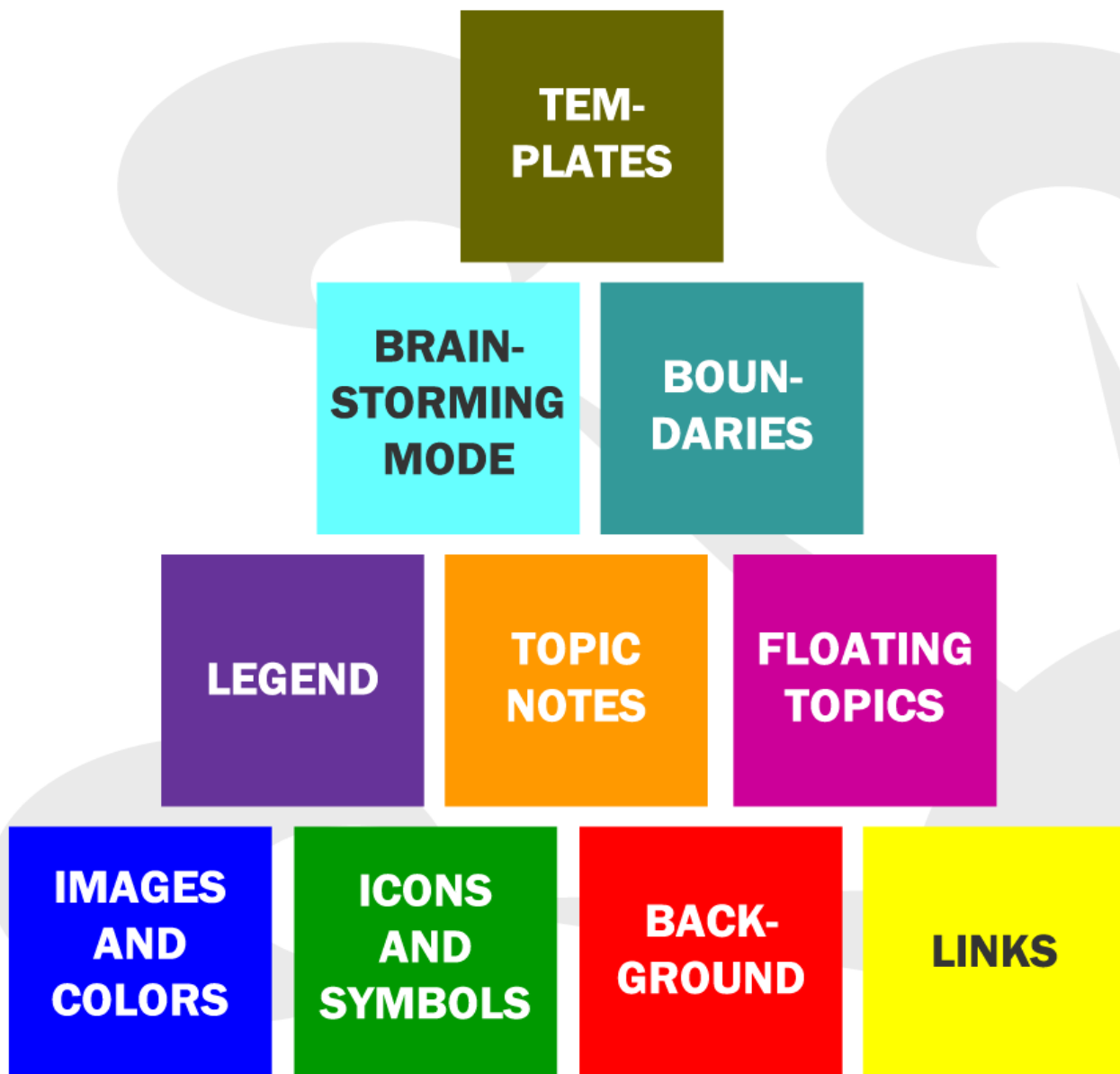


# 12 Building Blocks of Effective Mind Maps

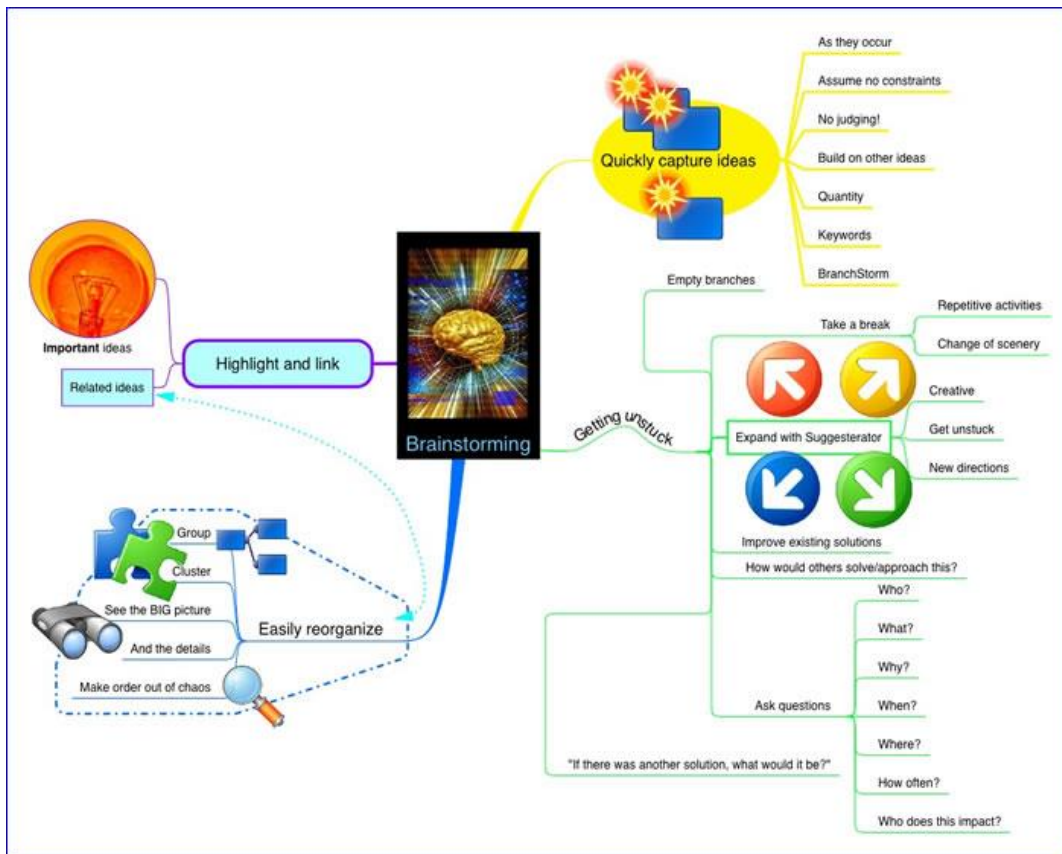


Mind mapping software is one of the most powerful productivity-enhancing tools to come along in a very long time. Its power and flexibility makes it the ideal tool for today's knowledge worker. It can be used to support so many types of esoteric yet important business tasks, such as planning projects, conducting research and writing reports. But it can also help you with bigger picture activities, such as brainstorming, strategic planning and making better informed business decisions.

