grad students wondering about their dissertation topic to faculty members who want to maintain a high level of research and writing, to reach their goals more quickly and less painfully. Get Gina's free assessments & ezine at www.academicladder.com

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