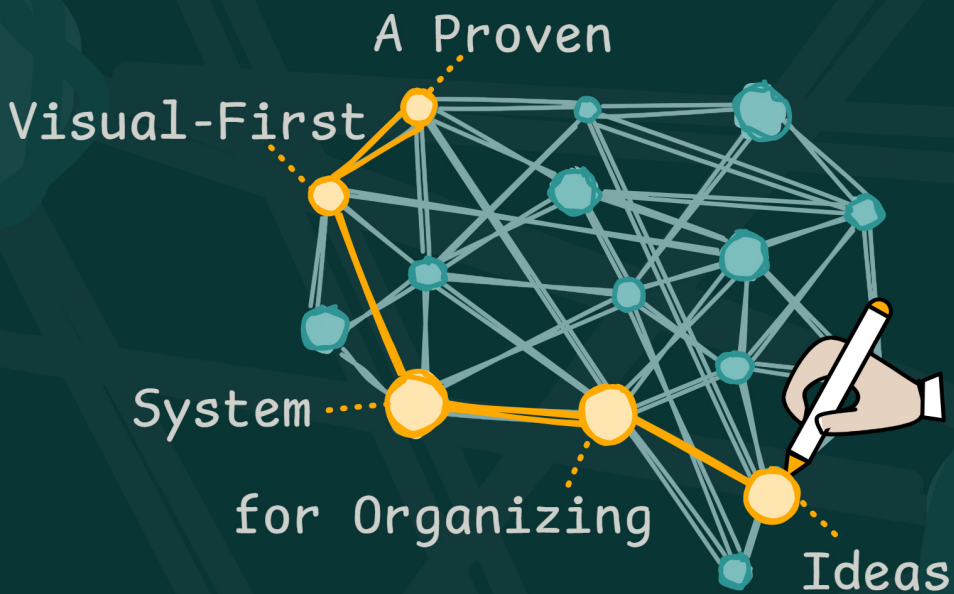


SKETCH YOUR MIND

Nurture a **Playful**
and Creative Brain



ZSOLT VICZIAN

Sketch Your Mind

Nurture a Playful and Creative Brain

Written by Zsolt Viczián

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Dedication

To the wonderful community of thinkers, note-takers, and visual explorers. Your curiosity, generosity, and pursuit of better ways to think inspire me every day.

In 2020 I ran an experiment—sharing ideas publicly to find like-minded people. This sparked a chain reaction: a blog, Obsidian-Excalidraw, a YouTube channel, the Visual Thinking Workshop, and now, this book. What started as personal inquiry grew into something bigger, thanks to you.

My family stood by me through this journey. I'm especially grateful to my wife, who supported the countless hours I spent with my notes and sketches. Without her, none of this would have been possible.

To Conor White-Sullivan and Christopher Chedeau, your encouragement nudged me to build the Excalidraw plugin, bringing visual thinking to life. To TfTHacker, your push got me to publish my first video.

This book is dedicated to all who treat knowledge as a journey, not a destination. We do this because we love thinking, note-taking, and connecting of ideas. As James P. Carse wrote in *Finite and Infinite Games*:

“The joyfulness of infinite play, its laughter, lies in learning to start something we cannot finish.”

The world of visual thinking and connected ideas remains incomplete. With every note and every sketch, we push boundaries further. I hope this book contributes, even a little, to our infinite game of better thinking and richer lives.

KNOWLEDGE

MANIFESTO

Knowledge is more than just stored, and not from
For too long we've been taught to keep it all in our heads
in folders, on flashcards, in books, in notes, in our heads.

It's time to let it go. To stop storing and start exploring.

Learn
Discover
to be
free

Stop Filing
Start Living

A Visual of
How to Use
Your Mind

Visual
Explains
How

Stop the books. Stop the gear. Make your knowledge visible.
Because once you see it, it's not going back.

Visual and Visual are Equal Partners

Knowledge is a Visual
Your Mind is a Visual

Visual is a Visual
Your Mind is a Visual

Visual is a Visual
Your Mind is a Visual

MANIFESTO

Knowledge is meant to be **seen, shaped, and set free.**

For too long, our notes have been trapped in walls of text—locked in folders, buried in bullet points. But our minds don't think in lines. We think in **loops, shapes, color, and space.**

It's time to flip the habit. To **stop storing and start exploring.**

Ideas Deserve to Be Seen.

Words flatten. Visuals reveal. Meaning emerges in feedback loops. Knowledge comes alive when it becomes visible.

Text and Visuals Are Equal Partners.

Visuals aren't decoration—they reveal. Text adds precision. Visuals spark intuition and bring the big picture into view.

Knowledge Is a Genie—Don't Trap It.

Books are magic lamps. Reading sets the genie free. Filing ideas in text-only notes slams the lid shut. Ideas need room to breathe—space to grow.

Stop Filing. Start Thinking.

Your mind isn't a filing cabinet. It's spatial, visual, alive. Your system should be too.

A Visual-First System Is Your Atlas for Thinking.

Archives are for storage. Atlases are for journeys. A visual-first system maps where ideas lead.

Create. Explore. Play.

Play isn't just for kids—it's your thinking superpower. Sketching turns ideas into a playground.

Sketch Your Mind.