One minor disadvantage of mind mapping software is that it brings with it a whole set of specialized terminology. In addition, when you first open a mind mapping application, you're faced with a blank slate. You could do so much, if you only knew what was possible.

That's the purpose of this report – to help illuminate the basic building blocks and concepts of mind mapping software, and to help you to understand how to use each of these elements to create more effective mind maps.

## Increase the visual impact of your mind maps with images and color



Images add visual interest to your mind maps. They can be utilized as the central topic of your map, or attached to other topics, and add a wealth of meaning and context to your maps.

According to mind mapping expert Tony Buzan, adding images to mind maps has numerous benefits:

**They help to focus the brain**, which prefers colorful objects to black-and-white ones.

They leverage your brain's powerful associative capabilities. Images tap into our imagination at a much deeper level than words alone can.

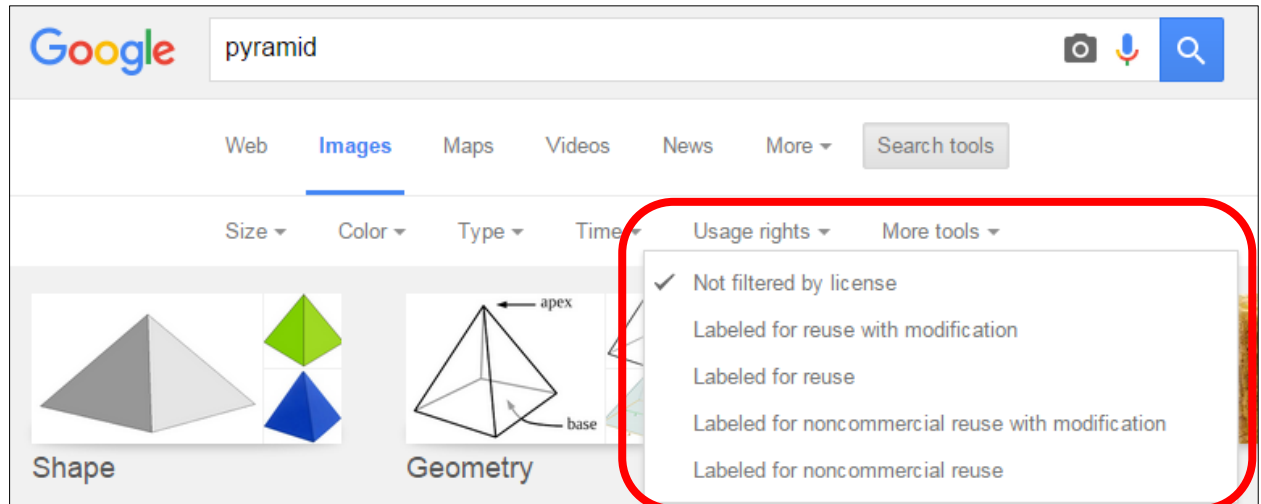
**Words and images together multiply your intellectual power.** It's the combination of the two that make mind maps such a rich visual medium for creative expression.

**Images are an excellent memory aid.** Simply put, they tend to be more memorable to your brain than words do – as the old saying goes, “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Buzan has this to say on the benefits of incorporating images into your mind maps:

*“They make use of a massive range of cortical skills: color, form, line, dimension, texture, visual rhythm and especially imagination – a word taken from the Latin imaginari, literally meaning to picture mentally. Images are therefore more evocative than words, more precise and potent in triggering a wide range of associations and thereby enhancing creative thinking and memory.”*

Where can you find images to use in your maps? My favorite source is [iStockPhoto.com](https://www.iStock.com) – a gigantic, searchable collection of high-quality, royalty-free images and illustrations. What makes it really useful is that it contains numerous images that can be used to visually describe not just things, but concepts – such as creativity and success. Google Images is a free and nearly inexhaustible source of images, but be careful using them. Some of them may have copyrights or royalty fees associated with them.

To avoid getting in legal trouble with a photographer or stock photo house, use the “search tools” button in Google Image Search and then click on the “usage rights” drop-down box. Select the setting that corresponds to your intended use, and Google will filter out any images that are not available for re-use.



### Using color in your mind maps

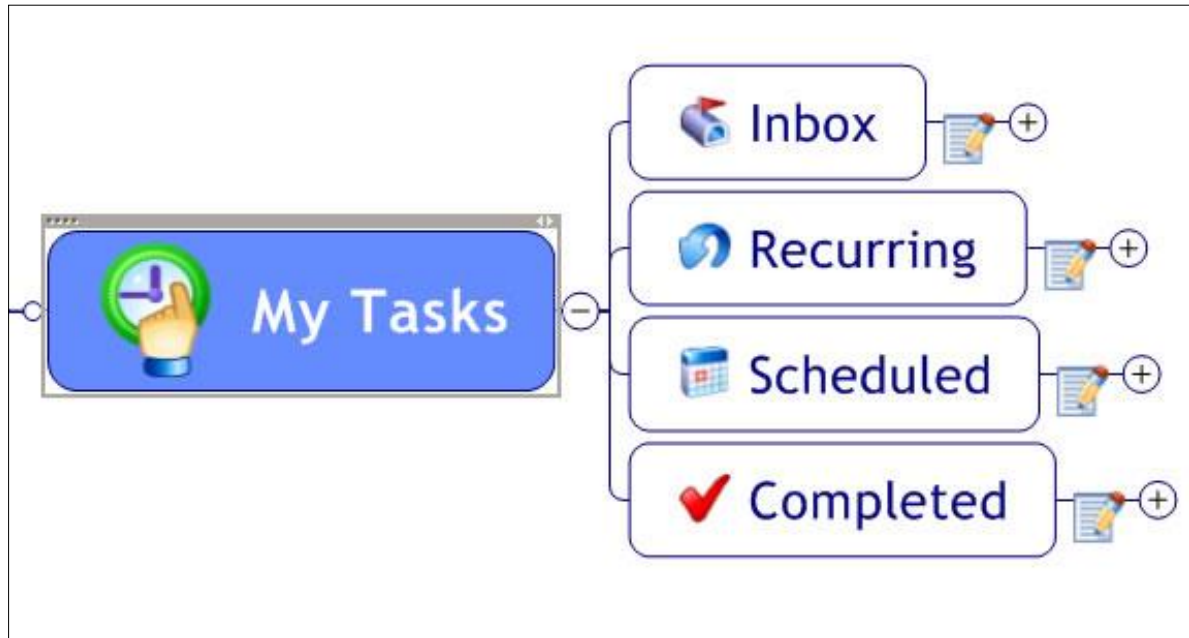
Like images, color adds meaning and context to your mind maps. Most mind mapping programs enable you to change the colors of topic backgrounds, topic text, branch lines and map background. These settings allow you to personalize your map, and make it more colorful and appealing to yourself and others. A few programs come with color “themes,” which can be used to apply a complementary group of colors to specific elements of your maps. This can be real time-saver compared to adding color to each element of your map individually!

