

WRITING FOR VISUAL THINKERS

A guide for artists and designers



Excerpted from *Writing for Visual Thinkers: A Guide for Artists and Designers* by Andrea Marks
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Writing for Visual Thinkers

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The tradition of writing in the field of design—whether serving as criticism, personal expression or persuasion—is long and storied. The design profession would surely be diminished without those defining voices—Rand, Glaser, Lupton, Bierut, Heller, to name but a few—that continually remind us and the rest of the world why the work of designers is so important. The need for designers to be able to communicate not only visually but also verbally has only grown over the years, to the extent that no professional designer today can afford not to develop the necessary skills.

With *Writing for Visual Thinkers*, a new voice in design has emerged. Writer, designer and educator Andrea Marks skillfully imparts her knowledge about the unique ways in which designers see the world and shows us how we can translate our visual ideas into words that are just as compelling and thoughtful. AIGA, the professional association for design, eagerly supports this ambitious educational tool for designers and visual artists, with the hope that it will benefit readers in their career pursuits and personal growth, and create ever more unique and inspiring voices.

Richard Grefe
Executive director, AIGA

The AIGA Design Press is committed to stimulating thinking at the intersection of design, business and culture. The Press is a partnership with New Riders Publishing as a means of extending AIGA's traditional role in advancing the art, practice and theory of design. With rigor and enthusiasm, The Press will embrace new fields, uncover powerful modes of inquiry and pursue excellence in design thinking.

USER GUIDE

It is best to read the *Writing for Visual Thinkers* e-book using version 8 or greater of Adobe Acrobat Pro, or Adobe Reader. You can download a free copy of Adobe Reader from the Adobe Web site <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>. Viewing the e-book in Acrobat Pro or Adobe Reader will enable all hyperlinks and features to be active, including the built-in search engine and accessibility options for the visually impaired. The Mac OS X application Preview may also be used, but does not offer the same functionality.

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Writing can be a challenge, especially for artists and designers who tend to be more visual than verbal. With so many conversations about the fate of reading and writing in the 21st century, we may ask how this impacts visual artists? Clearly, writing will continue to play a key role in your life. With so many resources available, this is an exciting time to be writing and making creative work.

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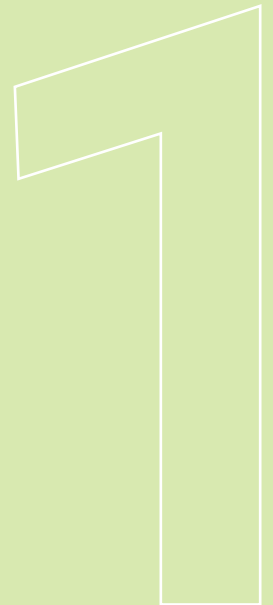
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The following excerpt is from the e-book *Writing for Visual Thinkers: A Guide for Artists and Designers* by Andrea Marks, published by [New Riders](#) in partnership with [AIGA Design Press](#). The book examines the relationship among writing, art, and design through the lens of a visual thinker— that is, a person who discovers and synthesizes the world through a strong visual sense. For more information go to www.peachpit.com.

Writing for Visual Thinkers presents ideas and methods that can help visual thinkers become better writers. It covers topics such as 21st century literacy, the workings of the brain and its connection to creativity, and how to use writing in more pragmatic ways, including a list of resources pertinent to writing, art, and design. The book is not intended to cover traditional writing and grammar conventions, as many excellent books exist. (The latest edition of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, beautifully illustrated by [Maira Kalman](#), is a wonderful resource.) Instead, the goal of this book is to explore the potential of written communication as a way to better understand the process of visual communication.

THE WRITER'S TOOLBOX



THE WRITER'S TOOLBOX

Writing can be a powerful tool when you are creating visual projects. From initial notes and sketches to free-writing and mind mapping, writing can help generate lively, [lateral thinking](#).¹ Writing helps to work through the process phase of a visual project, and can also serve as a reflective tool once a project is completed.

Writing begins as a private act that can lead to a more public expression. Writing during idea generation can be a way to gain comfort and skills that lead to better, clearer communication. Using private, “process” writing makes visual projects conceptually stronger, which ultimately leads to stronger “public” writing of materials such as proposals, project briefs, cover letters, and even blog entries and comments.

This chapter serves as a guide in using writing to enhance the creative process, both for visual and verbal projects. It presents approaches that use writing to generate ideas, support process, and reflect on finished work. These strategies are diverse enough to allow for different styles of thinking and learning. Some of these tools, such as mind maps, take advantage of words, pictures, and symbols; others, such as freewriting, focus on narrative thoughts. However, all of them use writing to bring out ideas in creative problem-solving.

