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# Mapping Your Way to Successful Writing

## Mapping Your Way to Successful Writing

Carol V. McIlhenny and Teresa Shellenbarger

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Students, faculty, and even accomplished authors sometimes struggle to get started with their writing activities. To create a well-constructed paper, they must organize various pieces of information into a cohesive written product. Some authors may only need to spend some time thinking about the information and the structure of the paper emerges, but for other writers, the process is not so simple. They may lack clarity or focus as they develop their work and don't have a clear vision or purpose of their paper. These struggling writers may need a more structured approach to help move their idea to an organized and understandable product. If this describes you, pre-writing activities and mapping techniques may offer a solution.

### PRE-WRITING

Pre-writing is an essential step to developing a cohesive, organized written work. During the pre-writing stage, authors need to generate ideas and then understand how concepts are connected. Traditional approaches used by many writers during pre-writing include brainstorming and a variation, free writing. Basically, you set a time limit (i.e., fifteen minutes) and write uninterrupted about a topic in a stream of ideas. It is important to allow for a free association of ideas and not to edit, reread, or correct information but rather, just write until the allotted time is up. If you are a writer who struggles to resist editing, you might find it helpful to turn the computer monitor off and just type during a free writing session.

## **ORGANIZING**

Once the free writing session is complete, you can go back, reread the ideas, and begin to organize your thoughts by grouping topics together. Major ideas that emerge can be used to create a listing of important ideas which in turn can lead to a structured outline. Many of us may remember being taught the official structure of outline writing with the essential lettering and numbering of the formal outline. Main ideas are listed in the outline followed by sub-items, supporting materials, or discussion points that are then elaborated upon when writing. This may be an effective pre-writing and organization approach. But others may prefer to modify the outline structure by moving from the brainstormed topics to generating main topics and subsections that form a loosely structured bulleted list of ideas. These linear organizational formats can help formalize ideas, but for some of us, this approach may be difficult and constricting. Visual thinkers may be more comfortable with an approach that graphically helps them organize their ideas. The use of mind maps or concept maps may provide an alternative pre-writing approach. Figure 1 is an example of a mind map for this article. Note that the map shown in Figure 1 was created with one of the software resources (bubble.us) discussed in the next section.