Colors can be used to “code” the content of your mind maps. For example, action items can be colored green, while concerns or problems could be colored red. The meanings of these colors are deeply embedded in the minds of most Western cultures (just think of a traffic light, where red, yellow and green each have different meanings). Ideally, your use of color and images ought to reinforce the meaning of your map; if an image or color doesn’t add to the message that your map is trying to convey, then you may want to consider eliminating it.

### Add clarity and meaning to your mind maps with icons and symbols

Icons and symbols are small visual elements that you can attach to topics in your mind maps, which add meaning and context to them. These miniature images can be used to depict priority (A/B/C or 1/2/3), types of activities (phone calls, meetings or travel), tasks, and types of information and ideas.

It's been said that a picture is worth 1,000 words. A symbol or icon, attached to a topic within your mind map, can convey much more meaning and context, which can be quickly understood by your brain. Symbols and icons are also a powerful way to categorize the contents of your



map, as explained by Tony Buzan in *The Mind Mapping Book*:

*“Codes enable you to make instant communication between different parts of your mind map, however far apart they may be on the page... For instance, you could use a range of simple codes in all your notes to represent people, projects, elements or processes that frequently recur. Codes reinforce an enhanced categorization and hierarchy to the simple application of colors, symbols, shapes and images. They can also be used to link source material (such as biographical references) to your mind map.”*

In many mind mapping programs, icons or symbols can be used to filter the contents of your map to display, for example, only those topics that are marked with a task icon. This makes them a powerful tool for managing the content of large mind maps.

Customizing your icons and symbols

I recommend that you invest some time in exploring the icon and symbol libraries of your mind mapping program. This will spur some ideas on how you can utilize them in future maps. Also, if your needs are specialized and extend beyond the standard set of icons and symbols that ships with your mind mapping program, you may have other options: Some programs enables you to

import small images into new, custom icon libraries. For example, MindManager enables you to import icon files in 3 sizes: 16x16 pixels, 32x32 pixels and 128x128 pixels.

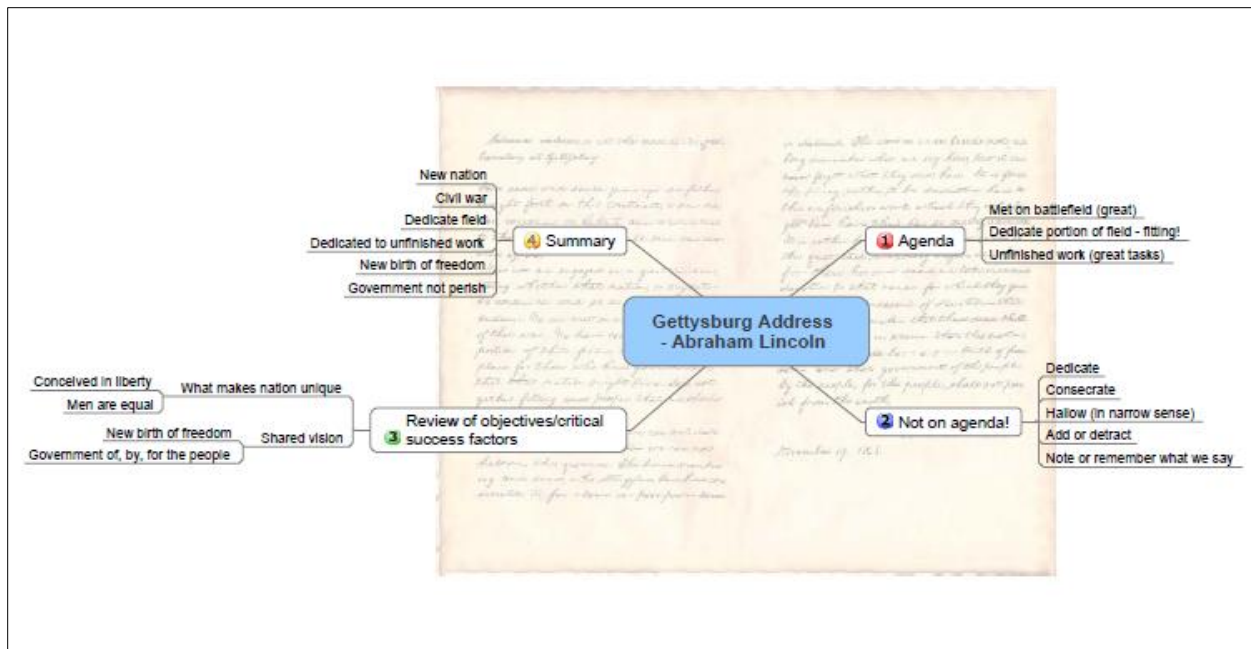
There are dozens of sites on the web where you can download free or low-cost collections of icons and symbols for use in your mind maps, including [FamFamFam](#), [Infragistics](#) and [IconArchive](#).

Or you can always “roll your own” symbols with an inexpensive icon editing program like [IconCool Studio](#), which provides people who are not design specialists with the ability to quickly and easily create professional-looking icons.

You should make it a practice to utilize icons or symbols in most, if not all, of your maps, to add color, meaning and clarity and to help you to filter their contents. Remember, color and imagery stimulate the brain. So icons and symbols can also make the contents of your map more memorable.

## How to add visual dimension to your mind maps with a background image or color

Many mind mapping programs enable you to add a background image or pattern to your mind maps, to enhance their visual appeal and branding. But this functionality is among the hardest



to use effectively, because a background can easily conflict with elements of the mind map itself – on the screen or in printed form.

