

FreeMind Can Free Your Mind

How to use mind mapping and mind mapping software to improve your creativity and productivity

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Introduction

Over the years, I have researched and tried a variety of techniques and tools to improve the quality and productivity of my work. From learning about filing techniques to how to process e-mail efficiently to my current work on project management certification, there seems to always be ways to take yourself to the next level. A few years ago, when I had a tablet PC, one tool I tried was a product called MindManager. The concept of MindManager was to generate a mind map using the drawing/pen input capabilities of the tablet PC. I no longer have the tablet, but I am finding more than ever lately that I could use a tool for generating mind maps – preferably something on the computer instead of drawing them by hand.

Fortunately, I recently came across such a package – FreeMind. A few primary features made this an excellent candidate:

- it is open source;
- it is free (both as in freedom and as in “no cost”);
- it runs on a variety of platforms (basically, any operating system)

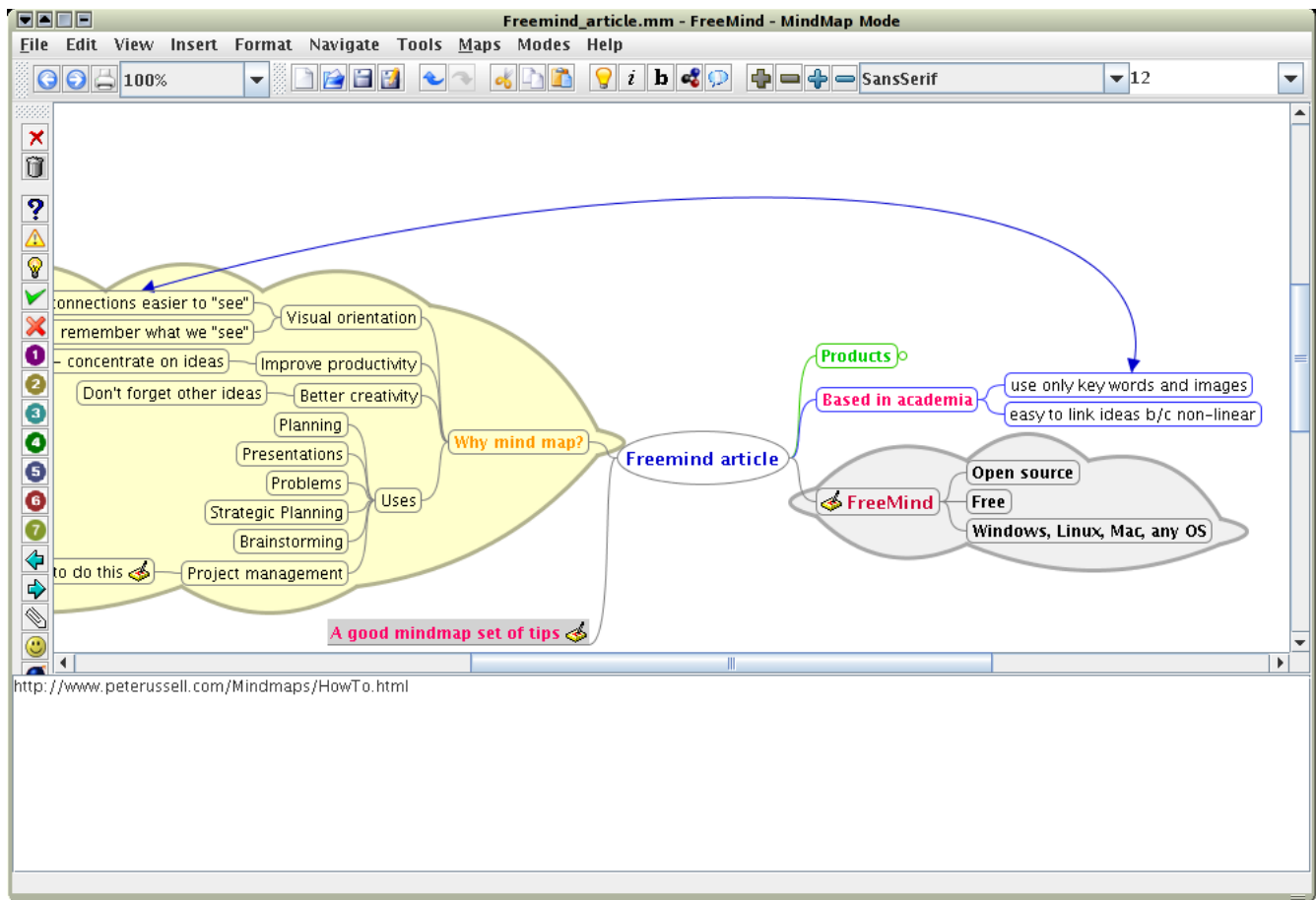
That last point was especially important for me as I run a Linux based network and desktops. Being able to use mind mapping software once again reminded me how powerful the concept is. I think you may be able to use it effectively in your work as well, so this article is written to help you learn more about mind maps and the software you may be able to use.

Why mind map?

Before looking at software, let us first make sure we understand what mind mapping is and how it may be used. Mind mapping is a technique that is rooted in academia many years ago. Sometimes referred to as “concept mapping”, it was designed to help students focus on key concepts as they developed presentations, papers, etc. A couple features of mind maps that make them unique include the use of key words and images and the linkage of ideas in a non-linear fashion. I'm sure those of you reading this have heard statistics in the past that most people – somewhere in the neighborhood of 70% - are visually oriented. Thus, techniques that rely on imagery, colors, layout, etc., can be very powerful. Just look at advertising as a classic example. Mind maps draw upon this preference in people by making the process of recording ideas a visual one.