This isn't about art. Your brain is wired for visual thinking—it's time your notes were too.

This is your invitation to step beyond text-first thinking—into a more dynamic, visual way of engaging with knowledge.

Flip the habit. Free the genie. Make your knowledge visible.

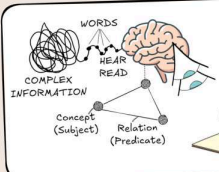
Because once you do, **there's no going back.**

MANIFESTO

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Ideas
Deserve
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Text and Visuals Are Equal Partners







Stop Filing
Start Thinking




A Visual-First
System is Your
Atlas for Thinking

Knowledge is a Genie
Don't Trap It in a Bottle

 <p>Books are magic lamps of knowledge.</p>	 <p>Reading frees the genie.</p>	 <p>Filing ideas in text- only notes traps it.</p>	 <p>Give it space to thrive.</p>
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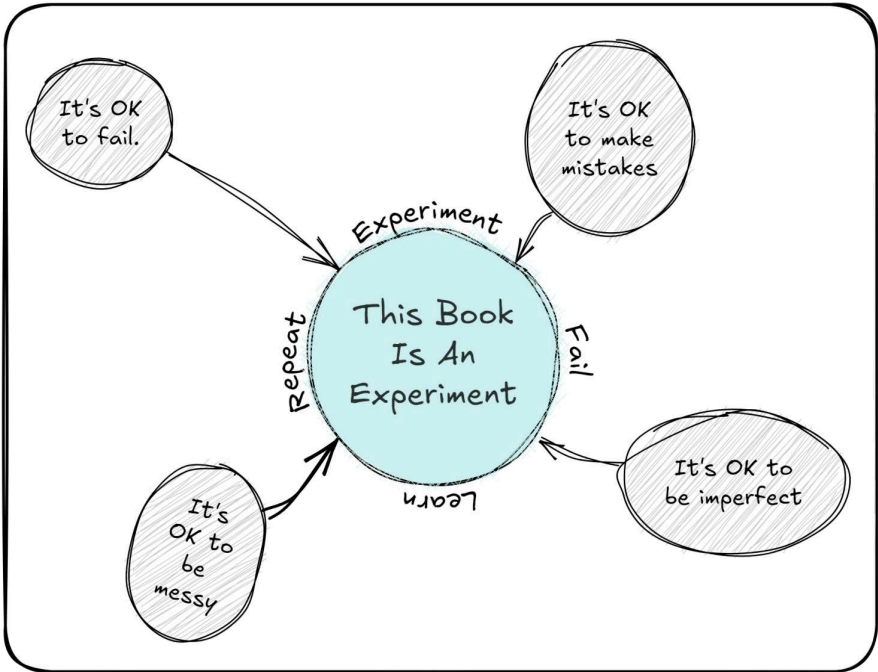
Create
Explore
Play



Sketch
Your Mind

Flip the habit. Free the genie. Make your knowledge visible.
Because once you do, there's no going back.

Preface



Two weeks into this project, I wasn't sure if this book would ever see the light of day. I had announced an ambitious plan in a video—a six-week sprint to write and self-publish a book. I even invited people to follow along, to witness my process, my struggles, and very possibly, my failure.

“Learning in public,” I called it. But really, it felt more like failing in public.

Shortly after publishing that first video, a comment popped up on YouTube:

“There are already too many books. Libraries are constantly throwing out books no one reads. What makes yours different?”

That question hung in the air for days.

What was I doing? Who was I to write a book? I wasn’t a writer, an academic, or even particularly good at the things I wanted to write about.

I can’t draw—not well, at least not the way people might expect if you want to teach visual thinking. I’ve taken courses, watched tutorials, read books on drawing. And yet, my stick figures are questionable, my lines shaky, my proportions completely off.

I’m also not a writer. My high school teacher blamed my convoluted writing on the fact that I had spent two years living in the U.S. as a kid, disrupting my Hungarian grammar. But that excuse doesn’t hold up—I write just as badly in English.

And let’s not forget programming. I’ve written thousands of lines of code for Obsidian-Excalidraw, the visual thinking tool I built. But I’m not a real programmer. My code is a mess—hacks upon hacks to make things work. Somehow, it does, but it’s not elegant.

So what am I doing here? Why should you, the reader, spend your precious time on this book?

Because despite my shortcomings, this book is about something I deeply believe in—a way of thinking, learning, and creating that doesn’t require perfection.

Because this book has the potential to transform the way you think, learn, and communicate—helping you break free from text-bound habits and embrace a more fluid, visual approach to knowledge.

For over a quarter of a century, I searched for the perfect visual note-taking tool, something that would let me think with

more than just text. No one built it, so in 2021, I did it myself. But the tool was only part of the puzzle. I wanted to explore a way of working visually, a way of capturing and linking ideas beyond text, beyond mind maps, beyond doodles.

That's what this book is about: a method for structuring knowledge that combines writing, drawing, spatial thinking, visual linking, and iterative creativity.

This book is also an experiment. I wanted to test whether today's tools—AI writing assistants, Excalidraw, Obsidian, automation scripts—could help someone like me, someone who isn't a natural writer or artist, create something valuable. I wanted to see if I could drink my own champagne—use my own tools, my own ideas, and make something real.