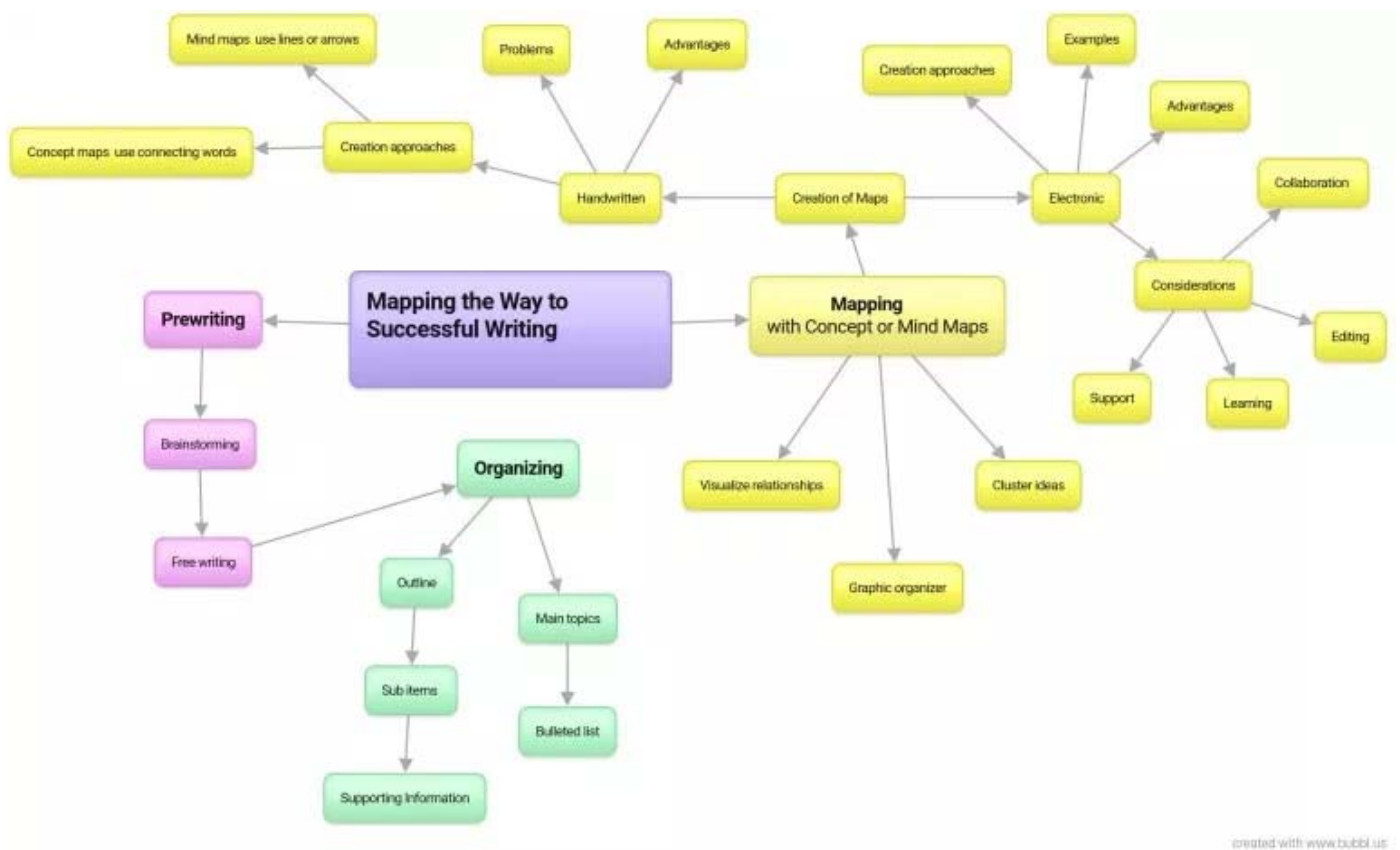


Figure 1. A Concept Map

## MAPPING

Mapping is a diagramming technique that may already be familiar since many educators use concept mapping as a teaching-learning activity with students (Garwood, Ahmed, & McComb, 2018). Concept maps are tools that enable you to cluster ideas and visualize the relationship between ideas (Davies, 2010). For writers, concepts maps may serve as a graphic organizer and help make connections between information and ideas.

In its simplest form, concept mapping can be done using paper and pencil where ideas are clustered and diagrammed onto the page. To construct a hand-written concept map, you would begin by placing the main topic in a central location, usually at the center of a page. This main concept is usually enclosed within a symbol or shape such as a box or circle. Next, main ideas or subtopics, also enclosed within a shape or symbol, would branch off from the main topic and are

connected by lines to the main topic forming a web of information. Traditionally this may look like a branching tree or it could resemble a sunburst-like diagram. The difference between concept maps and mind maps involves the connection of ideas. Mind maps show linkages between concepts with lines or arrows connecting the ideas. With with concept maps, these same linkages exist but connecting or relationship words are included to show how one idea links with another. Relationship words include increased, leads to, results from, represented by, is part of, can be used for; a wide variety of other linking words can be used to show these connections.

Traditionally, concept maps were created by handwriting ideas on a piece of paper. This approach works effectively for some topics and authors, but it does not allow for easy rearrangement of ideas on the written page. Changes to the concept map are cumbersome. As the writer sees the ideas emerge and they formulate their thoughts, they may want to move content, but this can be challenging if handwritten on a page. Using notecards or Post-It notes might be an alternative approach. With this movable technique, the writer brainstorms ideas and writes them on the card or note. Separate ideas are written on their own card or note and then the items are then arranged into a meaningful map. This process allows for the movement of ideas during this pre-writing phase. Ideas can be moved to different parts of the map until you are satisfied with the organization of the material. Then, it is possible to move from pre-writing to the writing stage with the assistance of the organizational map. Once the ideas are grouped and visually connected, you can use this map to form paragraphs.

## **DIGITAL MAPPING TOOLS**

These traditional methods of creating maps can aid in visually organizing the information and facilitate writing. However, with technology growth, this approach may seem outdated. Alternative computer-based mapping approaches may be

more suitable than traditional hand-written mapping techniques. Concept maps can now easily be created using computer programs or applications. Table 1 provides a listing of some of the computer programs and applications that are available to use for concept mapping activities. This table provides information about access to the program, the platform used, cost, and other special features.