A topographic map of Prevoist Island is shown in grayscale. The map features contour lines, a coastline, and various geographical labels. A blue rectangular box is overlaid on the map, containing a quote. Several red lines are drawn across the map: a vertical dashed line, a diagonal dashed line, and two solid lines that intersect and form a cross-like shape. The quote is in white text on a blue background.

“Learning never exhausts the mind”

—Leonardo da Vinci

Leonardo da Vinci's 15th century sketchbooks are filled with diagrammatic sketches that could be the precursors of today's brainstorm webs, concept maps, or mind maps. Da Vinci's creative genius is revealed in the way his knowledge of art and science informed each other. He used left and right hemispheres in "whole brain" interdependent thinking to realize so many of his remarkable accomplishments.² The sketchbooks and notebooks of many other creative geniuses, such as Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Thomas Edison, Charles Darwin, and Albert Einstein, also show diagrammatic sketching that is similar to the mapping methods used today.

MIND MAPS



A [mind map](#)³ gives visual form to ideas. It is particularly helpful for initiating ideas in a project. For visual thinkers, the diagramming of words in a visual, intuitive manner takes advantage of the more nonlinear, associative way that our brains naturally generate ideas. Like many brainstorming methods, mind maps needn't be questioned until they are completed. The goal is to develop the diagram quickly, then synthesize possible connections and directions. It may be useful to construct mind maps during particular phases in a project, when new connections and ideas are needed. Larger projects, which involve complex systems of information, also benefit from using these techniques.

In addition to words, another tactic for visual thinkers is the inclusion of color, images, and even dimension into these diagrammatic maps. These brainstorming techniques are varied and can help to better organize ideas and manage complex problems.

As with any new problem-solving or brainstorming technique, mind mapping takes practice. Look at it as one of many ways to explore an idea or understand a topic.

How mind maps work

Traditional mind maps are written by hand with pen or pencil, but many software programs and web-based mapping tools are also available. These maps can be done individually or as a group.

Handwritten mind maps allow for the quick, spontaneous flow of thoughts. Writing these diagrams on large sheets of paper, such as giant sticky notes or newsprint sketchpads, lets the mind map evolve and grow. Often, participants will become so engrossed that they are surprised when they reach the edge of the paper. Large mind maps can be pinned on the wall for further discussion and analysis.

Web-based mind-mapping software—such as [Free-Mind](#), [MindMeister](#), and [Thinkature](#)—allows for the addition of links, notes, or files to specific words. All of these web-based programs enable both individual and collaborative diagramming and mapping of problems, and are simple and intuitive to use. A great feature of these programs is that real-time collaboration can take place from multiple computers in different locations.

Developing a mind map with words

Begin with a sheet of blank paper that is tabloid size (11x17) or larger (particularly useful for collaborative mind mapping). Write a word in the middle of the page that best represents a central topic, subject, or question. You can think of this word as the “whole” in relation to the sum of the mind map’s “parts.”

From this central word, draw six or seven branching lines and at the end of each, quickly write one-word associations that relate to this center word. Nouns may be a good choice, as they usually carry more associations than verbs or adjectives do.

Circle each word and continue the creation of more branches from each of them. As you move further away from the center, your words will begin to have weaker associations with the center word, but new associations will most likely allow for new concepts to develop. Don’t be concerned if the words eventually lead you far off your initial topic—that divergence can lead to new ideas.

Developing a mind map with images

A graphic mind map works similarly to a verbal mind map, but allows for the addition of icons, images, and symbols. Visual thinkers, comfortable with schematic sketching, may find the combination of words and images useful in developing new associations. Follow the steps in the previous description of a mind map, but use icons or images instead of, or in addition to, words. Add new symbols, such as arrows, lines, and shapes, to further emphasize connections. Hierarchy (varying sizes, weights, and colors) can also help to emphasize concepts and make associations.