I don't know yet if I succeeded. But the fact that you are holding this book in your hands means I at least finished it. Maybe not in six weeks. Maybe not exactly as I envisioned. But I saw it through.

And that, I think, is the whole point of visual thinking—it's not about getting it perfect. It's about getting it out, shaping it, refining it, and making connections you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

So, if you've ever thought, I can't draw, I'm not a writer, I'm not creative—this book is for you. Because I've thought all those things too. And yet, here we are.

Introduction

You're walking through an unfamiliar city, looking for a place to eat. You pause outside a restaurant.



Do you read the menu—or glance through the window?

The menu is a list. You take it in line by line, scanning dish by dish, comparing prices, checking options. It's structured, but slow. Your eye hops from word to word, trying to piece things together.

The window gives you something else entirely. One glance—and you *know*. You see if the place is lively or quiet, stylish or simple, packed or just right. You take in the lighting, the people, the atmosphere—all at once.

The menu gives you structure. The window gives you insight.

Both have their role. But when you're hungry and unsure, one gives you a feel for the whole. The other gives you the details. That difference—between structure and immediacy, between reading and seeing—is at the heart of this book.

Now imagine your thoughts were like that.

Most of our thinking happens in menus. Not literal ones—but bullet points, tidy notes, color-coded highlights, lists that grow but rarely spark action. Information we consume line by line.

It's how we were trained to think: in lists, outlines, documents.

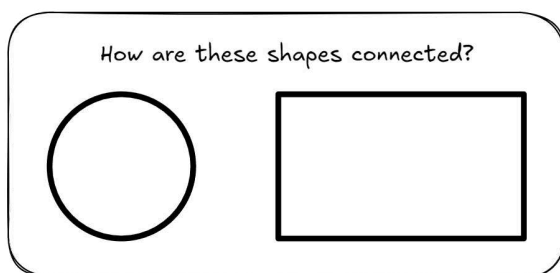
But thinking doesn't happen line by line.

When you're trying to solve a problem, spark a new idea, or get unstuck, you don't need more items on a list—you need to see *the big picture*.

You need a window.

This book is about adding windows to your thinking—spaces to play, explore, and snap ideas together like LEGO bricks into something new. It's about designing thinking systems that grow with you.

Now consider this riddle. How are these shapes connected? Think about it. We'll come back to it soon.



For a long time, I envied people who filled sketchbooks effortlessly. Their pages felt alive—full of expression and insight. When I gave it a go, I ended up with wobbly stick figures and rough scribbles. It didn't look like much, so I assumed I wasn't a visual thinker.

But the desire was always there. I wanted to see my ideas, not just write them.

I tackled my drawing struggles like an engineering challenge: with tools, templates, and code. I wrote scripts that let me trace icons, experiment with layout, and apply color schemes based on color theory. I stopped aiming for beauty and leaned into clarity.

This tinkering eventually became Excalidraw inside Obsidian—a space where I could place icons, connect ideas, and arrange thoughts spatially. No pressure to be artistic. Just freedom to think in space. Only later did I realize how different this was from what school had taught me to do.

Somewhere along the way, we were trained to think in lines. Schools taught us that real thinking lives in essays, outlines, and bullet points. But our brains don't work that way. We think in loops, branches, clusters, and layers. We notice patterns. We imagine space. We move between ideas—not just forward.

We were taught to flatten our thoughts into lines of text—no wonder we now struggle to bring them back to life.

It doesn't have to be this way.



The Moment Everything Clicked

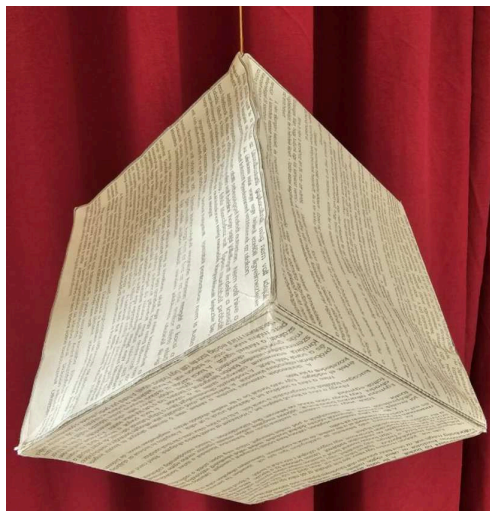
I was sixteen, sitting in my bedroom, wrestling with a story too big for the page. A crime, a victim, a weapon, and a dozen ways to see the same moment. I wrote the scene six times—each from a different angle—but the relationships weren't clear.

So, I folded the pages into a cube. Held it, turned it, read it as an object—six faces, six perspectives, all connected.

Suddenly, it clicked.

This wasn't a linear story; it was spatial. It showed me a way to think around an idea, not just through it. That moment fundamentally changed my approach to knowledge. Without realizing it, I'd discovered visual thinking—the ability to structure ideas beyond text, to make knowledge tangible and see hidden connections.

Knowledge needs spatial organization. Structure doesn't live only in the text—it lives in space, in movement, in how we navigate beyond flat sequences. The same principle applies to how we capture, link, and build ideas in every area of knowledge.

