



MAP THE MIND, TAP THE BRAIN

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Mind maps - colourful graphic images made up of curving branches, key words and pictures - are a popular but often misunderstood technique for studying, sitting exams, problem-solving and generally organising one's thoughts more concisely. Those who are fans tend to absolutely rave about them - yet for many, they represent a mysterious secret that no-one's yet let them in on, or else an unnecessarily complex route around the houses to find a solution, when an extra few moments' musing or thinking out loud might do instead.

In class, at home

In a recent straw poll of ACCA students, many alluded to the benefits of mind mapping when revising. Yet that's just one of a range of applications. Tony Buzan, widely regarded as inventor of the modern mind map, says, 'They're also incredibly useful for note-taking and note-making; you can summarise your thoughts much more succinctly.'

Taking lecture notes in mind-map format may sound daunting - yet Buzan says that students who are 'good thinkers' won't fall behind, as they should be able to distil the most important points, while students taking conventional 'linear' notes often struggle needlessly to scribble down every last word: 'Mind map users often ask at the beginning of the lecture, what the main topics will be, so that they can pre-prepare the basic branches,' he says. 'One advantage of this is that, if the lecturer spontaneously goes off at tangents, you just add a branch on. That's not easy with linear notes, where you're fundamentally transcribing the entire lecture, instead of focusing on the main points.' Nor, at this stage, is there a need to strive for perfection - students tend to add in images and colours later on, after class.

Amy Jackson, an ACCA student, currently training with Moore Thompson Chartered Accountants in Spalding, UK, is lucky enough to have a tutor who has bought in to the mind-mapping concept. 'Our tutor will usually use mind maps at the end of a chapter to summarise and lay out the main points and main areas,' she says. 'The mind map then develops when the class and tutor put ideas together, the tutor writing it up on the board and us taking it down. When studying at home, I rewrite and add to maps that have been done in class, going into more detail or expanding them.'

In the exam hall

One only has to scan examiner feedback in student accountant to understand that many ACCA students let themselves down by approaching discursive exam questions inappropriately, providing assessors with meaningless waffle that fails to answer the questions set. Yet, even in the exam hall, mind maps can be employed to beneficial effect.

'In an exam, there are various criteria asked for in a question - but they're all linked together,' says Amy Jackson. 'My starting point is the requirement and my branches grow from this, following my thought process and assisting in bringing my answer together.'

A mind map will help to show you the 'territory of the question', says Buzan: 'Your brain will radiate associations with the key words, especially if you've been using mind maps when revising.'

In fact, answering questions in prose form - such as demonstrating how you might resolve ethical dilemmas - can provide ideal opportunities to use mind maps for more than recall. Many students use them to organise data in a way that fits the allocated time for each part of a question, with the main branches emanating from the central question. 'It should only take a few minutes,' says Buzan. 'If you then look at your branches, you can more easily decide on a logical order for your answers.'

Creative accountants?

It might be easy to assume that accountants, with their reputation for cold, hard logic would struggle with what are highly visual tools.

'It's a great misconception that the accountancy profession is not creative,' says Buzan. 'Yet you must be creative to see your own organisation or your client's financial situation from many perspectives. In my view, creativity involves coordination of all your brain's cortical activities - imagination, rhythm, colour and image, as well as order, logic, words and numbers. I don't see why accountants can't use mind maps.'

Mark Oronzio, senior vice-president of strategic partnerships for mind mapping software producer, Inspiration Software, says, 'Mind mapping is an ideal way to generate, process and formulate thoughts and ideas, helping to provide clarity. They provide a simplified summary of intricate information, enabling the learner to fully comprehend relationships and new connections.' Oronzio says good mind maps present the 'shape' of the issue, including the significance of separate points and the way they relate to each other.

Pictures as well as words

Buzan maintains that illustrations are important components of mind maps, saying that, while it's not wrong to use only words, they would need to be really good 'key words' to properly aid recall. 'But remember, a picture is worth a thousand words,' he says. 'Even if you just use symbols and codes - they don't have to be ornate illustrations - it will help your brain to recall, understand and concentrate. By adding more images, you'll make the task for your brain so much easier. I would urge students who have only used Mind Maps with words up until now to give images a try.'

Start by keeping it simple

More elaborate mind maps - that you may find in textbooks or online - clearly take longer to compose. But high levels of mapping dexterity are unnecessary when starting out. 'If it sets people's minds at ease, when I invented mind maps, I had no images or codes; all my lines were straight, there were phrases and even sentences all over the place, and only one colour,' confesses Buzan. 'But they were still infinitely better than linear notes.'

'Anyone can draw - and the mind map doesn't have to be Da Vinci-esque; just tree-like, with key words on the branches.'

'You're really not asking your brain to do something new. We've been making mental images since we were born; it's linear note-taking that's unnatural. Give young children large sheets of

paper and coloured pens, and off they go, doodling and making connections. Mind maps are natural projections of that.'

In the office

Once you become comfortable with mind mapping, you're likely to start finding ways to incorporate them into your daily routine. 'Many people think in pictures rather than sounds — so using a mind map when planning out a presentation or project makes sense,' says Sean McPheat, managing director of MTD Training.

'They're useful for teaching new people the ins and outs of what you do. For example, if your accounts are set up in a particular way, it's far easier to show a diagram of this in a mind map than just to explain it. Sure, you'll also need to talk through it - but with a mind map, the brain can relate the information to pictures and the written word on the map.

'Personally, I use them for everything from a pre-holiday to-do list to annual business planning exercises.'

And now specialist software, such as Buzan's iMindMap, is further revolutionising mind mapping. 'While an advantage of hand-drawing is the immediate personal contact, computer-generated maps can be as big as you like,' says Buzan. 'You can just keep building, changing the length, shape, colour and location of the branches. They're totally flexible, with links between master maps and sub-maps.'

Amy Jackson advises fellow ACCA students who regard mind maps as overly complex and time-consuming to think again: 'That's what I initially thought, but knowing how to use them has made me realise their usefulness,' she says. 'There are some areas of study and work that I feel are too complex to use a mind map, and at first, yes, they may seem alien - but if students understand the best ways to use them, they can make a good study aid.'
