How to Select Mind Mapping Software

10 criteria you must consider - plus key questions to help you define your needs!

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Questions and considerations when selecting mind mapping software

Welcome to this brief guide to selecting the right mind mapping software to meet your business needs. It contains a list of questions you should ask yourself to better define your needs, as well as explanations of each type of feature and why it's important to business users.

Here are 10 criteria you must consider when selecting a mind mapping program that will match your needs, plus questions to help you better define them:

1. Program versions (desktop and mobile)

- Do you need the ability to interchange mind maps between mobile devices and desktop PCs or laptops?

Why is this important? You can capture your thoughts in a visual map any time, anywhere on your mobile device, and then transfer it to the desktop version of your mind mapping software for further development.

2. Map formats supported

What types of mind maps do you plan to create?

- **Traditional maps** are radial - that is, they have branches extending in all directions from a central topic.

- **Right-facing maps** are useful for showing a process or procedure.

- **Organizational charts** have all of the topics arranged in a hierarchy below the main topic. If you need to create this type of a diagram for your work, make sure your mind mapping software supports it.

- **Fishbone diagrams** resemble the spine of a fish with ribs extending at 45-degree angles to the left, above and below the spine. They are useful for root-cause analysis.

- **A concept map** is something like a mind map, except the connector lines contain words that define the relationship between one topic and another. Connections between topics can be more complex in a concept map than a mind map.
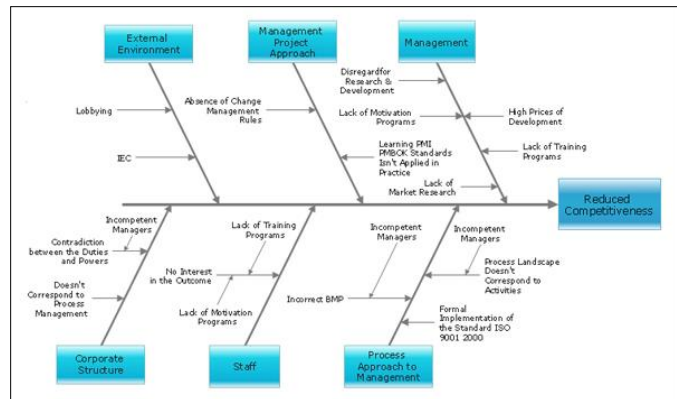
3. Topic features

What's important to you in the design of your mind maps? Do you need to be able to create:

- **Floating topics?** These can be useful if you don't know where an idea fits in the hierarchy of your map's topics. It's also a great place to create a "parking lot" for decisions and issues that have been tabled or for supporting information.

- **Call-outs?** These are useful for noting supporting information or for calling attention to a specific topic.

- **Task data?** If you plan to use your mind mapping software for to-do lists or for managing small projects, you'll want to select one that supports the creation and management of tasks.
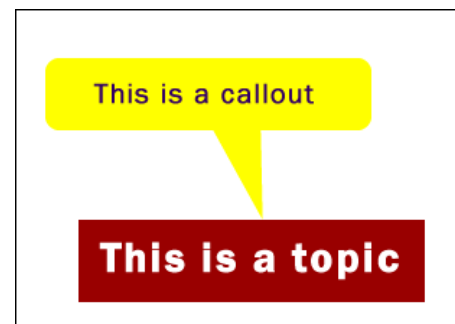
4. Map features

- Do you expect to create large, complex mind maps? If so, you may want to select a program that enables you to select a branch and create a new, linked mind map from it and its sub-topics. This immediately simplifies your map, while still keeping the lower-level information just one click away.

- Do you expect to brand your mind maps with a background image? Then select a program that supports this capability.

Templates speed the creation of mind maps. Rather than staring at a new mind map file with a lonely central topic in the middle of a big, empty workspace, templates give you a convenient starting point. You can either accept the topics as is and build upon them, or customize them to meet your specific needs.

5. Advanced features

If you plan to create large, complex mind maps with numerous topics and levels of information, then an excellent set of map filters is a must. This feature enables you to display, for example, only the tasks or only topics that contain a certain keyword. The rest of the map disappears from view, leaving you with a clear picture of those topics that meet your filter criteria.

Are you easily distracted or prone to information overload? Then you may want to select a program that enables you to focus in and focus out. Here's how it works: Select one branch to which you want to invest some time adding detail. Use the focus in command and the rest of the map disappears from view. While you're focused in, it looks like your selected topic is the central topic of your map. This enables you to focus your attention and brainpower on fleshing out that section of your mind map, free of visual clutter. Once you're satisfied with that section of the map, focus out to once again display the entire mind map. It's very useful!

