

How to use this checklist

The purpose of this worksheet is to help you to produce the highest quality mind maps possible. It does so by walking you through its content and structure in an organized way, asking you questions that encourage you to develop best practices in map design.

Print out a copy of this checklist and keep it next to your PC when you're preparing new mind maps. Use it as a "measuring stick" to assess the quality of your map, as well as a tool for improving your visual output. Fill in the blanks where appropriate; for the checkboxes, put a checkmark in the boxes if you believe your mind map meets each of the criteria.

OVERALL MAP

Purpose of your mind map

When you begin creating a mind map, you ought to have a clear purpose in mind. Some maps, for example, will be for your own consumption, while others will be created to be shared with others. When the latter happens, you must ensure that others are able to clearly understand the meaning of your map and its topics. They won't have the benefit of your perspective, so they may become lost and confused.

Another consideration is the type of information you want to put in your mind map, which should drive its format. Most topics lend themselves to a radial format (where topics extend in all directions). But if you're trying to visualize a process, then a right-facing map (where all topics extend to the right of the central topic and are read from top to bottom) may be more appropriate.

The bottom line is that if you have a clear purpose in mind at the beginning of your mapping process, you can create a map structure and layout that supports that goal.

Intended audience

When you are creating a mind map for your own use, the process is pretty simple, because you are the only person who will be viewing it and needs to understand the information it contains. It's a different story when you're sharing your mind map with others, because they do not have the benefit of the underlying context that you have in your head. That's why you must think carefully about who your intended audience is and what you want them to do as the result of reading your mind map. Each audience will be different in terms of their level of understanding and their motivation.

Audience assumptions

What assumptions can you make about how much your target audience knows about your map's content? This is critical to successful communication when sharing your mind maps with others. If you don't take this important step, chances are that the content of your map will either be way over their heads - or so basic that they will dismiss you and your mind map out of hand.

The best way to do this is assume that you are looking at your mind map through their eyes. Pretend that you are a key member of your target audience, with their level of knowledge, fsbeliefs and underlying assumptions. What would be abundantly clear to them? What would be hard to understand? Would it be clear what you want them to do when they look at your map?

Content sharing

How much of your map's content should be shared with this target audience? Does it contain some topics that are background information that you don't really need to share with them, or which may confuse them? Does it

contain any information that is proprietary and should not be shared with them? Give this careful consideration before sharing your mind map with them.

Map format

In what format do you intend to share your mind map? Each one has specific pros and cons that will either enable or limit what others can do with it. For example, sharing the map in its native file format gives others complete interactivity – as long as they also have a licensed copy of the software you’re using. Converting it to a web page (a GIF image with hotspots for links) enables you to post your mind map to a website, where others can click on the hypertext links embedded within it. Finally, a PDF file is purely read only; you cannot interact with it in any way. Keep this in mind when preparing to share your mind maps. Think about what you want your target audience to be able to do when viewing your map before publishing it, and then select your output format accordingly.

MAP CONTENT

Optimizing the contents of your mind map

This is where you can add the greatest value to your mind map, by carefully considering what you have created and looking at it with a critical eye. For best results, look at your mind map from a number of perspectives: What information is missing? What is superfluous and could be removed? What is potentially unclear? What is incomplete? Your ultimate goal is to make your map as clear and unambiguous as possible. Another useful tactic is to share your map with a colleague you trust, and asking them for answers to these questions. Sometimes, a second set of eyes is the best approach!

Natural progression from first to second-level topics

In an ideal mind map, anyone should be able to look at it and understand how one set of branches is related to its parent branch. There should be a strong level of continuity. Is that the case with your mind map?

Good flow of topics

Mind maps are typically “read” starting at the 12 o’clock position and then moving clockwise around it. Ideally, there should be a logical order or “flow” to your first-level topics. Some map topics will be more process oriented (step 1, step 2, etc.) while for other mind maps, the order in which the first-level topics appear isn’t as critical. Don’t be afraid to move a first-level topic and its children from one spot to another to see if it works better in a new location. There’s always the “undo” command if it doesn’t. By doing this “What if?” exercise, you will be producing a better mind map.

Natural flow of topics at the second level

Sibling topics in a mind map are those that share the same parent and are at the same level in your mind map. These should have a similar order and continuity to them as what we just described for the first level.

MAP DESIGN

First-level topic names

Your number-one priority when creating a mind map, especially one that is going to be shared with others, is clarity. Review each first-level topic of your map and ask yourself if each one has a clear and unambiguous meaning? Is it stated in as few words as possible? Can it be made shorter and still be clear to your target audience? Try to avoid over-long topic names. You always don’t have to limit them to a single word, as Tony Buzan teaches, but brevity is important when it comes to map topics. Got more to say? Put it into a topic note!

Appropriate icons and images

Icons and images are meant to add meaning, context and visual impact to your mind maps. As such, they need to be clear, unambiguous and appropriate to the topics to which they are attached. If an icon or image is unclear in its meaning, or could be interpreted in multiple ways, reconsider using it and look for another image that works better in this context. Inappropriate images detract from your mind map. If you're faced with a choice of using one that "sort of works" with a given topic or not using an image at all, choose the latter.

Map legend

If your mind map utilizes icons or symbols, then it should also have a legend to help others decode what they mean. The best way to do this is to create a floating topic called "legend" and list the icons used in your map and what they mean in 1-3 words. Don't assume your target audience will understand what each icon means.

Floating topics

Floating topics should be used only rarely in your mind maps. They are intended to be used to present information that is of secondary importance to your map's topic – such as a map legend or a list of additional resources that you'd like to encourage your target audience to check out. If you're thinking about adding one to your mind map, ask yourself what its relationship is with its central topic. If it is strongly related, then it should be connected to the mind map, not floating separately.

Branding your mind map

If you are planning to share your mind map with a customer or client, then you ought to include the name and logo of your organization on it. That way, when others view your mind map, they will know who created it – and who is responsible for the brilliant insights it contains!

Author and contact information

A mind map should almost always contain author and contact information, so others will know who created it and who to contact with any questions about it. You can format it either as a floating topic or floating text, ideally in the lower right or left corner of your map. You don't want this information fighting for attention with your mind map.

Map backgrounds

Be careful when using image, solid color or gradient map backgrounds – they can sometimes conflict with the content of your mind map, making it hard to read. Similar problems can occur when changing the colors of topic shape backgrounds and topic text colors – they must contrast with each other strongly, or readability may suffer. If you plan to use one, always print out your map in black and white. This is lowest-common denominator for how others will view a printout of your mind map. If there are any topics that get swallowed up by a dark color or some that appear in a similar shade of gray as your map topics, you need to know that now!

Map boundaries

Map boundaries are intended to draw attention to the most important content of your mind map. As such, only one section of your mind map should be formatted with a boundary (two on rare occasions, if you really must). The rule of thumb here is this: If everything is emphasized, then nothing is emphasized. Use them sparingly! Also, the same rules apply to boundaries as map backgrounds, in terms of readability and printability. Always test your map by printing it out in black and white!

QUESTIONS?

Got questions about managing your mind maps? Don't hesitate to contact me at chuck@innovationtools.com. Thanks! Chuck Frey, founder of the [Mind Mapping Software Blog](#).