Brainstorming and mind mapping

What is brainstorming?

Brainstorming is a great way to make a start on an assessment or to prepare for exams as it will make you aware of what you already know and what you need to revise on a topic.

Brainstorming basically involves writing down everything you can think of in relation to a topic or task, without worrying about writing in proper sentences or to a particular format. It helps you to gather all your ideas onto a single page and allows you to start anywhere and then build on these initial ideas.

Brainstorming also works well in a group. It allows everyone to come together and share ideas, discuss issues and problem solve. You may decide to allocate one person as the note taker, or decide to each write your own notes during the brainstorming session.

Tips for effective brainstorming

- Start with a blank piece of paper.
- Write the main topic or task anywhere on the page.
- Write down anything at all that comes to mind in relation to this topic or task.
- Write freely and do not worry about order, quality or style, or where on the page you write it. All that matters is that what you are writing is meaningful to you.
- If you feel like it, use colours and/or punctuation marks or symbols like arrows and asterisks to highlight information or main points. You can also use pictures or diagrams instead of words.
- Write until you run out of ideas.
- Read back over your notes and circle or highlight any key points. Look for gaps and ideas that could be further explored or expanded on. This is the starting point for your research.
- To make your notes clearer and easier to follow, it is helpful to re-write them as a mind map.
- Remember that you may come back to brainstorming at any stage of your assessment, research or study process.
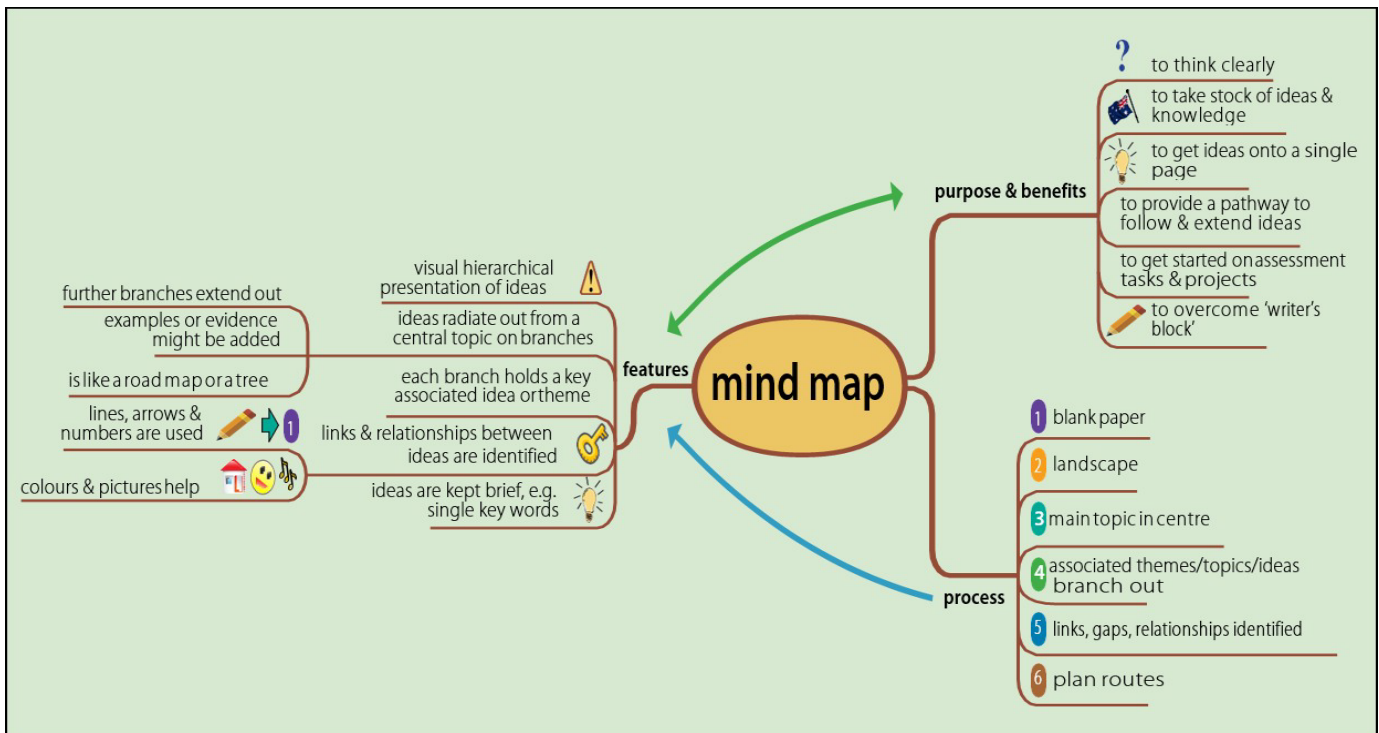
What is a mind map?

Mind maps are an extension of brainstorming that helps you to visually organise your information. They can be used to clearly show how each idea, theme or subtopic, as well as related examples and evidence, are linked to the main topic or task. Organising your thoughts into a mind map provides you with clear pathways to follow to help you tackle the task, and makes it easier for you to identify gaps in your research or knowledge.

Tips for creating a mind map

- Use your brainstorming notes to create your mind map.
- Start your mind map on a new blank sheet of paper.
- In the centre of the page, write the main topic or task.
- Use your brainstorming notes to create your mind map.
- Start your mind map on a new blank sheet of paper.
- Start drawing branches out from the central topic, writing one key point on or at the end of each branch.
- From each key point, draw smaller branches with supporting points (this may be explanations, examples or evidence), on or at the end of each smaller branch.
- Add any additional minor points, examples and/or reference sources at the end of each branch.

An example of a mind map

Mind map example showing:

purpose & benefits
- to think clearly
- to take stock of ideas & knowledge
- to get ideas onto a single page
- to provide a pathway to follow & extend ideas
- to get started on assessment tasks & projects
- to overcome 'writer's block'

features
- visual hierarchical presentation of ideas
- ideas radiate out from a central topic on branches
- each branch holds a key associated idea or theme
- links & relationships between ideas are identified
- ideas are kept brief, e.g. single key words
- further branches extend out
- examples or evidence might be added
- is like a road map or a tree
- lines, arrows & numbers are used
- colours & pictures help

process
1. blank paper
2. landscape
3. main topic in centre
4. associated themes/topics/ideas branch out
5. links, gaps, relationships identified
6. plan routes

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