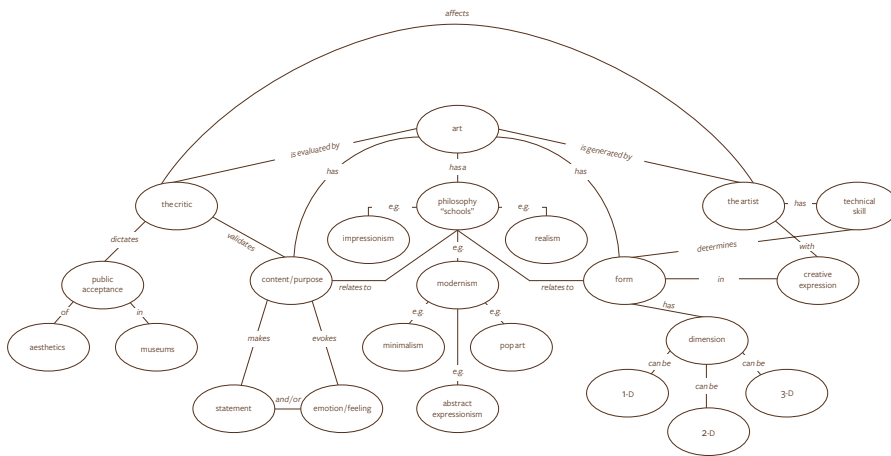
Examining the results

When you are finished with your mind map, take some time to reflect on the results. If you are working with a small group, discuss the ideas that came forth and write or map out this conversation.

- » Are there certain patterns and relationships that emerge?
- » Are there new concepts that need to be considered and remapped?

If several people create mind maps on a similar topic, you can compare them. In areas of similarity, you may see patterns that can be used to develop a concept. Areas of difference might prompt further exploration through research and conversation.

CONCEPT MAPS



In many ways, [concept maps](#) are similar to mind maps. They too make use of associative relationships, using a nodal diagram containing words. The main difference between them is that concept mapping allows for a more thorough investigation and analysis of conceptual relationships and meanings. With the addition of propositional links, indicating relationships between two concepts, concept maps focus more on systems thinking.

[Joseph Novak](#), author of the book [Learning How to Learn](#), developed the technique of concept mapping at Cornell University in the 1970s, as an aid to science learning. As Novak states, “When concept maps are conscientiously constructed, they are remarkably revealing of students’ cognition organization.” His mapping techniques are used by students starting as early as first grade, and proceeding through higher education.⁴

How concept maps work

Concept maps show relationships of concepts (objects, people, environments, events, etc.) in a hierarchical order, from general to specific. Each of these words is joined by a proposition or linking statement, such as “depends on,” “can be,” “made of,” “from.” These propositional statements are the necessary links to create systems of meaning within the map.

Developing a concept map

Begin by writing the concept you want to explore at the top of your sheet of paper.

Next, continue writing related concept words connected by simple propositional phrases. For example, if the concept to be explored is “water,” then below the word “water” you might write “living things” and connect the two by the propositional phrase “needed by.” [Meredith Davis](#) and [Hugh Dubberly](#) depart from the traditional concept map and use a more narrative written structure, without a top-to-bottom hierarchy. [Dubberly's concept map](#) of the word “play,” a project developed for [The Institute for the Creative Process at the Alberta College of Art + Design](#), shows the many ways that the concept of play can be explained in a narrative, diagrammatic form. The poster combines

narrative phrases, words, and diagrammatic symbols in a visually dynamic example of a concept map. Davis uses concept maps in her first-semester graphic design course at [North Carolina State University](#). Each student is assigned an object (iPod, household appliance, t-shirt, etc.) and Davis provides a base map template. This template allows students to see the “situatedness” of an everyday object within larger contexts (technological, physical, social/cultural, cognitive), to articulate cause and effect relationships within a system, and to identify places for design intervention. The maps are points of departure for deeper investigations of the object, through writing and designing. The decision to place the subject to be explored in the center of the diagram allows for several concepts of similar hierarchical importance to be shown. The concepts become more specific as they leave the center node. As Davis states, “I use [concept maps] as narratives, so there is value in the connecting phrases being descriptive and smaller structures being captured within zones of the diagram. It is easy to deploy these structures as ways of organizing students’ written arguments.”⁵

When concept maps are expanded to include narrative writing, students are able to make more meaningful connections. According to Davis, “if it is just a reflection of how students view the hierarchical relationships among simple things, it is tough to make the writing do more than reveal that hierarchy.” Both Davis and Dubberly encourage consideration of visual mapping issues such as shape, scale, proximity, and color to further emphasize conceptual relationships. For visual thinkers, the addition of these elements creates a more robust visual language.

Examining the results

Students and teachers can initially go over concept maps together to see how particular concepts were developed. The maps may need to be redrawn to clarify relationships, and subsequent maps can be developed as new information is gathered. Finally, concept maps are excellent as an initial wayfinding tool, in understanding and analyzing complex information. They provide an excellent jumping-off point for subsequent writing (freewriting, short essays) and sketching.

In sum, building confidence in writing is an ongoing process. It takes dedication, practice, and patience and the more you write, the more confident you will become at expressing yourself in words. Whether alone or in tandem with sketching, writing helps organize and articulate ideas and manifest thoughts. Visual thinkers should utilize writing as another tool in their creative process. Information on *Writing for Visual Thinkers* can be found at www.peachpit.com.