

Mapping Out The Personal Statement; A Visual Thinking Strategy for Students

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Mind Maps (also known as visual maps and wandering maps) are a creative way to approach the professional school personal statement and help students see the big picture. Mapping is a method for visual thinking that helps students organize their thoughts and make sense of their experiences. Maps can help students identify key strengths and admissions competencies that they can highlight in the personal statement, supplemental essays and even the interview.

In her book *You Majored In What; Mapping Your Path From Chaos to Career*, Katharine Brooks outlines the use of a Wandering Map technique she employs while working with undecided and liberal art majors who didn't have a good grasp of their strengths and skills and how they might apply them throughout their lives—not just in a work setting. She found that when students were asked to “list their top ten strengths” they would write one or two things, but then get stuck. “The Wandering Map is a way to get around those mental roadblocks because it invites students to “discover” their strengths intuitively through what they have done in the past.”

I've found that even students with a clear goal, such as medical school, have trouble reflecting on the qualities, experiences, and strengths that they want to highlight in the application. Pre-professional students have spent so much time checking items off of their “to-do” list and following a self-prescribed formula that they often have trouble crafting a unique and reflective essay. Mapping can help them “connect the dots” and develop an essay only they could have written.

Mapping Exercise

Approximate time to complete: 45 minutes: Approximately 15 minutes to draw the map (unless students want to be artistic!) and about 20-30 minutes to analyze it.

Instructions:

1. Give every student a blank piece of paper (preferably legal size) and pencils, pens, and/or colored markers.
2. Ask the students to start thinking about all the interesting, significant things they've done or have happened to them. Tell them to think way back to pre-school days through the present and note any highlights from those years. This is a “brain dump” on to the paper.
 - a. Did you take interesting classes?
 - b. Did you have a memorable summer experience?
 - c. What are some things you're most proud of?
 - d. Did you face a tough challenge?
 - e. Did you have interesting hobbies?
 - f. How did you spend your free time?
 - g. What was your favorite time in school?
3. Ask the students to start writing down their thoughts. Keep them short—one or two words. Don't try to write an essay or paragraph. If you worked at a summer camp, just write “summer camp.”
4. Tell students to draw a rectangle or circle around every entry they write down to keep them separate from one another. Encourage them to fill the page with as much information as they can.
5. Remind them not to try to organize it in any way and **do not censor or edit what they're writing**. Anything that comes to mind should go on the paper—even if it seems trivial or silly.
6. While they are doing this you can show them the list of “Prompts” you received as a separate handout. You can also add to or create your own prompt list if you think of additional ideas.

7. Now it's time to analyze the maps. Start by asking them to connect (by drawing lines) the obvious links. For instance, if they have a lot of different sports they played, encourage them to connect all the different sports. If they have a lot of summer jobs or other work/internship experiences, ask them to draw lines to connect them.

8. Ask them to think about what the meaning is, or the commonalities between, the different things they have done and label each line. For instance, if they played a lot of sports, what does "sports," mean to them? Were they leaders on their teams? Were they into the competition—win at all costs? Were they more interested in being part of a team? Did they mostly pursue individual sports and push themselves to be the best? Only the student can identify the meaning- ask them to dig deep!

9. Tell them that now we want to "connect the dots"—just like in those old coloring books where you would connect the numbered dots and suddenly see a picture. What are the connecting themes or threads that run through their lives? Do they seem to use certain skills over and over again? You have a handout that contains a list of threads and themes including the AAMC Admissions Competencies.

10. At this point, depending on your students and the amount of time you have you can ask for volunteers to share themes or threads that they have discovered. You can also break the students into pairs and have them share their maps with each other (if you plan to do this, tell them ahead of time so they don't write something they wouldn't want someone else to see). Sometimes they can find threads and themes in other people's lives that they can't find in their own.

11. Finally, ask the student to write down 5 key strengths, threads or themes that they have uncovered. They can now start to think about how they might use those discoveries in their professional school applications, essays and interviews. The result should be an essay that only that student could have written!