By default, most mind mapping programs utilize a white background for the maps they produce. While this provides an excellent contrast for the map itself, it can get rather boring to look at visually. To add visual impact to your maps, you may want to consider adding a background image or pattern (Like the Gettysburg Address depicted as a mind map - above). There are several reasons why you may want to do this:

- To help your mind map get your audience's attention, especially if you're making a presentation from your mind mapping program.
- To enforce consistent branding of the mind maps produced by your company. If you're a consulting firm, for example, you may want to create a simple map background and incorporate a screened back logo. If you create a custom map template that incorporates this background, then each of the maps that your team produces will include it – ensuring that each one clearly communicates your firm's brand to your clients and prospects.

**Here are some tips on how to incorporate backgrounds into your mind maps:**

**Where can you find background images?** Many mind mapping software programs ship with a selection of images that are specially designed for this purpose. In addition, you can utilize any image from your computer's hard drive, or purchase inexpensive stock images from a website like iStockPhoto.com. Check your program's help file for instructions on recommended sizes of images for map backgrounds, tiling (using your image as a background pattern) and other options.

**Use a color gradient effect:** If you want to keep it simple, consider adding a gradient of a solid color as your map background. This effect can add a whole new level of depth to an otherwise flat mind map.

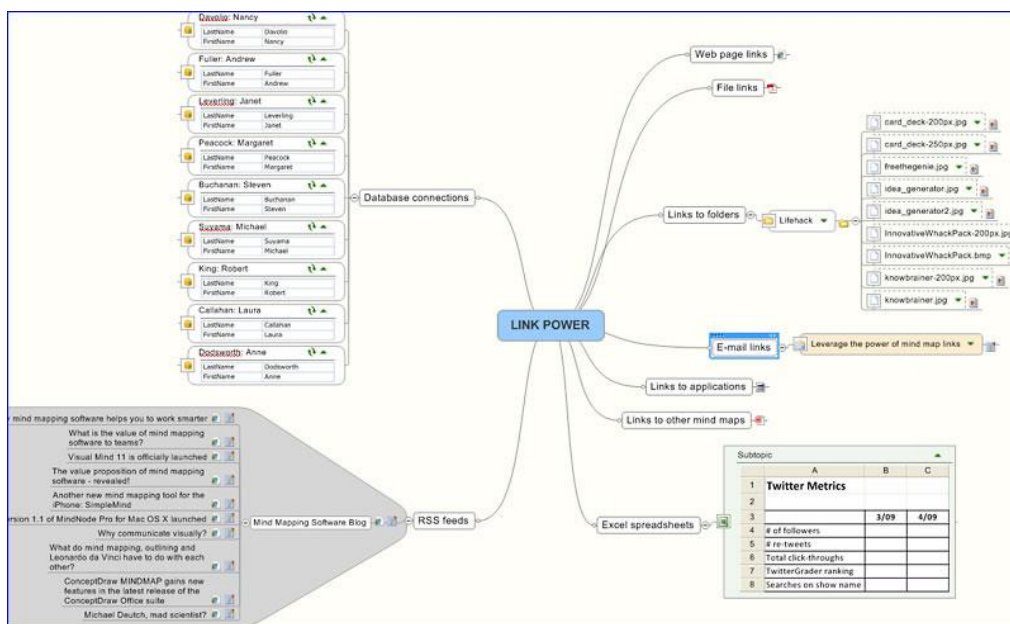
**Relevance to your map's topic is always a good thing:** Try to make the map's background relevant to the content of the map. For example, if you created a mind map that summarized the content of a book you read, you could include a screened back photo of the cover in the map.

**Branding your mind maps:** If you want to add a corporate logo to your map background, I recommend positioning it in one of the four corners of the map, where it is least likely to interfere with any of your map's content. You may need to experiment with image size and placement (in other words, placing your logo in one corner of a large white or colored rectangle) to get this to work right.

**Tile effects:** If you want to “tile” your logo in a repeating pattern as the background of your maps, I strongly recommend that you start with a black-and-white image of your corporate logo, and then use your favorite image editing program to screen it back 70 to 80%. This should convert it to a very light gray, something like a watermark. This is exactly the effect that you are going for. This will help to ensure that your logo is clearly visible, yet it shouldn't interfere with the content of your mind map.

**Test, test, test:** Finally, if you plan to share such a map with others, I strongly recommend that you print it out both in black-and-white and color, so you can verify if there is enough contrast between the map background and the content of the map itself. You may discover that your background image or pattern conflicts with elements of your mind map when it is printed out in black-and-white, or that a solid background color may obscure the color of your map's connector lines, topics or other elements.

## Leverage the awesome power of links in your mind maps





Many types of work today involve a significant amount of research. As you gather large quantities of information, it can quickly become a jumble of confusing facts, figures and notes. A mind map enables you to create time-saving “pointers” to all of these bits of information and help you to keep them better organized – just a click or two away.

Today’s mind mapping software supports a remarkable number of link types, which can vastly increase the power of your visual diagrams. Here’s what’s possible, along with some tips on when and how to utilize them:

**Links to files:** Using this feature, you can easily keep track of many types of information that is related to the project you’re working on, including, documents, spreadsheets, presentations and any other type of file. These links function much like a desktop shortcut: When you click on the link icon, the file will open. Use this feature to save time when you must keep track of key documents or files.

**Links to folders:** This works like linking to files, except your map displays the contents of a folder on your PC, and each file is a live link. This could be very useful as part of a personal dashboard, especially if you tend to store all of your critical files in a single folder.

**Links to web pages:** Often, the information or knowledge you need to gather is located on external web sites. Using the URL linking feature of your mind mapping program, you can easily create bookmarks to these key resources and organize them along with the rest of your research.

**Links to e-mails:** An increasing amount of the knowledge and information we must work with is embedded in e-mail messages. Accordingly, several mind mapping programs enable you to import the content of individual e-mail messages from Microsoft Outlook into your map, or point to external representations of them.

**Links to applications:** If you want to take linking to its logical extreme, you can even create links within your map to frequently-used programs. You simply create a file link to the executable file (.exe) of the program that you want to open from within your mind map. This could be especially useful if you start your day by opening a master map.

**Links to other mind maps:** Of course, you can also embed links to other mind maps in the map you’re working on. This can come in useful if you need to divide a large, complex map into

several smaller, linked ones, or if you're using a master map (an index of all of the maps you have created).