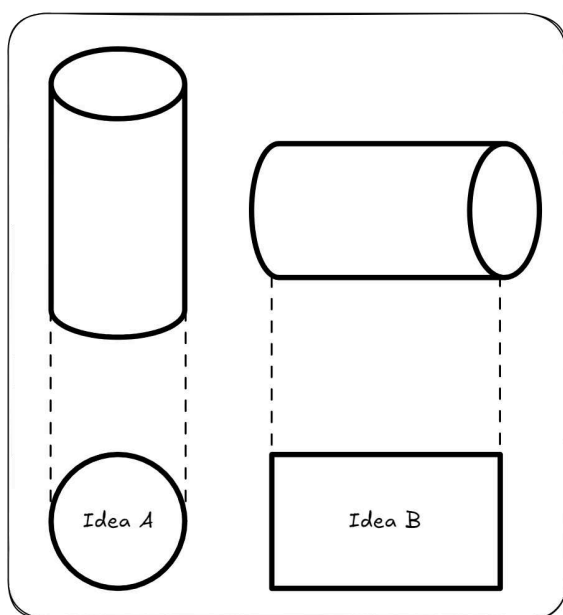


SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE

If you've ever felt buried under text—piling references, bullet points, and notes—you'll appreciate what visual thinking can offer. This isn't about making art; it's about freeing your thoughts from rigid lines, letting them grow organically in space. Sketches, icons, tracing, or algorithmic color choices aren't shortcuts—they're ways to structure knowledge visually because that's how our minds work best.

The magic lies in the connections it reveals. A single sketch can link ideas that remain distant in text, sparking recognition. Have you ever rearranged puzzle pieces and suddenly seen the picture? That's visual thinking—concepts snapping together intuitively.

Take the earlier riddle. The connection isn't just about shapes—it's about shifting dimensions. A circle and a rectangle seem unrelated until you move beyond linear thinking. Ideas don't just sit side by side; they stack, rotate, and interlock—sparking insight. Visual thinking draws on intuition, revealing meaning in the spaces between ideas.



Sketching a drawing or diagram to help you think is already a big advantage—but it's only half the solution. The real magic begins when visuals form a connected system. When sketches, maps, and diagrams aren't isolated moments but part of an evolving network of ideas, visual thinking transforms from a spark of intuition into a reliable, reusable way of knowing.

This book offers practical methods not only to think visually, but to build that evolving system. It's a systemic approach to

visual thinking: one that helps you connect, navigate, link, and reuse visuals to unlock their full potential.

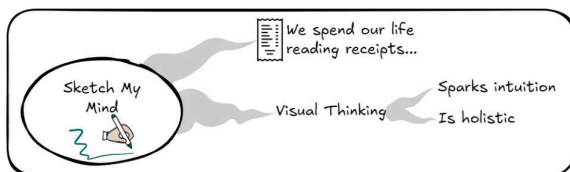
Whether you're new to visual note-taking or already comfortable sketching, visual thinking is accessible to everyone—from scrappy tracers like me to skilled sketchers wanting a robust framework. Let's make your mind visible—and bring your best ideas to life.



Create Your “Sketch My Mind” Map

As you read this book, build your own “Sketch My Mind” map—a living visual playground. This isn't something to archive; it's a map evolving with your thoughts.

Start simple: draw a circle labeled *Sketch My Mind*. Branch out from there. Add reflections, small sketches, or keywords. Let your ideas guide you.

