



There's a saying-- "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" We often find that writing our thoughts actually clears, and sometimes changes, our thinking.

At least, not many of us can map in our minds, sentence by sentence, a novel or even a longish email and then, in one swoop, simply type from the first capital letter straight through to the final period. We need to go back and read what we wrote, clarify the context, set the stage to make sure the reader shares our premises, check that we're clear on the call to action somewhere near the end, and, along the way, we usually modify the message.

So, why is it that we need to see what we say to know what we think? Well, one reason is the "seven plus or minus two" heuristic.

Some decades ago, George Miller summarized research that indicated, on average, people have capacity to receive, process, or remember about seven items of information at a time-- give or take a couple. Recoding or chunking bits of information into larger groups can permit us to increase our capacities.

But in the experiments Miller described, those things were static and presented sequentially. Imagine if you had to keep track of seven things moving different directions simultaneously and report accurately about all of them. In those experiments, the things people were asked to remember were sensory-- different auditory tones or shapes-- or symbolic-- strings of digits or words. They weren't related to each other in intertwining complex ways. Now, imagine keeping track of seven possibly related things that all move but maybe not at the same rate and not with the same delays and cause and effect.

With these musings it's easier to consider, when we're moving from concrete details to abstract notions and back again, and everything we talk about is changing through time, and many of the ideas we're trying to pin down affect each other, we need to get stuff out of our heads in order to see if we really agree with what we think... we think.

I find text-sparse representations even more helpful than writing out thoughts. Logic diagrams, mind maps, simulating models, canvases like the Value Proposition Canvas or the Empathy Map-- all of these invite us to get our thoughts out of our heads and onto a page-- one page.

Each of these visuals provides a different lens on our thinking, and, unlike long form writing in which the same topic may be addressed more than once but pages apart, in visual, text-sparse representations, ideas that inform each other are usually clustered together. Sometimes we then see that we are lopsided in our thinking. We have a lot over here and not so much over there.

And sometimes we are surprised that similar themes emerge in multiple places. So, we move those thoughts together and realize that we have mounting evidence; we have strong convictions about something. Another reason I like text-sparse visuals: they can be quick and dirty, fast enough to create, useful enough to share, not too precious to throw away or start again.

We've all heard of a "eureka" moment recorded on an airplane napkin. You can't get tangled up in your words, if your writing format is five inches squared. You can't include extraneous stuff, only the most important elements. But the next time you look at it, you will see new opportunities to make the representation-- and your thinking-- better.

Visual representations of our thinking are valuable when we're working alone, but I consider them absolutely necessary when working with others. Looking at the same thing often leads us to physically face the same way. That can diffuse tensions that sometimes arise when we're talking across the table about something complex.

Instead of a me-against-you tone creeping in, standing side-by-side looking at the same whiteboard, it's easy to remember-- we're on the same team.

Sharing visuals often leads to discovering that people are using the same term and meaning very different things, defining it in different ways. We can then make our understandings and assumptions explicit.

A shared visual invites others to modify it, to add what they understand to, changing the representation to reflect their experiences. That can lead to increased buy-in to whatever it is you're discussing.

Visual representations also serve as a shared memory from meeting to meeting. If we look again at what we made the last time, we don't need to start over. The visual prompts memories of all our previous conversations and all our points of agreement.

When we want to share the vision, share the workload, share the concerns, we can share text-sparse representations to get on the same page, literally.

So, when we tackle something important and complex, we can help ourselves in two ways. First, don't do it all at once. The big bang approach to addressing complex stuff just doesn't work. Research says that sleeping on it really does help those neurons connect in insightful ways. Second, we can get those ideas out of our heads and onto something we can see. Then, maybe, we'll learn what we really think.