### **Other types of connections**

Mind mapping software also enables you to pull information into your maps. While technically not links (which tend to point away from your map to other assets and resources), these tools can connect your maps to even more valuable data (click on the map above right for a complete picture of examples of all of the link types):

**Ranges of cells from spreadsheets:** Several programs now enable you to connect your maps to an Excel spreadsheet, and display a range of cells from it within your map. This can be especially valuable if you're trying to create a business dashboard to help you stay up-to-date on key business metrics.

**RSS feeds:** Several leading mind mapping programs enable you to set up RSS feeds, which enable you to connect a wealth of news, blog updates and other structured information into your maps.

**Database connections:** At least one leading mind mapping program gives you the ability to connect to a database, create a simple query against its contents, and insert the results into your map.

In short, today's mind mapping software enables you to connect to an amazing variety of data and resources, which can help you to add more value to your mind maps.

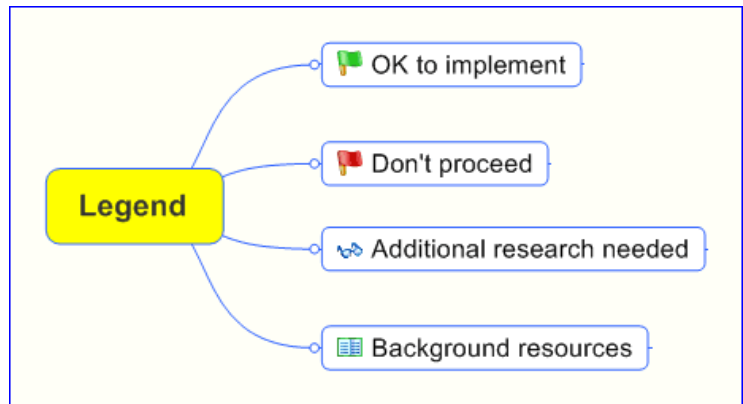
### **Legends: How one small enhancement to your mind maps can make them much easier for others to interpret**

If you frequently share your mind maps with colleagues and coworkers, they may not completely understand the meaning and context of what you're trying to communicate. That's because mind mapping lacks a commonly accepted visual vocabulary – a set of de facto standards that governs how mind maps should be constructed, what common icons and symbols mean, and so forth.

One way to improve the quality of your mind maps and the effectiveness of how they communicate your intended meaning to others is to include a legend in them.

A legend in a mind map serves the same function as one does a geographical map: it defines what

each symbol and icon means, so that the person reading them can interpret these marks with the proper meaning. In a mind map, legends typically define the meaning of icons or symbols attached to topics. Unfortunately, because most developers of mind mapping software don't automate the production of legends, most users of these productivity tools don't realize it's possible to add them to their maps, or how to create them.



### **Where should you use legends?**

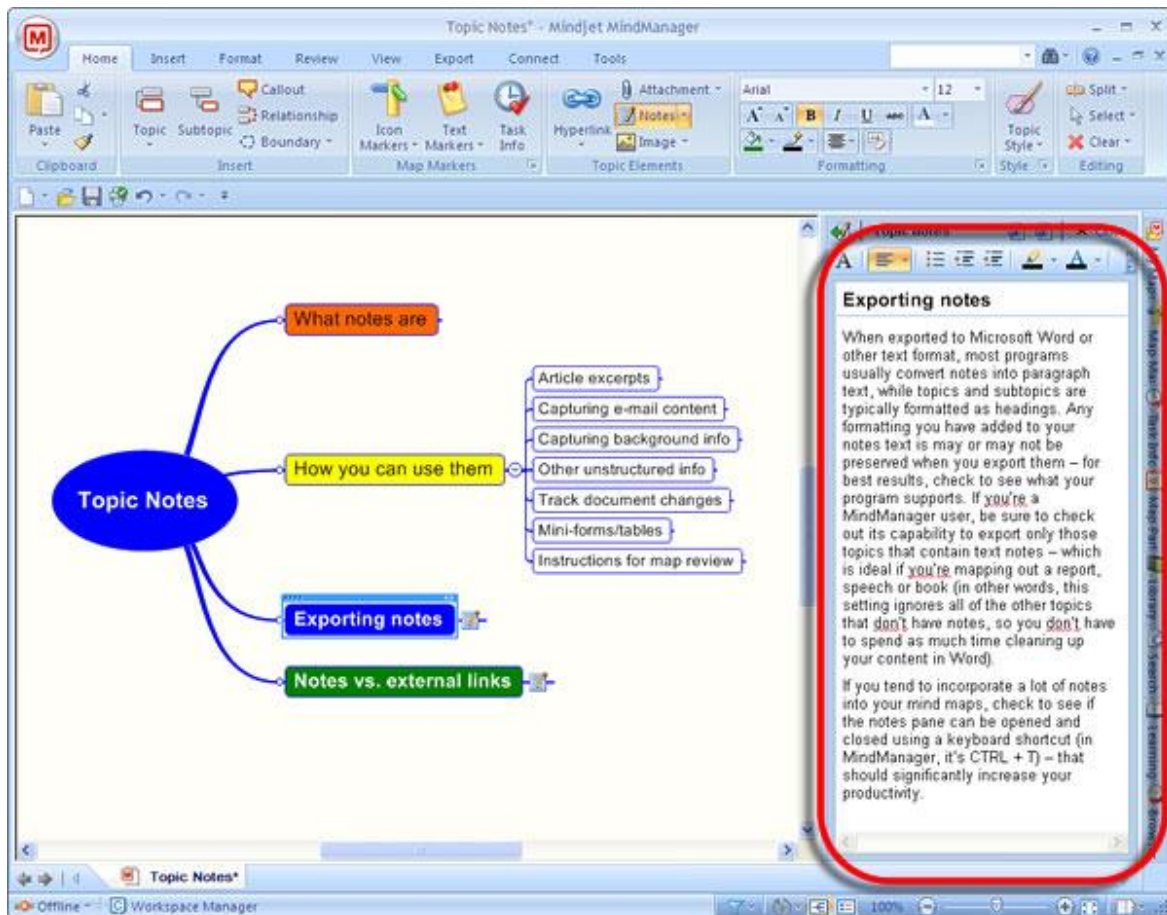
Legends should be used on any map where you are utilizing symbols or icons. This is very important, because your map needs to be immediately understandable by anyone with whom you share it. The meaning of each symbol or icon may have been abundantly clear to you at the time you created your map, but remember: you have the advantage of knowing the entire context of your map, because you're the one who created it. Others viewing this map may be confused by the meaning of these small graphics and, as a result, may not take away the full meaning that you intended when you added them to your map.