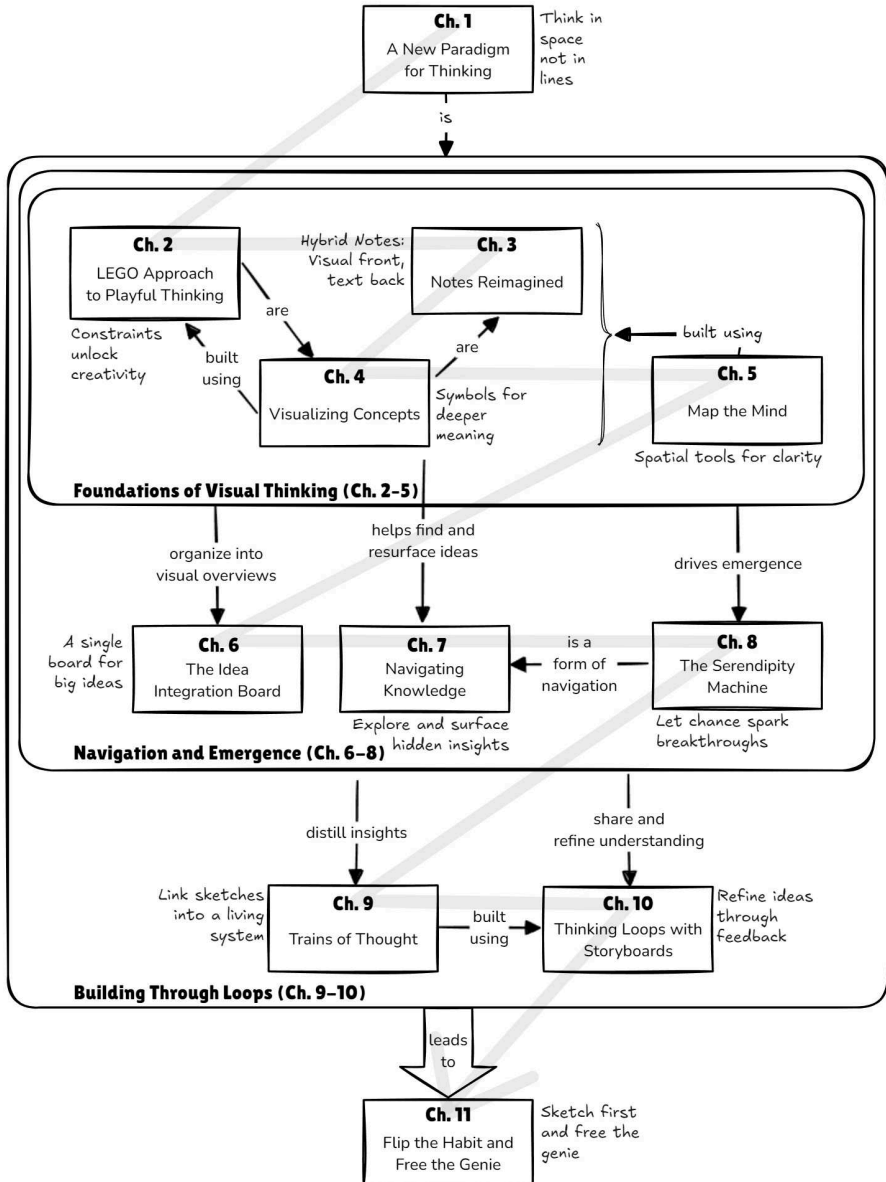


Remember: no artistic skill required. A few arrows and keywords are enough. You're not decorating—you're uncovering connections text alone hides.

Visual thinking gives ideas room to move. The moment you start mapping, you're already thinking differently.

YOUR JOURNEY AHEAD

The chapters build on each other, step by step. This map shows where you are in the journey—and how each piece fits into the bigger picture. Treat it as your compass.



Chapter 1

A New Paradigm for Thinking



Transform flat, linear notes into a dynamic visual system so you can spot connections instantly, navigate ideas intuitively, and turn scattered insights into clear, actionable knowledge.

By the end of this chapter, you'll become a **more spatially aware thinker** by learning how to:

- Spot how text-first notes can hide meaning.
- Use visuals to reduce mental overload.
- Place your system on the 1D–4D PKM map.
- Sketch ideas to uncover hidden insights.
- Build notes that grow with new links.

If your ideas are scattered across emails, folders, meeting notes, and half-filled notebooks, you're not alone. Most of us don't have a knowledge problem—we have a structure problem.

Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) isn't just about capturing more notes. It's about making your ideas visible, connected, and ready to evolve. Done well, PKM turns your digital space into a thinking partner—one that surfaces forgotten insights, reveals patterns, and helps you turn raw thoughts into clarity, direction, and creative output.

But not all PKM systems are created equal. Many let you link and tag ideas, creating a web of associations across your notes. But that web still lives inside text. Even with backlinks—a list of other notes that mention this one, not just ones it links to—meaning often hides in dense pages and linear structure. You jump from one idea to another, but it's still like flipping through books—you're reading your way through thought, not seeing it.

This chapter introduces 4D PKM: a system grounded in how we naturally think—visually, spatially, and iteratively. It's a shift away from walls of text, linear notes, and sequential processing, toward a more holistic, spatial approach to knowledge. In 4D PKM, notes aren't just stored—they're sketched, arranged, visually linked, and revisited. They become modular building blocks in a thinking environment—one where structure reveals meaning, connections spark new insights, and ideas evolve into articles, videos, or innovations.

However, before we define 4D PKM fully, let's step back and explore why this shift matters—and how we got here.

MIRRORING THE WAY OUR MINDS WORK

Nearly a third of your brain is dedicated to visual processing (Van Essen, 2003; Sheth & Young, 2016)—a striking reminder that vision isn't just one of the senses; it's central to how we think. Our ancestors didn't survive by reading reports—they thrived by

recognizing patterns, tracking predators and prey, and navigating space.

Visuals don't just illustrate—they illuminate. They reveal structure, make patterns visible, and mirror the mind's spatial logic.

