



him to the stage. Naturally, I bought some of his best-selling books first. As I understood it, his argument for making mind maps was twofold. The activity of physically drawing a map helps you (a) understand a topic and (b) memorise it.

Experience subsequently taught me that Buzan was onto something. Very soon after that event, I was invited to run a three-hour class on How to Be Creative, with just 24 hours' notice. The class came with a 15,000-word outline, which I was supposed to memorise.

Buzan's enthusiasm for mind maps was fresh in my ears, and I was inclined to believe his notion that making ideas into maps, rich with visual detail, could be the best way to absorb them. So, over several hours, I read and reread the 15,000 words of lesson notes. As I did this, I drew maps of it all: maps of the whole thing, then maps of the various individual parts, and maps of practical exercises that might come in useful.

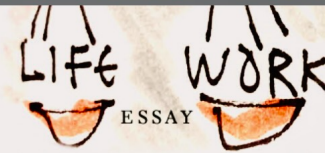
Finally, as darkness fell, I made one last map with coloured branches (as Buzan recommended) and little images scattered among them (ditto). One of those images, reminding me to discuss the importance of boredom in creativity, showed a man yawning. Another, to argue against perfectionism, hinted that "only God can achieve perfection" by means of a cartoony white-bearded deity.

I'm happy to report that the process worked well. When the class started, I took the precaution of warning participants that I might be a bit halting here and there. And they therefore looked unbothered when I did get a couple of minor things wrong. But in general, a single quick glance at that colourful map was enough to tell me where I was and where to go next – the point, after all, of any map.

I was especially pleased that when the class ended, people came over to ask if they could examine and admire the colourful sheet of A3. I used it many times afterwards to teach the same class, sometimes deviating considerably but always having the framework to come back to.

I'm not sure if I realised at the time how important it was that I made that mind map by hand. In an age when digital devices can quickly and accurately transcribe spoken words, it's not surprising that people resist writing by hand and eventually stop being much good at it. A survey in Britain not very long ago found that one in three people hadn't written anything by hand for six months. This is to be regretted because, time-consuming though it may be, writing and doodling by hand helps us to understand information and remember it.

Let me explain by talking about something slightly different. If somebody gives me complicated directions, I often find myself repeating them with



movements: waving my left hand for left turns, right hand for right turns, swivelling at the hips – or whatever – because at a deep subconscious level I know I won't remember anything without these tiny muscle memories. It's the same with writing and drawing.

To try making your own mind map, think of a topic and a reason for covering it – maybe to seek a better understanding of it, or to memorise something (or both). Making your own map, you might seek to impose structure on what seems too big to understand, or too chaotic. You might use branching structures to convey hierarchies (ideas, workplace greasy poles, family trees). You might borrow from flow charts to convey procedures. You could use the map to capture a picture of history unfolding (global technologies, or personal self-improvement). The way in which you distribute ideas around your sheet of paper might convey what is central, and what is peripheral. With strategic use of colour, or assorted typefaces, you can draw distinctions and highlight similarities. With arrows pointing one way or both ways you can show cause and effect. With speech bubbles, you can draw attention to important quotations. I hesitate to recommend any particular approach, because there's no correct way to do it. I like to add my own doodles. You might prefer to use a collage of photos.

When I was preparing to write this, I sat down and drew some mind maps. I started by writing "Idler Mind Maps" in the centre of the page. From there, I drew six branches, leading to these words: What Why When Where Who How.

From each of those words, I drew smaller branches. "What" led to further questions. What am I writing? What is a Mind Map? What is the *Idler*? "Who" caused me to think of all the different types of people I associate with the *Idler*, many of them fragmentary reflections of the founder, Tom Hodgkinson: writers, ukulele players, smallholders, newsletter writers, media people, literature fiends – and of course people who like idling. Each of these led me to further ideas about mind maps.

A smallholder might like to use mind maps to plan for the different seasons of the year, to allocate space, and rotate crops. A ukulele player might map chords, playlists, venues, other types of stringed instrument and musical accompanists – or whatever. You get the idea.

For a long time, a mind map doesn't feel finished. It remains, essentially, an exploded list until I've added sufficient visual interest. But if I'm not careful it can quickly become overdone – too structured, and boringly uncreative. I try to avoid perfectionism, try to remember that cartoony white-bearded deity. And if that doesn't work, I'll put down my pen and go out for a walk with Peanut. ☺