### **How do you add a legend to your mind map?**

Typically, a legend is formatted as a floating topic at the top or bottom of the map; a series of subtopics radiate from it, each one containing an icon or symbol, with the topic text providing the meaning. For best results, I recommend placing the legend above the map, because people tend to read top to bottom, left to right. If the first thing they see looking at your mind map from the top down is the legend, they will fully read it first, which will help them to understand the mind map itself.

When in doubt, include a legend in your mind maps. The people with whom you share them will appreciate it!

## How to get the most out of topic notes in your mind maps



If you want to become a more effective mind mapper, then it's essential that you become familiar with your program's topic notes feature. Notes should be an integral part of all but the simplest mind maps. They represent a great way to store additional information, without having a clutter up your view of the mind map, and thus help to prevent information overload.

In most software programs, notes may be attached to any topic and are displayed in a separate pane to the right or below the workspace. They are especially useful because they can be easily hidden from view, yet can be accessed via a single mouse click. Many programs enable you to format your text, including, bullet points, numbered lists, tables and more. Once you have added

a note to a topic, most programs give you a visual indication – usually by displaying a small note icon next to it.

### **How can you use topic notes?**

This incredible flexibility makes topic notes an ideal repository for:

- Excerpts of articles that you are utilizing for a research project, along with a link back to the source article.
- The text of an e-mail that contains information relevant to a project.
- Capturing background information for a book, article or report you're writing.
- Phone numbers, addresses and any other unstructured pieces of information that you may need at a future date.
- As a method to manually track changes to topic content, such as a version history. This is especially useful if you're collaborating with others on a mind map.
- It's possible to create mini-forms (such as a map revision history table) that can be used within maps to track revisions or other relevant data.
- If you are distributing maps to others to complete, notes are a good place to include instructions.

Topic notes are an essential tool for helping to prevent information overload. Because they are normally hidden from view, they are a great place to store extended information that would otherwise be crowded into your mind map. As a form of visual diagramming, mind mapping was never designed to support more than a word or two per topic. Placing five words, or 20, or 50 any map topic results in a map that is almost unreadable. Notes enable you to create a very concise topic name, and then to capture all of the other important information in a note.

### **Notes on exporting topic notes to Word**

When exported to Microsoft Word or other text format, most programs usually convert notes into paragraph text, while topics and subtopics are typically formatted as headings. Any formatting you have added to your notes text is may or may not be preserved when you export them – for best results, check to see what your program supports. If you're a MindManager user, be sure to check out its capability to export only those topics that contain text notes – which is ideal if you're mapping out a report, speech or book (in other words, this setting ignores all of the other

topics that don't have notes, so you don't have to spend as much time cleaning up your content in Word).

If you tend to incorporate a lot of notes into your mind maps, check to see if the notes pane can be opened and closed using a keyboard shortcut (in MindManager, it's CTRL + T) – that should significantly increase your productivity.

### **Capturing information in notes vs. linking to external documents**

When should you use notes versus linking out to an external document, spreadsheet or other file? If the supporting information that you seek to add to your map is lengthy, longer than two pages, you may want to consider linking out to an external document. The notes windows of most mind mapping programs are highly functional, but you'll probably find that they become ponderous when used with longer documents.

It also depends upon the nature of the information you are trying to capture. Say, for example, the information you're trying to capture comes from an article on a news media site. If you don't capture and save the entire text of that article, you may not be able to find it on their news site two weeks or two months later, because some websites don't maintain permanent collections of all of their content.

Notes are most useful to you when they are of moderate length; excessively long notes become hard to digest. You may be better off to subdivide a particularly big thoughts into a number of subtopics (the functional equivalent of subheadings in a document) and add shorter notes to each one, rather than create a single enormous note.

### **How to leverage the power and utility of floating topics in your mind maps**

While most mind mapping software programs now support floating topics, not many users know how to utilize them. Here are some tips on how to do so effectively:

**Brainstorming:** Floating topics are a great way to quickly record a series of ideas in a mind map and keep the creative flow going, without getting bogged down in where each one should fit. In fact, one program's brainstorming mode works this way by default. When you are conducting



a brainstorming session with ConceptDraw MINDMAP, you enter ideas into a dialog box that is superimposed over the map's workspace. It deposits each idea as a floating topic, which you can arrange and embellish later.

**Map legends:** In a mind map, a legend tells you what each icon used in the map means. Typically, these are positioned above or below the mind map as a floating topic. Sub-topics are then added for each icon contained within the map, with the topic name explaining what each icon means.

**Parking lot:** When you want to add an idea or piece of information to your mind map, but aren't quite sure where it fits in the hierarchy of topics and sub-topics, you can temporarily "park" it in an open area of the workspace as a floating topic. You can figure out what to do with it later. This "parking lot" concept is especially useful when recording the outcomes and decisions arrived at in a business meeting, where information tends to come at you quickly and often in an unstructured way. Don't forget: Most programs that enable you to create a floating topic also enable you to add sub-topics, notes and other embellishments to it. So don't be afraid to fully describe your uncategorized idea before moving on to other parts of your map.

**Instructions:** If you are sharing your map with others and need to explain how it's organized, a floating topic is a great way to do that. It lets you convey instructions to your collaborators – without cluttering up the structure of the map itself.

**Show opposing forces:** Sometimes it's valuable to depict opposing forces in a mind map, by creating two main topics ("pro" vs. "con" for example), and having sub-topics fan out in opposite directions (see the image above right for an example). According to Michael Deutch, [writing in the Mindjet Blog](#), these types of maps can be useful for depicting:

- Pros and cons
- Actions and reactions
- Strengths and weaknesses

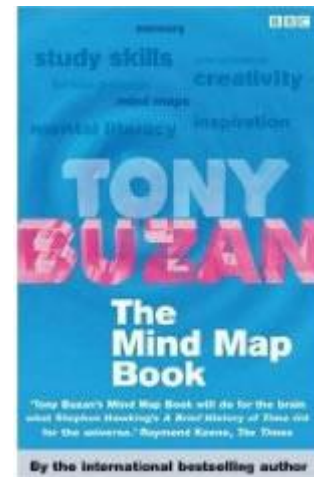
- Ideal situations vs. reality
- Compare the perceptions of opposing parties in negotiations
- List “what we know” vs. “what we don’t know”

## What are basic ordering ideas and how can they improve your mind mapping?

Basic ordering ideas are the first-level topics that radiate out from your map’s central topic. They are the key concepts that help you to produce the greatest number of associations as you develop a mind map. This concept was originally developed by Tony Buzan as part of his mind mapping methodology, and has been ignored by most developers of mind mapping software. But the idea behind basic ordering ideas (or BOIs) is a solid one, and you can almost certainly improve the quality of your mind maps by being aware of how to create good BOIs.