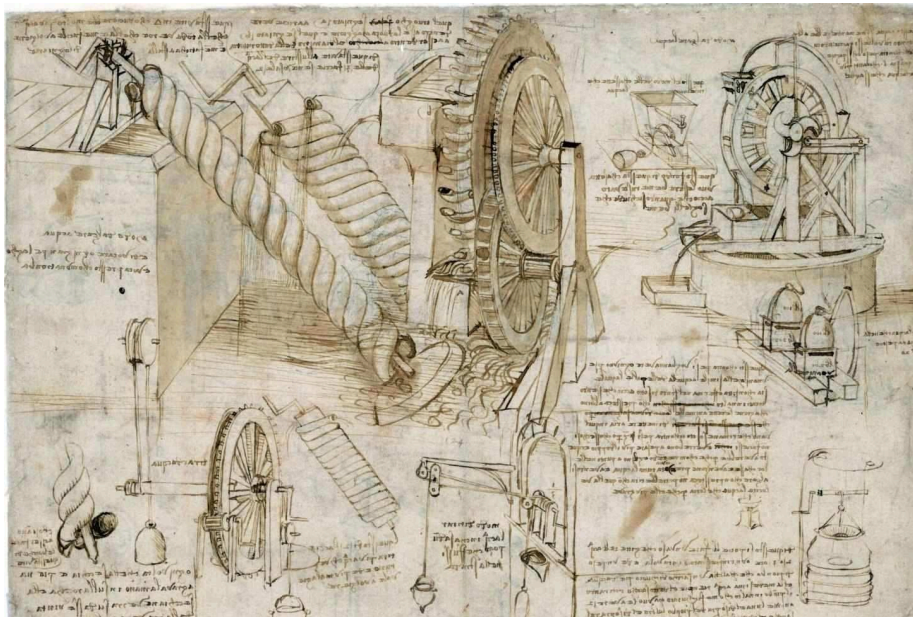
Imagine stepping into a medieval cathedral. Stained glass windows tell stories through light. Frescoes turn beliefs into beautiful scenes. Statues become silent teachers. The architecture lifts your gaze, guiding the mind through space, color, and form. The fresco in the apse of the Church of St. Helena in Nova Ponente, South Tyrol—depicting Christ in Majesty, flanked by symbols of the Evangelists—is a beautiful example: theology, structure, and memory expressed through image and spatial design. As Barbara Tversky's research shows, spatial arrangement shapes memory and understanding.



For most of history, this was how knowledge was organized—not locked in text, but expressed through image, space, and story. Paul Martin Lester's *Syntactic Theory of Visual Communication* reminds us that early writing systems—like hieroglyphs and cuneiform—blended symbol, layout, and repetition into visual knowledge structures.

Medieval illuminated manuscripts carried this tradition forward. The images weren't decorative—they were integral to understanding. Layout guided the eye. Color signaled meaning. Sequence shaped thought. Rather than separating visuals from

text, these manuscripts treated them as parts of the same thinking system. Today, we face what David Hyerle describes as a “cognitive dissonance in representation systems”: we process ideas in rich, connected ways, yet education still asks us to show our thinking in narrow, linear formats. In *Visual Tools for Transforming Information into Knowledge*, Hyerle calls for reintegrating visual and verbal forms—because learning happens not just through words, but through patterns, models, and space.

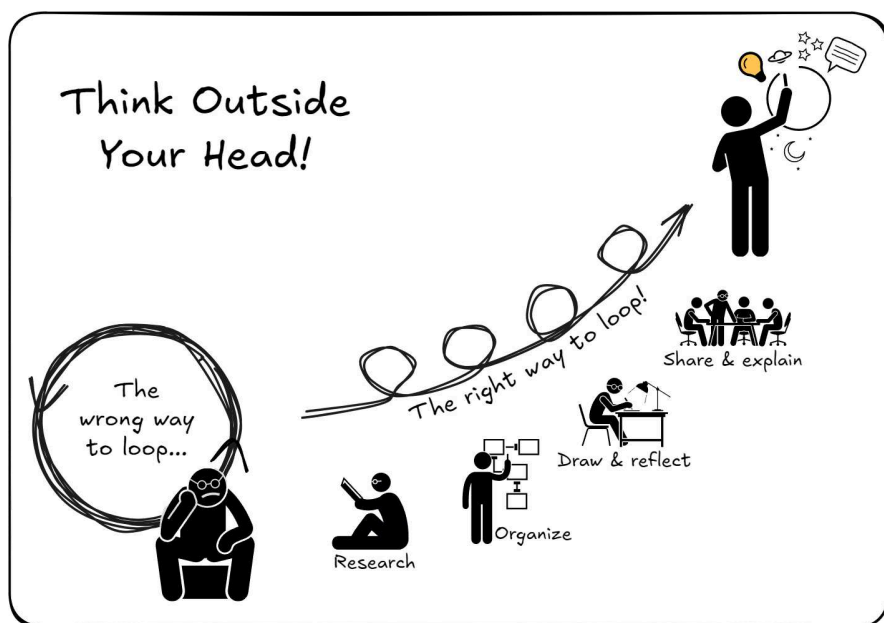


Even in science, visuals led the way. Leonardo da Vinci’s notebooks weren’t annotated drawings—they were visual thinking in action (image: *Codex Arundel*, British Library, via Wikimedia Commons). Colin Ware in *Visual Thinking for Information Design* notes how diagrams reveal what text conceals, especially when it comes to structure and relationships. Robert McKim in *Thinking Visually* called this “thinking with the eyes”—where drawing is not a supplement to reasoning, but central to it. His ETC loop—Express, Test, Cycle—makes this process explicit, a pattern we’ll return to in Chapter 4.

Like da Vinci's notebooks, these weren't just artistic expressions—they were blueprints for understanding. Today, cognitive science confirms what these thinkers knew intuitively: thought extends into hands, tools, and space.

You think with your body and surroundings as much as your brain—whether you're sketching an idea, pacing the room, or speaking a thought aloud. These aren't mere aids or shortcuts; they *are* thinking. It's distributed, embodied, and spatial. The more deliberately you engage with your environment, the clearer and more creative your thinking becomes.

THINKING IN SPIRALS, NOT CIRCLES



Clarity emerges through loops—not in circles of overthinking, but in spirals of refinement. This same principle—externalizing to think—shows up every time we sketch a rough idea, talk it through, or revise our notes.

