MindMaps & Visual Thinking
*The Why and the How: From Brainstorming to Organizing*

By:

Ernest Svenson
Digital Workflow CLE

Presented at:
ACLEA 49th Mid-Year Meeting
February 2-5, 2013
Clearwater, FL
Ernest Svenson spent two years as a law clerk to a federal trial judge. He then practiced commercial litigation, first for a well-respected New Orleans law firm, and more recently as a solo practitioner. His 'Ernie the Attorney' weblog was chosen by the ABA Journal as one of the top 100 law weblogs two years in a row. He has a new book, published by the ABA, called "Blogging in One Hour for Lawyers."

He also puts on CLE seminars about technology in law, and online webinars at the site PaperlessChase.com.

Ernie believes that the practice of law is largely an "information processing business" and his goal is to help lawyers find more efficient ways to process their information.

Ernie enjoys photography, golf and music. He likes to play his guitar for captive audiences, who quickly escape once he starts singing.
What is mindmapping?

A Mind Map is a visual diagram used to display or arrange information. The Wikipedia definition suggests the following description of what a mindmap is:

“a diagram used to represent words, ideas, tasks, or other items linked to and arranged around a central key word or idea. Mind maps are used to generate, visualize, structure, and classify ideas, and as an aid in study, organization, problem solving, decision making, and writing.”

By creating a mindmap you can quickly visualize relationships between concepts and core bits of knowledge, and then create structure. And you can do this simply by sketching out your visual ideas on a piece of paper. But computers are better for creating and tweaking mindmaps.

Computer-generated mindmaps can be “edited” easily, and developed with greater flexibility. It’s easier to fling out new ideas on to a computer mindmap, and it’s easier to rearrange those ideas as one begins to see how those ideas should be structured.

It sounds like, in the end, you’re going to wind up with some kind of hierarchy, right? And that immediately makes most people think of an outline. A linear outline, that’s what they tend to think of when you talk about structuring ideas.

So why not just create a linear outline to begin with?

First of all, if you start with a linear outline the process of flinging out new ideas and concepts will tend to be more rigid. The early part of developing a structured talk or paper is best done in a freeform manner, which lets lots of different ideas come forth. Many of those ideas will turn out to be useless, or inappropriate to the ultimate goal.

Mindmaps are more flexible and permit free flowing ideas to come forth. Mindmaps are more flexible in terms of rearranging those ideas to see if they fit in different areas, to see if they connect with other structures. Linear outlines do not encourage loose ideas to be introduced, and certainly don’t make it as easy to rearrange a large number of loose ideas.

Brainstorming to Organizing

So mindmaps are a better tool for the “brainstorming to organizing” phase of developing a paper or speech. Linear outlines are great if you already have a strong sense of structure. But, since many times you could benefit from some brainstorming, it makes sense to start with a mindmap. In short, you can cover more bases with a mindmap, and it’s easy to shift into a linear outline later if you need or want to.

Remember, the process for any kind of presentation, be it a speech or an oral argument or a closing argument to a jury, usually involves the following steps:
1. Collection - gather all the potentially relevant information.
2. Organization - start looking for patterns and connections in that information that can help you make your points, or arguments.
3. Presentation - present your points or arguments in the most compelling manner, i.e. the manner that allows your intended audience to easily grasp what you have to say, then remember it so they can act on it.

Mindmaps will help you in all phases of your presentation, but it is steps 1 and 2 that really showcase the benefits of mindmapping.

**The visual power of mindmaps demonstrated**

Here is an example of a mindmap that depicts thoughts about mindmapping in general:

![Mindmap Example](image)

This demonstrates how visual a mindmap is, compared to an outline. The map contains connections drawn between elements. Note as well that there are icons displayed next to some of the various elements or nodes. These are common features of any mindmapping software.
You can probably see how studying this mindmap is different than reading a linear outline containing only words, and yet words that essentially convey the same points. Would you be able to readily grasp the key points as quickly? Maybe. But many people find that a mindmap is easier to understand, and also that the information set forth in a mindmap is easier to remember. This is another reason why mindmaps are helpful.