In [The Mind Map Book](#), written by Tony and Barry Buzan, the authors provide the clearest explanation of what BOIs are and why they’re so important. The authors believe that creating effective basic ordering entries is a critical first step when creating a mind map, because they shape the content and meaning of the rest of the map:

*“Basic ordering ideas are key concepts within which a host of other concepts can be organized... these power words or basic ordering ideas are the key to shaping and steering the creative process of association. To put it another way, they are the chapter headings you would use if you were writing a book on the subject.”*



*“Basic ordering ideas help to shape, sculpt and construct mind maps enabling the mind to think in a naturally structured way... the primary ideas are in place so that secondary and tertiary ideas can follow quickly and easily to facilitate a harmonious thought structure.”*

Imagine that you’re preparing a major business proposal or writing a book. You would want to create section or chapter headings that are meaningful, relevant and easy for your reader or target audience to follow, correct? Further, you would want these major headings, taken together, to provide an accurate, high-level overview of the topic, wouldn’t you? That’s what



basic ordering ideas are all about – creating three to seven major “hooks” that fully describe your map’s topic at a high level and which serve as a mental catalyst to drive the mapping and brainstorming process.

The Buzans imply that if you don’t pay adequate attention to your BOIs, then you will probably end up with a poorly organized, hard to understand mind map. Of course, this is more critical for a hand-written map where you’re stuck with your major topics wherever you wrote them on the page. Mind mapping software allows you to add, delete or edit your map’s topics at any time. Still, I think this is an important principle that you ought to be mindful of. I think that understanding and applying this concept to each mind map you create will ultimately make you a better visual mapper!

## 15 tips for generating powerful first-level topics for your mind maps

One of the real strengths of mind mapping is that it leverages your brain’s awesome associative powers. But in order for you to realize that potential, you need to be sure to select keywords for your first-level topics that help you to make additional connections and generate valuable ideas.



In their excellent book, [\*The Mind Map Book\*](#), Tony and Barry Buzan offers some valuable tips to help you decide what words to use for your map’s first-level topics – which he calls “basic ordering ideas.”

### He recommends that you ask yourself these open-ended questions:

- What knowledge is required?
- If this were a book, what would its chapter headings be?
- What are my specific objectives?
- What are the seven most important categories in the area under consideration?  
(According to brain science, the mind can only hold at most 6 to 7 thoughts consecutively. So you should try to limit the number of basic ordering ideas to this number)

- What is a larger or more encompassing category into which these fit?

Buzan also recommends questions that begin with the popular “5W & H” words: Who? Where? What? When? Why? and How?

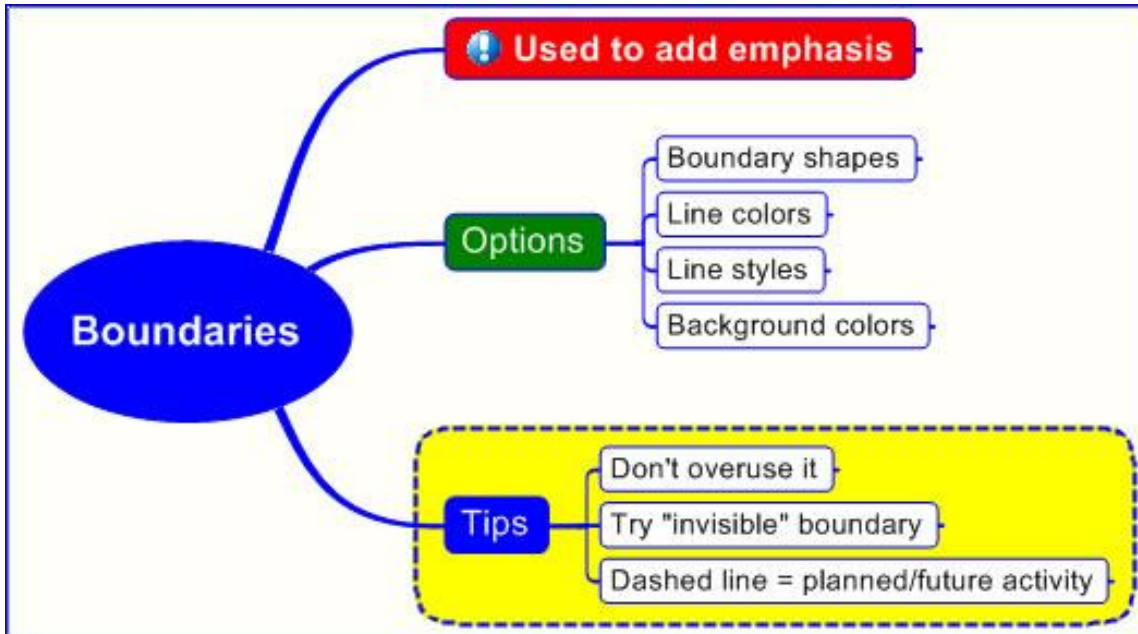
Here are some additional tips from the Buzan brothers on the types of words that tend to make effective basic ordering ideas:

- Divisions: chapters, lessons or themes
- Properties: characteristics of things
- History: a chronological sequence of events
- Structure: how things are formed or arranged
- Function: what things do
- Process: how things work
- Evaluation: how good, beneficial or worthwhile things are
- Classification: how things are related to each other
- Definitions: what things mean
- Personalities: what roles or characters people have

These questions and word types will help to catalyze your thinking and will help you to develop more effective mind maps. Why not give them a try?

## **What are boundaries and how can they increase the effectiveness of your mind maps?**

If you are sharing a mind map with other people, and want to draw their attention to a specific section of it, a boundary is a good way to do that. A boundary visually joins a topic and its subtopics together, usually with an enclosed line and a different background color. It is used to provide emphasis to a section of your mind map, to make it visually stand apart from the rest of its content. They are especially valuable when used in larger, more complex mind maps, where many topics and levels of information are fighting for attention.



Most mind mapping programs give you a variety of options in terms of boundary line styles (solid lines, guidelines, as well as scalloped cloudlike shapes) and colors. Don't be afraid to experiment with your program's boundary options to learn what works best for you. One caution, however: Don't overuse boundaries in your maps. If you emphasize everything, then nothing stands out, negating the value of it as a visual aid.