These mapping programs can assist you to create the same topic map as a hand-written concept map, but the technology allows you to easily move content on the map and make changes as ideas emerge and develop. Materials can be added, removed, and moved. An electronic file is created and updated as changes are made. For writing teams, these electronic maps can be easily shared with collaborators allowing members of the writing team to edit or add to the map.

#### Table 1: Concept Map Applications

	Cost	Special Features
Bubbl.us Bubbl.us Available: Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free (up to 3 mind maps)</li> <li>\$4.91/month (unlimited mind maps and collaboration)</li> <li>Free 30-day trial</li> <li>Non-profit/education discount available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ability to share with others</li> <li>Insert mind map images into Microsoft products</li> </ul>
Creately Creately.com Available: Online, desktop, and mobile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free (<math>\leq 5</math> public diagrams, <math>\leq 3</math> partners)</li> <li>\$5/month (<math>\leq 5</math> partners)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Templates</li> <li>1-click create</li> <li>Themes and color palettes</li> <li>Real-time collaboration</li> <li>Publish with interactive viewer and active links</li> </ul>
Inspiration Inspiration.com Available: Online, PC, and Mac	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free 30-day trial</li> <li>\$39.95 perpetual license (1 computer)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visual learning</li> <li>Graphics organizers</li> <li>Concept mapping</li> <li>Mind mapping</li> <li>Webbing</li> <li>Outlining</li> <li>Plots &amp; Graphs</li> </ul>
Lucidchart Lucidchart.com Available: Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual plans are free</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborative</li> <li>User-friendly</li> <li>Allows Visio import/export</li> </ul>
MindMaple MindMaple.com Available: PC and Mac (iOS coming soon)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free version available</li> <li>\$19.99 lifetime license</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Import Freemind, MindManager, and TXT files</li> <li>Clipart available</li> <li>Export to Microsoft apps</li> </ul>
Mindomo Mindomo.com Available: Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free (3 maps)</li> <li>\$36/6 mo. (1 user)</li> <li>\$90/6 mo. (1 user, 5 guests)</li> <li>30-day money back guarantee</li> </ul>	Integrates with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Blackboard</li> <li>Clever</li> <li>Canvas</li> <li>Moodle</li> <li>D2L</li> <li>It's Learning</li> <li>Google classroom</li> <li>Office</li> </ul>
RealtimeBoard Realtimeboard.com Available: Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free (<math>\leq 3</math> boards, <math>\leq 3</math> collaborators)</li> <li>\$40 (unlimited boards, custom templates and video chat support)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaborate in real time</li> <li>Infinite workspace</li> </ul>

Before using these technology-based mapping options to assist with writing, authors should consider what program will best meet their needs. Consider if your writing is done alone or with collaborators. If writing with others, will an electronic concept map work for the group? Can you share the files and edit them? Can the collaborators input and edit the map if needed? Another consideration is the challenge and time needed to learn the mapping technology. Find out if there

templates you can use to give you a head start on the map. Is there technical support available to assist you?

Even though there may be a learning curve in mastering the technology, these programs offer a visually-based alternative to concept maps that can be easier to modify and save than traditional hand-written concept maps. They also may be easier for collaborators to share and edit. These writing approaches may be appealing to some writers and may help guide writers as they move from idea generation to writing. Consider these writing techniques and approaches to help generate, cluster, and organize your ideas. Find the approach that meets your writing needs and use it to map your writing success.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Carol V. McIlhenny, MHSc, BSN, RN, RNC-OB is a PhD Candidate at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA. She is an experienced nurse and has worked in a variety of professional nursing positions in diverse roles and settings. Contact Carol by email: [pgsw@iup.edu](mailto:pgsw@iup.edu).

Teresa Shellenbarger PhD, RN, CNE, ANEF is a Distinguished University Professor and the Doctoral Program Coordinator in the Department of Nursing and Allied Health Professions at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA. She is an experienced nurse educator and author. She currently serves as an Author-

In-Residence for *Nurse Author & Editor* and regularly contributes articles about writing, Contact Teresa by email: [tshell@iup.edu](mailto:tshell@iup.edu).

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