Do you expect to create the same types of mind maps over and over, say for a report you produce on a regular basis? If so, look for a program that supports map parts. Think of map parts as segments or mini-templates that you can drag and drop into your mind map.
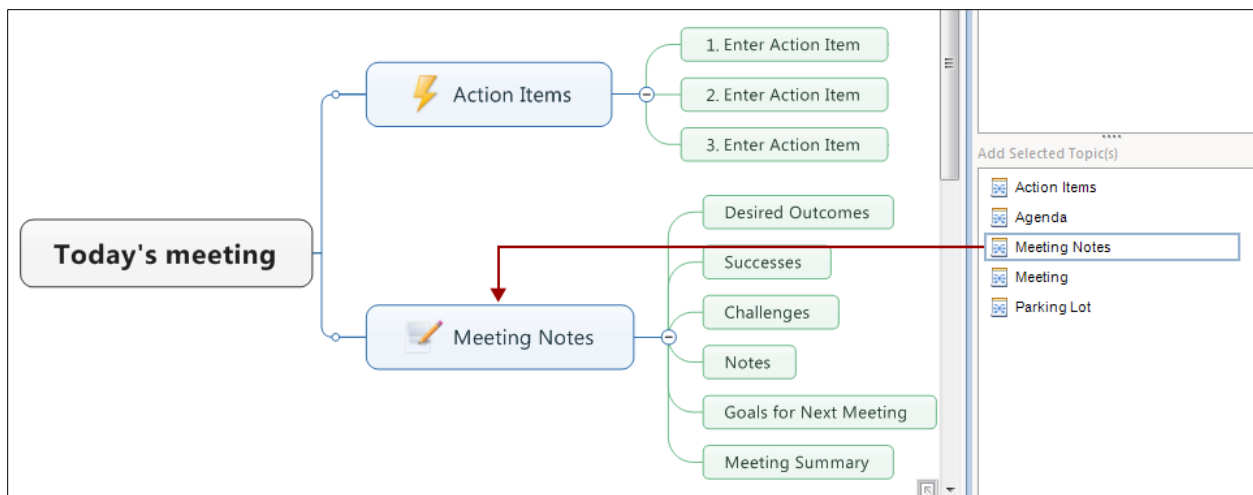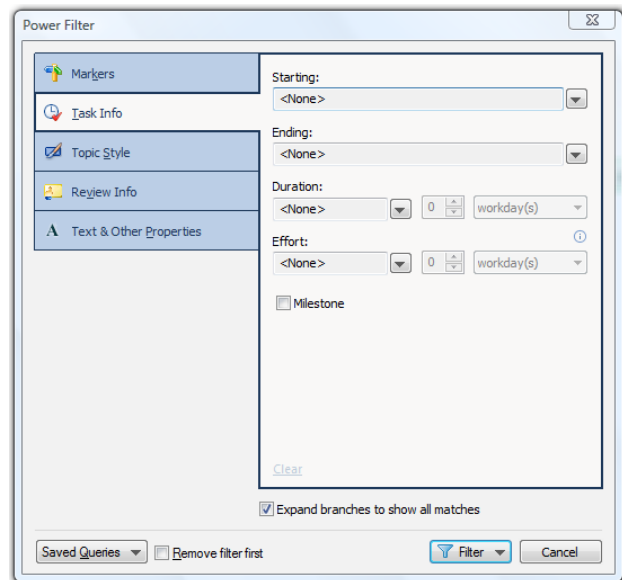
Do you plan to do a lot of research that will be captured in mind maps? If so, a program with an embedded web browser may be advantageous. It's very efficient to be able to view a web page and then drag and drop elements into your mind map.

6. Modes

- **Outline:** This is like the traditional hierarchical outlines you did in school. This view is useful only to the extent that it can give you another perspective on the information you've organized and gathered in your mind maps.

- **Brainstorming:** If you plan to use mind mapping software to generate and capture ideas, then a program with a brainstorming mode isn't a necessity, but it is great to have.