Here's one creative way in which you can use map boundaries is in combination with relationship lines:

1. Create a boundary around a group of topics
2. Add a relationship line that points from another topic to the boundary.
3. Change the background color and line color of the border to clear, or match its color to the background color of your map.
4. The result is a relationship arrow that points to the vicinity of a group of topics, without touching it.

Another creative use of boundaries is to use your program's border line style in a way to add meaning and context. Let's say you have created a map where one branch depicts a group of tasks or project elements that are optional or may be accomplished in the future. If you change the topic line and border line style to a dashed line, you visually reinforce the idea that this section of the map is focused on items that are for future consideration.

**One final tip:** if you want the people with whom you're sharing your map to clearly understand why you have emphasized one or more parts of it with boundaries, then you may want to consider adding a callout or floating topic with an explanatory note.

## The brainstorming mode in mind mapping software: What a great idea!

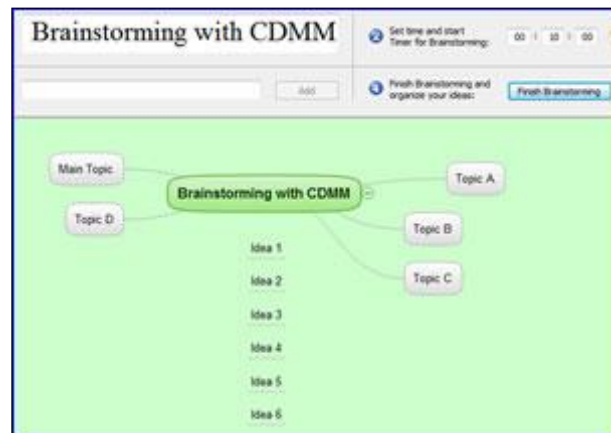
One of the leading applications of mind mapping software, according to my surveys, is utilizing it to generate and capture ideas. So it's not surprising that many of the leading programs offer a brainstorming mode. What is this mode, what exactly does it do and how can it benefit you?

In general, the brainstorming mode of mind mapping software is designed to make it quick and easy to enter a succession of topics or ideas, using only the keyboard (no mouse manipulation required) and without regard to exact placement of each topic. After all, you have complete freedom to move them around later. This ability to enter multiple topics quickly is especially helpful if you're facilitating a group brainstorming session for your work, and your team mates are shouting out ideas to you one after another. Brainstorming mode lets you capture them quickly, without the program getting in the way.

Several programs also offer a countdown timer, which enables you to set a time limit on individual or group brainstorming. Sometimes, this can be a catalyst, helping you to generate more ideas, faster. In a group setting, however, it has a more practical use: To ensure that a team doesn't spend too much time on any given challenge they're trying to solve.

**Here's how the functionality of brainstorming mode compares in the major mind mapping programs that have it:**

[ConceptDraw MINDMAP](#) inserts each of your ideas as free-floating topics, which gives you a lot of freedom in grouping and arranging them. The program's brainstorming view (shown above)



also contains a countdown timer, which enables you to set a time limit on your ideation sessions. Ideas can be added using only the keyboard, which makes ConceptDraw MINDMAP an ideal program for group brainstorming sessions, where the meeting facilitator must be able to add a number of ideas quickly, without the program getting in the way.

[MindManager](#) contains a brainstorming mode that can help you with problem definition, ideation and evaluating your ideas. It uses a virtual card deck, displayed in a vertical panel on the right side of the workspace, to present stimuli as “cards.” I like its process orientation and its practical, easy-to-use design.

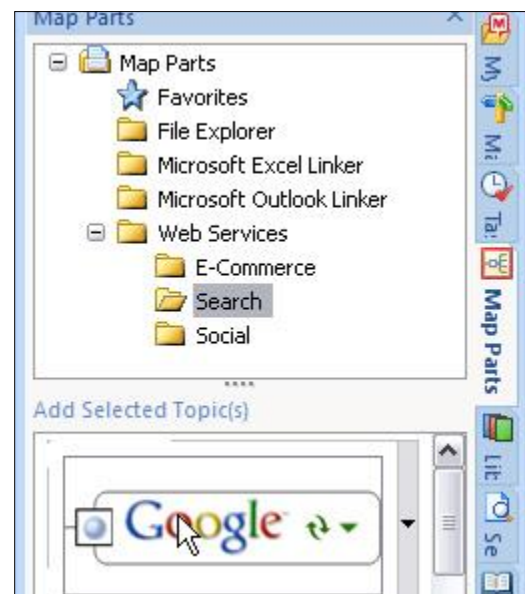
[MindMapper](#) takes a unique approach to brainstorming: It enables you to create a series of brightly-colored floating topics called “memo notes” that resemble Post-It notes. These can be added to your map workspace using the shift-left mouse button combination. The mouse is still required for this program, but MindMapper gets style points for enabling you to record your ideas in a colorful, playful format. In addition, MindMapper offers a count-down timer, so you can set a time limit on your brainstorming sessions; it also can count upwards, so you can see what your elapsed time is – how long you’ve spent brainstorming ideas.

If capturing ideas on the fly is important to you, then definitely check out these programs. I recommend that you download trial versions of several of them to see what works best for you.

## Improve your productivity with mind map templates

Most of us have activities that we do on a regular basis – meetings, plans, reports and more – where we need to quickly organize, distill and utilize information in a productive way. Why not speed these repetitive tasks by creating mind map templates to “automate” their production and improve your productivity?

A well-designed template gives you a “starting point” or framework with the major topics already created, which spurs your associative brain into action. It also saves you time, because you’re not creating the same map from scratch each time you do that activity.



If you're not convinced that mind map templates will save you time, simply multiply the number of times you do a given task during an average week by the amount of time that it takes you to create such a mind map. Let's look at an example:

You have 10 meetings a week; on average, it takes you 30 minutes to create a meeting map that incorporates the meeting objectives, participants, agenda, support materials and meeting room arrangements. That's a savings of 5 hours in a week – pretty impressive!

Types of maps that lend themselves to a templated approach include:

- To do lists
- Meeting planning and management
- Project management
- Group brainstorming (using methodologies like Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats)
- Decision making
- Job descriptions
- Performance reviews
- Packing list for business trips

Most mind mapping programs enable you to create a map and then designate it as a template, so you can re-use it later. But a few programs go farther than that. They enable you to create and store collections of commonly-used branches and sub-branches that you can add to an existing map at any time. MindManager calls them "custom map parts," while Visual Mind calls them "structures" – I call them incredibly useful!

## Questions

If you have questions about this report, please contact:

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Updated: October 2015