Each loop involves expressing your thoughts, seeing the gaps, and revising. That's the path to deep understanding. Sketching helps surface missing details. Talking helps reshape scattered

thoughts. As Richard Feynman taught, explaining a concept is one of the best ways to learn it. Every cycle of research, organizing, reflecting, and sharing sharpens your ideas.



Test Your Thinking with a Sketch

Ever had an idea that felt clear in your head—until you tried to explain it?

Try this: Close your eyes and picture a tiger. Not just any tiger—a specific one. See its whiskers, stripes, paws. Now, without a reference, count its stripes.

Hard, right? Mental images feel vivid, but they're vague.

Now draw the tiger. Even a rough sketch pulls out details you didn't consciously recall—the curve of the tail, the shape of the ears, the stripe placement.

This is emergence. Sketching helps surface details your mind skips over. You begin to *see* the idea more clearly, because drawing forces you to make decisions your brain glossed over.

Writing would surface different aspects—like the tiger's behavior or symbolism. Each mode taps into different cognitive pathways. Switching modes reveals what text alone can't. Your thinking becomes more flexible, more complete.

Switching how you express an idea—drawing, writing, speaking—can clarify it. Switching how you move can do the same. Tracing, sketching, arranging sticky notes—these aren't afterthoughts. They're how your body helps your brain work things out.

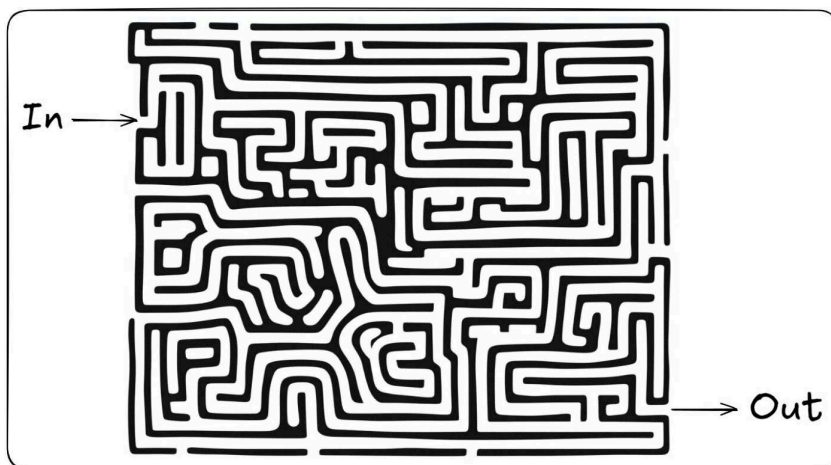
Cognitive scientist David Kirsh suggests that thinking didn't begin in the head—it began in the body. Before we could simulate ideas internally, we sketched them in sand, shaped them with our hands, or moved our bodies through space. Visual thinking continues this lineage: when we draw, we're not just representing thought—we're *performing* it. A dancer marking choreography, a scientist sketching a concept, a designer roughing out ideas—each

is thinking by creating partial, external models of something not yet fully formed.



Lighten the Load with Layout

Try solving this labyrinth in your head—no pen or finger.



Now trace the path physically. Which was easier?

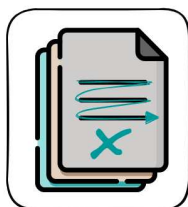
This is offloading. Your brain no longer needs to juggle the whole maze—just the next move. When you sketch a plan or map out ideas visually, you do the same: reduce mental load, gain clarity, and discover what was missing.

Unlike the tiger sketch, which helps ideas emerge, the maze shows how visual thinking helps you **cope with complexity**. It breaks problems into steps. It frees working memory. You can see more clearly because you're holding less in your head.

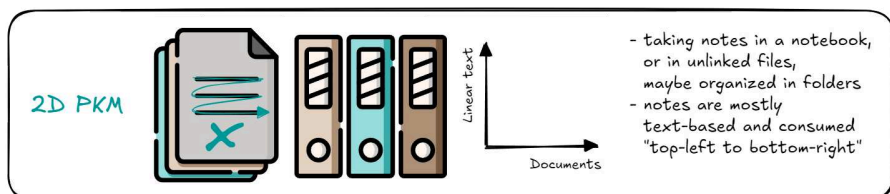
Offloading frees your mind to focus on one decision at a time. That's why sketching a problem or arranging ideas visually isn't just helpful—it's foundational. The moment you engage gesture and layout, thinking becomes easier to explore, connect, and remember. For millennia, knowledge wasn't just read. It was experienced and seen.

THE PROBLEM WITH TRADITIONAL PKM

If you've ever taken notes you've likely followed the traditional pattern: writing in lists, outlines, or paragraphs. This is **1D PKM**. It's the foundation of most note-taking systems, where ideas are captured sequentially and retrieved one word at a time—forcing your memory to hold the structure together.



