

NON-LINEAR ORGANIZATIONAL TECHNIQUES: HOW TO MAKE WRITING SUCK LESS

MATT KREILING

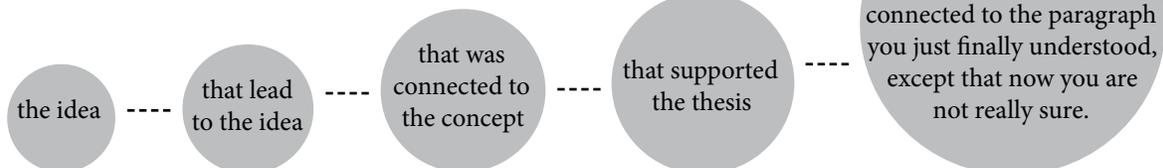
Man, this introductory paragraph is hard. I want to reach out to those, like me, who get really frustrated when trying to write a paper, but I don't want to turn off those who enjoy writing papers. I want to offer a solution, but I need to talk about the problem first. I want to be playful and entertaining, but convey useful information. I want to be concise, but friendly. I guess I'll just jump right in:

Writing is an amazing technology, but it isn't always the best tool, particularly for the activities of brainstorming, organizing and outlining ideas, and taking notes. There is a better way to do these things, but first let me tell you two ways writing sucks.

WRITING SUCKS PART I: LINEARITY

We use writing to help us think, but writing is not thinking. Thoughts do not have a beginning, middle, or end, but shoot out in all directions. When we are asked to "express" our thoughts in writing, it's like someone asking us to describe a sunset using only dominoes. How can we stack words in neat rows, little black marks on a white background, and expect it to mean something, to somehow reflect what is going on in our heads?!? Linearity, the domino quality of writing that happens because each word depends on previous words, can trap, intimidate, mislead, and generally cause many people to hate writing. In fact, linearity often creates problems with reading as well. How many times have you mulled over a paragraph in the middle of a chapter in the middle of a book, and when you finally understood what the writer was talking about, you had forgotten why she was talking about it? It happens to me all the time.

You are so far down the tracks that you have great difficulty seeing



Which brings us to another reason why writing is not always a great way to spread ideas...

WRITING SUCKS PART II: WORDS CAN OBSCURE THE IDEAS

If you close your eyes right now, I am willing to bet that you could not recite the second sentence of this essay, but I am equally sure that you have a basic idea about what I've been writing about so far. In fact, you have probably internalized all the important ideas and integrated them with a dozen of your own. Even if it is near impossible to remember the exact words of the sentence, your mind has absorbed the meaning and let the words go. You have gone beyond words.

And it is really hard to talk about what is beyond words...using words. In fact, studies have shown that students who are given a full transcript of a lecture remember less about the lecture than those who were required to take thorough notes, and those taking the thorough notes remember less than those who were instructed to only write down key words. When it comes to taking notes, less can be more. When we write down a near transcript of a lecture, or copy down large passages of the text we are reading, we often obscure the main ideas.

This essay is not about why writing sucks. It is about how to make marks on that blank piece of paper that

- 1) don't trap you in linearity,
- 2) resemble your true thinking process,
- 3) create an easier way to organize thoughts, and
- 4) are easier to remember.

This process is most often referred to as mind mapping, which refers to a term coined by a guy named Tony Buzan, but it is also referred to as branching, clustering, concept mapping, bubbling, visual thinking, or non-linear organization.

I believe that anyone, even those who don't consider themselves visual thinkers, can benefit by breaking away from the strictures of linearity and playing with these techniques.

Mind mapping and similar techniques mirror the natural architecture of thoughts, increase our ability to make and remember associations, and most importantly: allow us to play.

Ideas are like giant balls of velcro, covered with tons of little hooks.

Each little hook connects to other ideas, and each of these ideas can hook thousands of other ideas.

At its core, thinking is built on associations—connections.

When we **encourage** and explore
connections,
e a s e o f f
the bonds of black and white linearity,
and see each idea as a radiant center
or a seed,
the connections proliferate.

I think of mind mapping, non-linear organization, or whatever you want to call it, as a way to make play.

“The opposite of play is not work. It’s depression.”

– Brian Sutton-Smith

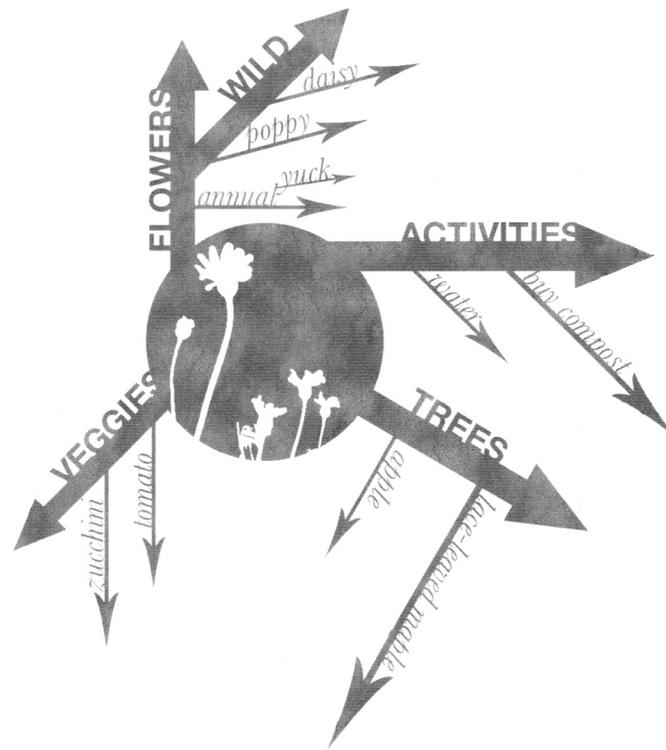
Most of our trouble with writing stems from the mistaken idea that work cannot be fun. Play can vanquish the ever-present internal censor, the overdeveloped critical part of our mind that makes writing a chore rather than a pleasure.