12. If you can, allow a few weeks or months to pass and re-visit the map with them somehow. You can conduct this exercise a few months before your traditional personal statement workshop. This will allow for continued reflection before the anxiety of the application preparation reaches its peak. Students often find new themes as they re-visit the map. If they get stuck on a supplemental question, ask them to pull the map back out for ideas and examples.

Be creative and find what works for your advising format and student population. Good luck! Feel free to contact me with questions or feedback at etom@occ.cccd.edu. ☺

Resources:

Brooks, Katharine. [You Majored in What? Mapping Your Path from Chaos to Career](#) New York: Plume, 2010

Buzan, Tony, and Buzan, Barry. [The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential](#). New York: Plume, 1996.

Hyerle, David. [Visual Tools for Transforming Information into Knowledge](#). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2009.

Margules, Nancy and Maal, Nusa. [Mapping Inner Space](#). Chicago: Zephyr Press, 2002.

Mind Map Prompts

Events in your life, positive or negative, lasting a moment in time or for years:

- Working in a fast food restaurant or law firm
- Helping your neighbors move in
- Taking a fantastic class
- Tutoring a child
- Baking cookies for the holidays
- Designing a website
- Acting in a school play
- Reading an amazing poem
- Running for school election
- Winning a basketball game
- Parents' divorce
- Family injury or illness
- Family challenge

Objects you use and/or enjoy:

- Computers
- Musical instruments
- Books
- Binoculars
- Tools
- Skateboards
- Telescopes
- Microscopes
- Sailboats
- Paintbrushes
- Journals

People who have affected you in a significant way:

- Parents
- Relatives
- Mentor
- Professor
- Health Professional
- Favorite teacher
- Hard teacher
- Coach
- Scout leader
- Minister

Academics/ College:

- Academic major/minor
- Classes
- Achievements
- Assignments, papers or projects
- Creative works
- College years: freshman, sophomore, junior, etc.
- Theories
- Lab/ Research experience
- Honors

Extracurricular:

- Internships
- Clinical experience
- Study abroad
- Summer programs
- Clubs/ Student activities
- Volunteer activities
- Leadership
- Athletics

Other Ideas:

- Unique accomplishments
- Adventures/risks
- Elementary or junior high school
- Family heritage/culture
- Favorite memories
- Favorite quotes or song lyrics
- Fun & leisure
- Games
- High school years
- Hobbies
- Ideas
- Interests
- Jobs
- Pets
- Places you've lived
- Places you've traveled
- Reading
- Sports
- Summer activities
- Vacations
- Writing

Mind Map Threads and Themes

- Achievements/ Awards
- Alone or with others
- Animals
- Art
- Classes
- Computers
- Creative ideas
- "Doing" or "Thinking"
- Drama
- Equipment
- Family
- Fun
- Hobbies
- Indoors or outdoors
- Internally or Externally rewarded
- Knowledge I've acquired
- Learning
- Locations
- Music
- Physically active or deskbound
- Reading
- Research
- Risky or safe
- Roles I've played in family or elsewhere
- Solving Problems
- Subjects- topics of interests
- Things I want to change
- Tools
- Types of people
- What comes naturally to me
- Writing

Skills & Talents

- Analytical
- Artistic/ Aesthetics
- Assertiveness
- Communication
- Computer
- Counseling
- Creative thinking
- Detail/Follow-through
- Interpersonal "People"
- Research/Investigative
- Leadership/Management
- Manual Dexterity
- Negotiating
- Numerical/Financial

- Organizational
- Outdoor/Athletic
- Presentation/Performing
- Problem Solving
- Serving/Helping
- Teaching/Instruction
- Thinking Strategically

What's Important/ Values

- Adventure
- Challenge
- Contribution
- Creativity
- Diversity
- Expertise
- Family
- Friendship
- Fun
- Harmony
- Health
- Independence
- Justice
- Leadership
- Learning/Knowledge

AAMC Admissions Competencies

Interpersonal

- Service orientation
- Social skills
- Cultural competence
- Team work
- Oral communication

Intrapersonal

- Ethical responsibility to self/ others
- Reliability and dependability
- Capacity for improvement

Thinking and Reasoning

- Critical Thinking
- Quantitative Reasoning
- Scientific Inquiry
- Written Communication

Science

- Living Systems
- Human Behavior