Likewise, if you are a typical manager, you have several projects going on at once with input coming at you from all directions. When faced with the need to sketch out a preliminary plan or to record some thoughts, initially you probably have no idea how everything will coalesce together. If you can get the ideas on paper, you can link them together later in many different ways. Again, a mind map can help with this as it is not organized in a linear fashion like a paper outline with sections and subsections.

Below is a screenshot of the mindmap I put together as I prepared to write this article:



As you can see, it is very graphical in nature with branches off of nodes, clouds to help group concepts, and a non-linear connection between a couple of the ideas. Using software for this, I was also able to collapse one of the branches (see the “Products” bubble?) and the highlighted item (“A good mindmap set of tips”) has a note attached, showing in the bottom pane. I’ll speak to some of the features of mind mapping software, and FreeMind in particular, shortly.

Mind Map Uses and Other Benefits

Mind maps can be used for a variety of purposes and can provide you with many benefits. These include:

- **Visual orientation** – as mentioned earlier, most people are visually oriented and a mind map will help them to “see” ideas and how they interconnect. The visual nature also helps with memory retention.
- **Improved productivity** – because mind maps are based on the use of key words and even images when possible, one does not get bogged down in trying to write out every little detail of a concept. In fact, the mere act of writing (or typing) is minimized. This lets you put your concentration and effort into ideas, likely what you are supposed to be doing.
- **Better creativity** – because you are able to work much faster and more efficiently in recording ideas, it minimizes the likelihood that you will forget something or fail to note an idea.
- **Planning** – start putting together your notes and ideas for planning purposes and rearrange them as the process moves along.
- **Presentations** – use the mind map to organize the main points you need to make during a presentation in a way that will help you remember them without having to memorize them. This is probably the longest running use of a mind map that I have engaged in as all of my public presentations are written out in the form of a map using many colors and images.

- **Problems** – record a problem with branches for different possible solutions.
- **Strategic planning** – record the results of your SWOT analysis, map out possible solutions, and the actions tied to each strategy.
- **Brainstorming** – just start getting those ideas recorded!
- **Project management** – keep track of what needs to be done, in what order, by whom. A great article on using mind maps for project management is available at the Innovation Tools web site(<http://www.innovationtools.com/Articles/ArticleDetails.asp?a=148>).

How to mind map

Speaking of how to use a mind map, I would like to just briefly cover some tips on how to create mind maps. These tips are based on the work of Peter Russell who provides lots of information about mind maps at his web site (<http://www.peterussell.com/MindMaps/>):

- Use key words or images
- Start at the middle and work your way out to the edges. (I might make an exception for this when preparing a map for a presentation – I like to make mine in the form of a treasure map with arrows leading from one clue to another).
- Use clear, strong visual images – especially at the center of the mind map.
- Use the branches to create “sub-nodes”
- Peter suggests printing instead of script and using lower case instead of upper case. This suggestion may not mean much if you are using software to generate your mind map.
- Use color!
- Use different visual aids like arrows, graphics, borders, etc.
- Have fun!

Mind Mapping Software

There are several software applications now available that can help you produce mind maps. As I mentioned earlier, I have used MindManager in the past and felt it was a capable product. Now I am using FreeMind. Below is a list of some of the products available along with some brief comments:

- **Visual Mind** (<http://www.visual-mind.com/wv.htm?0015>) – This is a Windows-only piece of software. The “Basic Edition” (which is “crippled” according to the site) costs \$89 and the “Business Edition” runs \$199 per license.
- **SmartDraw** (<http://www.smartdraw.com/specials/mindmapping.asp?id=31671>) – Another Windows-only piece of software, a single-user license runs \$197.
- **Mindjet MindManager** (<http://www.mindjet.com/us/>) - This application will only run on Windows XP or Windows 2000 Pro, so the choice of platform is very limited. A single user license runs \$349.
- **Inspiration Software** (<http://www.inspiration.com/home.cfm>) – This application is available for both the Windows and Mac OS platforms. Part of the reason for that is its heavy basis and emphasis in the academic/educational world. The cost of a license is \$69 per user.
- **MindMapper** (<http://www.mindmapper.com/>) - This application is for Windows only and runs \$180 per user license.
- **NovaMind** (<http://www.nova-mind.com/>) - This application came from developers of Apple software, so it is only available for Mac OS'es. It runs \$79 per user.
- **FreeMind** (http://freemind.sourceforge.net/wiki/index.php/Main_Page) – An open source application, it is free and can run on any operating system (with precompiled binaries for most operating systems). The cost is **FREE**.

Recommendation

Here at Strategic Innovations, I recommend users download, install and start using FreeMind. It comes with all the benefits of being an open source application and the cost cannot be beat. Based on my experiences, FreeMind is every bit as good as the 800-lb. gorilla of the market – MindManager. The makers of FreeMind do note on the web site that there are a few rough edges and minimal or no support for a few items (like fancy fonts). Nothing that impacts productivity or useability in my opinion. In addition, FreeMind is able to export to a variety of formats, including html and xhtml (see an xhtml example here), PNG (a graphic file format) or JPEG (another graphic file format), or as an OpenOffice document (ver. 1.1 - .sxw). Thus, if you are using OpenOffice (as I recommend), once your mind map is done, if you need to get it into a written report form, just do an export and your outline is ready for you.

Even if you choose to go with one of the more costly applications available, I still recommend that you explore mind mapping as a way to improve your creativity and productivity. It is a solid business tool that can help you do your job better.

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