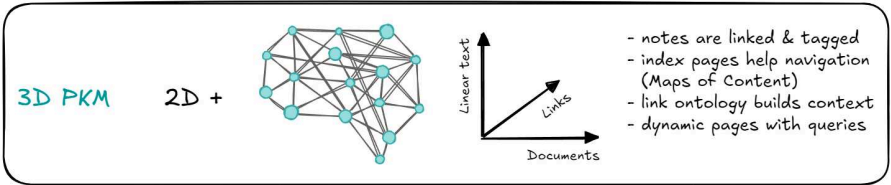
In **2D PKM**, arranging notes into folders adds a second dimension. But ideas remain isolated. A “Projects” folder sits apart from “Archives” or “Resources,” as if each lived in its own sealed box. Any meaningful relationships between them—shared concepts, recurring patterns, cross-cutting themes—stay invisible unless you deliberately surface them. The folders don't talk to each other. You have to connect the dots yourself—and worse, you have to *remember* where those dots are and how they relate. The system relies on your memory to bridge gaps it doesn't acknowledge.



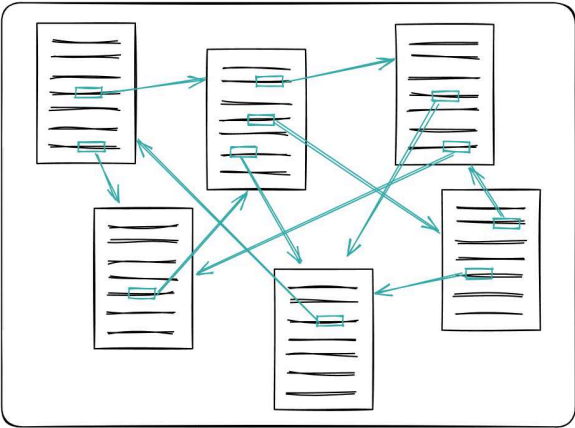
Modern note-taking systems solve the problem of disjointed notes with links and tags. You're no longer just filing information—you're building your personal Wikipedia. But it's still mostly text. Connections exist, but meaning often hides in walls of prose—dense, uniform, and slow to navigate.

In **3D PKM**, interconnected notes help ideas resurface, cross-pollinate, and evolve over time. With every link, you weave a web

of associations where new patterns emerge through years of tending, exploring, and connecting.



Linking and tagging is a critical step forward—but when everything is text, it engages only half the brain. Meaning stays buried in long paragraphs. You click through, but end up scanning line by line, hoping to rediscover the insight you vaguely remember.

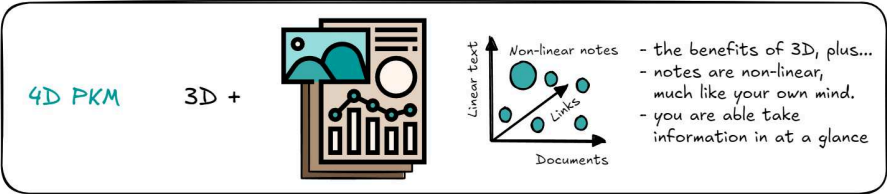


Our brains are wired for space, patterns, and context—for seeing the whole, not just reading the parts. And that’s something linear text alone can’t fully support.

4D PKM

What’s missing is spatial structure, fluidity, and a way to see how ideas fit together. Knowledge isn’t just something to store—it needs to be seen, shaped, and navigated. That’s where **4D PKM** comes in.

Visual elements—diagrams, layouts, icons—aren’t decorations. They’re modular building blocks of thought. When arranged in space, they reveal structure, surface connections, and support dynamic thinking. Instead of scrolling through text, you navigate a visual landscape—where meaning emerges at a glance, not word by word.



4D PKM flips the paradigm. Visual-spatial thinking comes first. Text is layered in to clarify and deepen, not dominate. This redefines how knowledge is built: visuals as foundation, text as scaffolding.

Each visual note becomes familiar—like a room in your home. You know where things are. You know how they connect.

HERE’S HOW EACH STAGE TRANSFORMS YOUR THINKING

1D	You jot things down. A quick thought here, a quote there. It’s easy to capture, but hard to reuse. Notes pile up, disconnected. There’s no big picture.
2D	Notes are organized in folders or notebooks. You can store and retrieve them more easily. But they still live separately. You’re referencing ideas—not connecting them. It’s a filing system, not a thinking system.
3D	You start linking notes. Ideas begin to talk to each other. Patterns emerge. You’re making sense of what you’ve collected—but it’s still all text. Only half the brain is engaged.
4D	Visuals are fully integrated. Sketches live in space next to text, each enriching the other. Everything is linkable, movable, revisitable. You’re not just organizing—you’re <i>thinking with structure</i> . Not just the big picture—the whole picture, for the whole brain.

Thank You for Reading

I hope this sample sparked ideas, raised questions, and nudged you to think beyond the default. *Sketch Your Mind* is a book about clarity, creativity, and reclaiming your visual mind—and this was just the beginning.

If you're ready to explore how visuals can transform your thinking, I'd love for you to read the full book.

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If you enjoyed this sample, consider sharing it with a friend—or better yet, sketch an idea it inspired.

Want more visual insights? Join the [Sketch Your Mind newsletter](#). This isn't your typical newsletter—*Sketch Your Mind* is a visual-first newsletter about ideas, creativity, and personal knowledge. Each issue features one illustrated concept, a hands-on tip, and a canvas you can zoom, explore, and reuse.

Stay curious,

Zsolt