- **GANTT:** This is a type of horizontal bar chart that is commonly used in project management. It converts the start and end dates from the tasks in your mind map into a visual timeline.
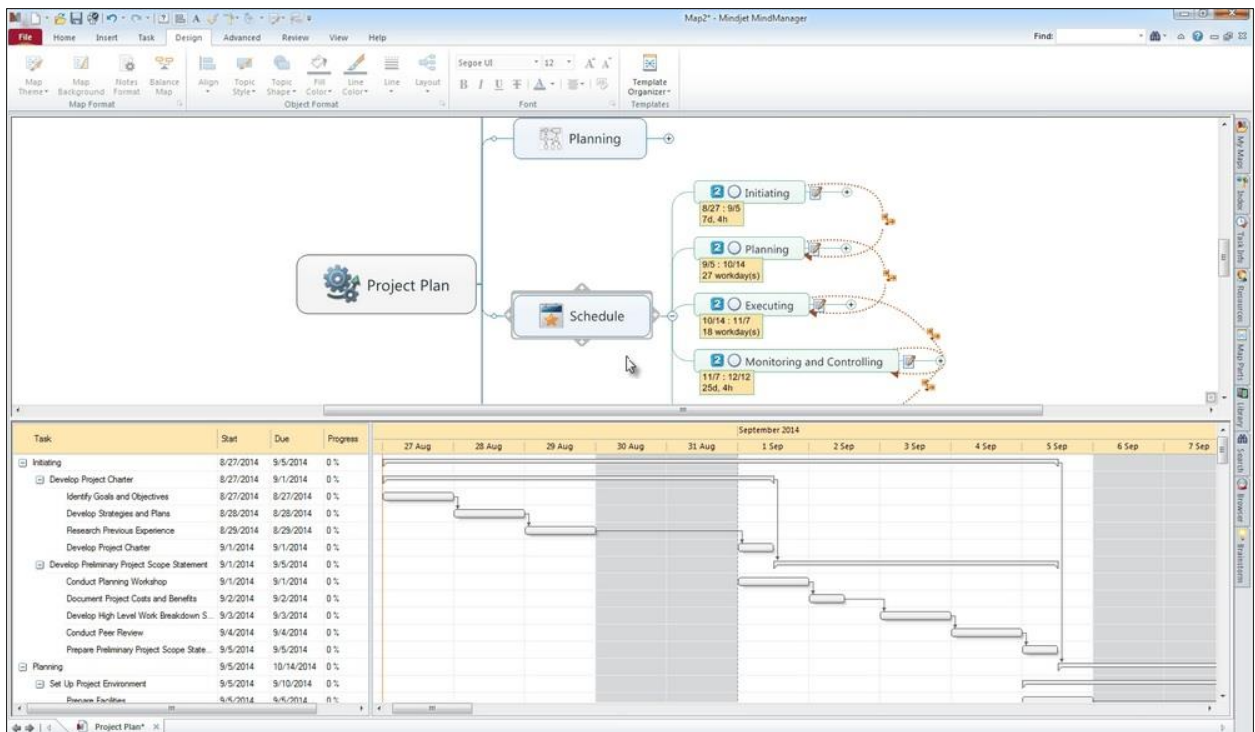
- You can use mind mapping software to present your ideas. Programs enable you to do so in one of two ways: They either take snapshots of specific branches and topics, which appear as slides in a sorter view (much like PowerPoint) or they enable you to select topics in sequence, which then enables the program to "fly" your audience through your mind map, one set of topics at a time.

7. Collaboration

Do you plan to share your mind maps with colleagues or team members, and solicit their feedback? Some mind mapping programs have a "review" mode similar to Microsoft Word, where your team members can mark up your map with their recommended changes. You can then decide if you want to accept or reject them.

Several programs are integrated with cloud-based services, to which you can upload your maps and then share them with others. Several of these collaborative environments also include web-based versions of their software, so team members who don't have the desktop software can still collaborate via less-expensive cloud-based versions.
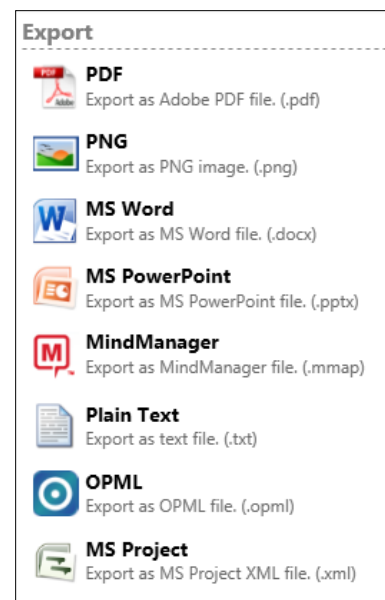
8. Integration capabilities

Some mind mapping software programs have the ability to exchange data with other applications in real time. Unlike exporting, which is an all-or-nothing proposition, integration has more to do with moving selected bits of data back and forth between the mind mapping software and other applications. For example, being able to "push" tasks in your program to Microsoft Outlook, or querying SharePoint and displaying the results of your search within your mind map.

9. Export formats supported

Export file formats are some of the most important considerations when you're selecting a mind mapping software program. Often, what you're producing in your mind map is not the end result. You may use it to organize all of your material and then export it to PowerPoint or Word, where you'll finish it up. The other thing to keep in mind is that there are some linear thinkers out there who don't feel comfortable with mind maps, so for them you may want to convert your map into a more conventional, palatable format – such as a Word document.

Take your time and figure out how you want to output the information that's in your mind maps, and then select programs that have those capabilities.

Export

PDF
Export as Adobe PDF file. (.pdf)

PNG
Export as PNG image. (.png)

MS Word
Export as MS Word file. (.docx)

MS PowerPoint
Export as MS PowerPoint file. (.pptx)

MindManager
Export as MindManager file. (.mmap)

Plain Text
Export as text file. (.txt)

OPML
Export as OPML file. (.opml)

MS Project
Export as MS Project XML file. (.xml)

10. How to make a final selection

Once you have identified a short list of two or three mind mapping programs that appear that they may meet your needs, download trial versions and test them out, one at a time. For the duration of the trial period, look for opportunities to put the software to use. Then ask yourself, "Does this program fit in well with my work flow? How does it enhance my work processes?"

Take notes about the pros and cons of the program, so you can compare it with the others at the conclusion of your software trials.

About the author

Chuck Frey is the founder and publisher of the [Mind Mapping Software Blog](#), your leading source for news, trends and resources related to visual mapping. He has written numerous articles and reviews about mind mapping software, and is widely regarded as one of the leading experts on visual mapping and visual thinking.