The visual power of mindmaps helps your presentation

After you use a mindmap to brainstorm and then organize information, you’re left with a wonderful tool that you can use when you present your talk, or your argument in court.

For example, a lawyer who wanted to make an argument about the elements of a case involving personal injury might create a mindmap that looks like this:

![Mindmap](image)

This kind of mindmap is fairly rudimentary, and looks like the product of stages 1 and 2 (i.e. brainstorming and organizing). But, as the lawyer gets ready to present his argument he or she would probably want to have a map that’s a little more visually compelling. Such a map would help the lawyer quickly zoom in on key points, and it might look something like this:
All of these visual elements were added later. They are easy to add when using a computer software program. And most computer mindmapping software allows for this kind of mindmap.

**Tweaking a mindmap is easy once you learn how**

With the computer it’s easy to rearrange these elements, or to collapse certain nodes from view. Again, the key to a mindmap is flexibility. Information contained in a mindmap can easily be changed or filtered. How you rearrange elements or filter them may vary slightly amongst different software programs, but mostly they tend to work the same way.

To collapse a node, you usually click on the plus or minus sign located near the branch. To rearrange a node you usually select it by clicking on it, and then you drag it to the new node you want to connect it to.
Helpful resources for learning more about mindmaps, visual thinking and presentations

For more information on how to work with visual information in general, and mindmaps in particular, here is a list of helpful resources.

**Mindmaps**

- **The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential**, Tony Buzan
- **Why you should MindMap** - North Carolina attorney Lee Rosen explains how he uses MindMaps in his law practice.

**Cognition Principles**

- **Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School**, John Medina
- **Brain Rules for CLE Presentations (blog post)**, Ernie Svenson
- **Information Anxiety**, Richard Saul Wurman (a very helpful book for people who manage information - e.g. lawyers)
- **Getting Organized in the Google Era: How to Stay Efficient, Productive (and Sane) in an Information-Saturated World**, Douglas Merrill and James Martin
- **A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age**, Daniel Pink

**Developing "Visual Thinking"**

- **The Back of the Napkin: Solving Problems and Selling Ideas with Pictures**, Dan Roam
- **Blah Blah Blah: What To Do When Words Don't Work**, Dan Roam
- **Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain**, Betty Edwards
- **The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential**, Tony Buzan
- **Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative**, Edward Tufte
- **Beautiful Evidence**, Edward Tufte

**Presentation Principles**

- **Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery**, Garr Reynolds (Buy this book first, and read it often)
- **slide:ology**, Nancy Duarte (Great book to learn how to build a visual presentation from scratch; also explains design principles)
- **Really Bad Powerpoint (free web post)**, Seth Godin
- **Lee Posen's Presentation Magic** - a professional presenter’s blog on thoughts about effective speaking techniques. Mr. Posen is also a clinical psychologist, so he knows the psychology of presenting.
• **Mac Power Users Interview of Les Posen** - highly informative discussion of special tricks for making your slides more interesting and engaging

• **Mac PowerUsers podcast on Keynote**, David Sparks & Katie Floyd (two practicing attorneys who use Macs discuss how to prepare and give presentations using Apple’s Keynote program)

• **The Articulate Advocate**, Brian Johnson and Marsha Hunter - Soup to nuts practical guidance on how to deliver a talk, or how to speak in court. These are the things that veteran actors learn, and which lawyers should be taught as well, but for some reason never are.
Svenson known for his Ernie the Attorney website (ernietheattorney.net), which was chosen by the ABA Journal as one of the top 100 law weblogs two years in a row. He believes that the practice of law is largely an "information processing business" and tries to help lawyers find more efficient ways to process their information. Toward that end he also started the weblog: pdfforlawyers.com, which is focused on the use of PDFs in law. He also started a company that delivers CLE programs in Louisiana: www.paperlesschase.com.

He is a full time speaker on topics related to practical use of technology by lawyers, and has spoken for bar groups or trade associations in Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Illinois, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas. His twitter handles are @ernieattorney @pdflawyer and @paperlesschase.