Play isn’t important just because it is fun. When we play, we use our whole brain, not just the rigidly structured language center in our left brain.

BRAINSTORMING IN SPACE

It may take a few times to get comfortable with mind mapping, but many people get results the first time. For our purposes, a mind map: 1) radiates from a central image; 2) uses key words; 3) uses colors, emphasis, and images.

- Put a blank sheet of paper in front of you, horizontally.
- Lay out your colored pens. Sharpen your colored pencils.
- Draw an image in the center that represents the subject that you are brainstorming about using three colors.
- Smile.
- Draw a branchy shape coming out from the center image.
- Print a single key word, your first association, no matter how silly on the branchy shape.
- Draw another branchy shape; print another key word; if a picture or a symbol is easier or more fun, draw it.
- Keep associating, and embrace even the most absurd connections.
- Branch off the branches.



So you've played around, hopefully getting a lot of ideas, making connections, but, most likely, your page is a mess—lines drawn everywhere, doodles...but how will this help you write a paper? Don't worry, you've already done most of the work, getting all the ideas out of your head and relating them to each other.

Are there any words or images on the page that seem to have more things connecting to them than others? There is a reason for this: they are central ideas.

Take one of them and put it in the center of a fresh piece of paper.

Now, without losing your sense of play, but with a little more care, branch out from this center. Choose main ideas, like the bigger limbs of a tree, not specifics, which will be the smaller branches and twigs.

If a twig-type idea keeps popping up, imagine what kind of major limb would connect to it, (what bigger idea it is supporting?)? These major limbs, or main ideas, are what the Buzans call "basic ordering ideas."¹ In a traditional outline, these are the roman numerals, but unlike a traditional outline, you are free to jump around from main idea to main idea to supporting idea.

1. Tony Buzan and Barry Buzan, *The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 85.

As you work, look for the natural hierarchy of ideas. In order to explain fully the central idea, you need the basic ordering ideas, the limbs; to fully explain the limbs, you'll need the branches; and many of the branches will need twigs.

Don't feel trapped if you suddenly feel that a limb or even a twig should be at the center; just grab another sheet of paper and try it out. Take your time. Use colors, different size printing, symbols, and images.

When you feel that the relevant ideas are all out there, beautifully radiating from the center, ask yourself, "Do I have a thesis?" A thesis is a proposed answer to a question that is worth asking—a question that you have to think about to answer. Of course, there are many other ways to define a thesis, and if my definition isn't helpful, someone at the Writing Center can help you work on your thesis or point you in the direction of some great handouts. I will just settle for giving you a quick example of a thesis question. The question that this essay answers is not, "What is a mind map?" It is instead, "Why and how are mind maps better tools for organizing ideas?"

Once you settle on a thesis question, take a look at the mind map and imagine the main limbs as sections of the paper. Circle everything that seems to fit into one section. Now do the same for the next section, and so on. Look for a natural order that suggests itself: Put a roman numeral "I" in the area(s) that you have circled that you think will become the first section of your paper, a "II" in the next section. These do not have to be hard and fast categories. You may find your thinking changes as you convert this non-linear piece of art into a paper with a beginning, middle, and end, but in my experience, the paper comes out easily and quickly if I have taken enough time to play.

LESS WORDS, BETTER NOTES

So far, I have been talking about getting ideas that were already in your head out onto paper, but mind mapping can also be used to understand and remember the ideas of others, whether from a lecture, text, or meeting. Taking notes using mind mapping, especially during a disorganized meeting, seminar, or lecture, can get messy, but some of the techniques, particularly the use of key words, will help you absorb the information and remember it much more easily. The technique works best if you have an outline to start with. This can be the table of contents of a book, the headings and subheadings of an article, or the outline provided by the lecturer. If you don't have the major limbs before you start taking notes, you will just have to accept that your mind map will probably be a little messy.

Use key words. I have tutored many students who pull out thorough, neat, and massive notebooks, that are nearly useless. By breaking down ideas into key words, instead of copying down information verbatim, we are actively learning, and it sticks with us.

Make connections. If you haven't figured it out by now, non-linear organization techniques are all about connections. When you fit new information into the web of other information, it is easier to recall and makes more sense when you can quickly see its relationship to other pieces of information.

BLOW YOUR MIND EXERCISE

Get a blank piece of paper. Print the word, “HAPPINESS” in the center. Draw ten branches coming out from the center, like this:



Think of ten words that you associate with happiness. If you are near someone, have them do the exercise too and compare your results.

Pick one of the ten words. If you are doing it with other people, choose a word that most of you have in common. Make ten associations from the word you picked.

Now do it again. Or just imagine doing it again, and again, and again. From any of the words you generated, it is easy to generate ten more, and from those ten, you could easily generate one hundred, and from those, a thousand, and so on, FOREVER. In other words, your mind has an infinite associational capacity.

If you do this exercise with others, you can also see how different people make different associations.

The LESSON: You will never run out of ideas. You are unique.

WORKS CITED

Buzan, Tony and Barry Buzan. *The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.

Smith, Brian Sutton. *The Ambiguity of Play*. The United States: First Harvard University Press, 1997.