

Mapping Out the Personal Informer: 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 their life through a new lens. The visual thinking that helps students generate their thoughts and ideas can help them to help students identify key strengths and admissions competencies that they can highlight in the personal statement, supplements, essays and even the interview.

In her book *You Majored In What: Mapping Your Way Out of a Path from Chaos of Career, Academic Problems and use of a Wandering Map technique she employs while working with undecided and undecided majors who didn't have a good grasp of their strengths and skills and how to use them to find their way in the world— not just in a work setting. She said that when students were asked to list their top 5 strengths they would write one or two things, but then she said, "The wandering map in it was a great way to get mental roadblocks to rise to the surface and then students could see their own strengths in a way that they have done in the past."*

I've found that even students with a clear goal and a solid plan have trouble reflecting on the qualities, experiences, and strengths that they want to highlight in the application. Many of these students have spent so much time checking items off of their "to-do" list and following a formulaic formula that they often have trouble crafting a unique and personal essay. Mapping can help them "connect the dots" and develop an essay that is truly their own.

Mapping Exercise

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

Instructions:

1. Give every student a blank piece of paper (preferably 8 1/2 x 11 size) and pens, pens, and/or colored markers.
2. Ask the students to start thinking about all the interesting, significant things that have happened to them. Think of the things that have happened to you in the last few years. Think of the highlights from those years and if a "brain dump" on the other:
 - a. Did you take an interesting class?
 - 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 thing to do?
3. Ask the students to start writing down their thoughts. Keep them short— one or two words. Don't write an essay or paragraph; if you wanted to a sentence or two is fine.
4. Tell students to draw a rectangle around each word or phrase they wrote down. They can draw 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 don't erase or edit what they've written. 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 in your own prompts if you think of additional ideas.

