

How to Start Sketchnoting

by Veronica Erb

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

Sketchnoting is a graphic method for putting thoughts on paper, whether for taking notes or presenting a design process. Figures, scribbles, boxes and arrows provide the raw materials, with no need for artistic ability. Erb presents her process for sketchnoting, starting with preliminary elements to plan the sketch including title, speaker style, description of the talk and any other useful information. Content is captured as boxes holding main points, which can then be refined and connected to reflect flow and hierarchical organization. With these enhancements, the sketchnote gains focus, and personal flair can be added for visual pizzazz. The process improves with practice, and the end product, mixing verbal and nonverbal, presents information in an innovative way.

KEYWORDS

informal communication
 annotations
 illustrations
 visual materials

Information Architecture

In October 2011 I started sketchnoting to practice committing ideas to paper. At EightShapes (a Washington, DC-area UX firm), we often use sketching in our design process. At the first sketching studio I attended, I was overwhelmed. There was so much to keep in my head at once and so little time to capture what ideas I could conjure. I decided that sketchnoting was the practice I needed.

The visual style you see in my notes is the same style you would have seen in the margins of my college notebooks and featured on my campaign posters for high school treasurer. Because I had this existing visual vocabulary, I could focus on making efficient and communicative sketchnotes.

Today, when I sketchnote, I follow a process that I discovered in my first few months experimenting with it. You can follow this process regardless of your comfort with drawing – there's always room to grow.

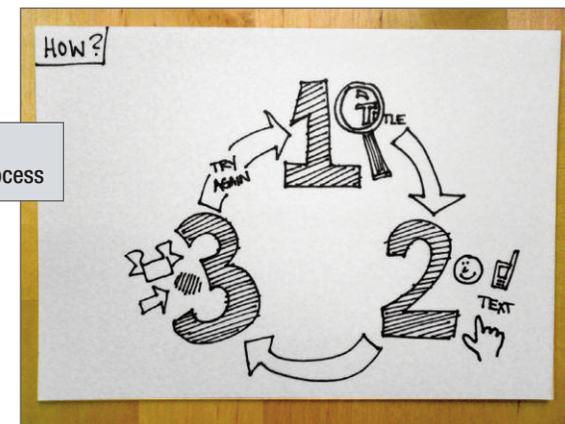


FIGURE 1.
My sketchnoting process

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Step 1. Plan what you might capture.

Before a presentation, I think over everything I know about it – the title, the description or agenda, the speaker’s past presentations – and think about how those elements might affect my sketchnote.

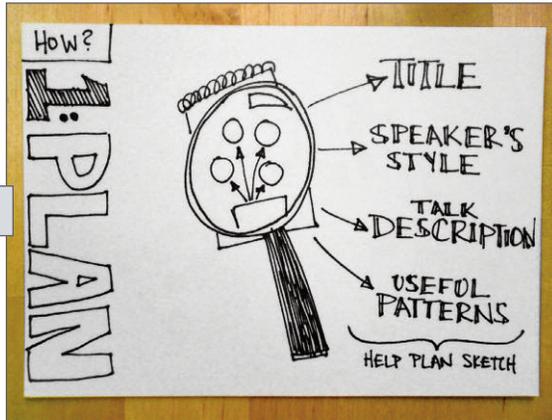


FIGURE 2. Planning

Step 2. Capture the first things first.

While I sketchnote a presentation, I make sure I get the most interesting and hardest to remember information down first. I draw simple drawings or save space for them, before I add complexity. I write down the first few letters of each item in a list, so I can finish the list when I have more time.

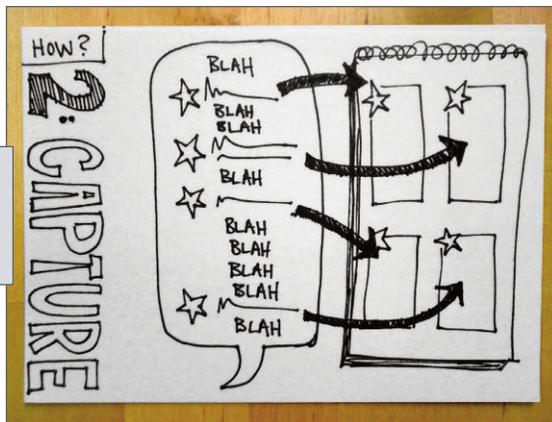


FIGURE 3. Capturing the most important information first

Step 3. Refine the sketchnote’s message.

As a presentation concludes, I look over my note. Are the main points clear? Is the flow of the talk obvious? If not, I use arrows to show flow, texture to fix mistakes and frames to highlight key elements. I use all three – arrows, texture and frames – to refine the visual hierarchy of my note.

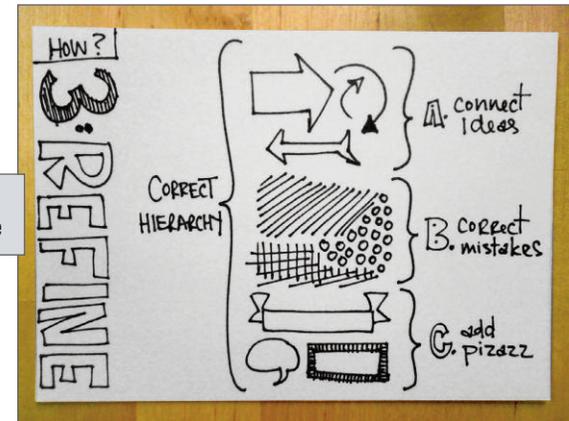


FIGURE 4. Refining the message

Try again!

Sketchnoting is a skill that improves over time, as long as you give yourself the time and the space to learn from each note. Whatever process you follow, sketchnoting can be a rewarding practice that will improve your ability to draw ideas in any other context you might encounter.

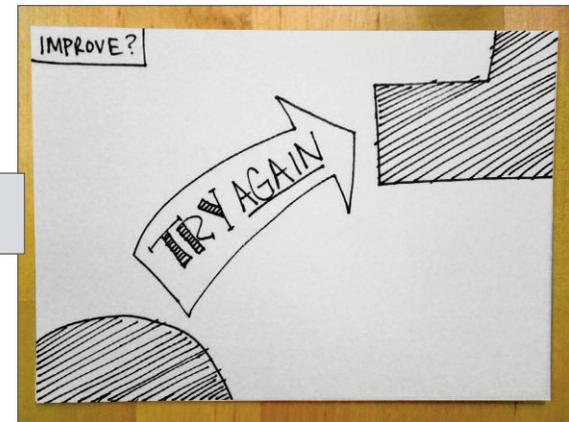


FIGURE 5. Improving your effort

Now, go give sketchnoting a try!