Sketchy Thinking

Classroom Sketchnotes Bringing Learning to Life



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How to Make Sketchnotes in the Classroom

Visual Note-Taking for Creative Thinking and Better Learning

What Are Sketchnotes?

Sketchnotes are **visual notes** that combine **words, images, shapes, and structure** to capture and organize ideas creatively.

They help you

- Remember key points more effectively
- See relationships between ideas
- Think critically and creatively
- Engage your imagination while learning

Step-by-Step: How to Make Sketchnotes

1. Listen, Watch, and Think	• Focus on *big ideas*, not every detail; m*ain ideas*, not every word • Ask yourself: *What's important? What connects? What surprises me?* What matters most here?
2. Start with a Title and Frame	• Write the topic boldly at the top or center. • Use banners or shapes to define your page space.
3. Use Simple Icons and Symbols	• Draw what you hear — even stick figures or arrows are enough! • Use icons for people, emotions, actions, and connections. • Draw quick visuals (stick figures, arrows, lightbulbs). • Represent actions, emotions, or ideas simply.
4. Mix Words and Pictures	• Combine keywords with visual metaphors. • Show relationships with arrows or clusters.

5. Add Structure	• Try a mind map, timeline, or comparison grid
	• Try layouts like:
	  ○ Mind map (central idea with branches)
	  ○ Flow (timeline or process)
	  ○ Columns or boxes (compare/contrast ideas)
	• Group related ideas together.

6. Use Style to Emphasize	• Highlight key ideas with bold text, color, or icons. • Keep it organized and clear. • Bold or CAPS for key ideas • Icons, color, or shapes for emphasis • Keep it readable and uncluttered
7. Reflect and Review	• Add small notes or highlights after class. • Ask: What patterns do I see? What questions remain? • Circle patterns or questions you notice.
8. Quick Tips	• Don't worry about drawing skill - Focus on ***meaning, not art****!* • Keep your pen moving; refine later - done is better than perfect! • Use color sparingly for clarity - two or three colors maximum • Experiment — there's no "right" way! • Practice a few go-to icons: 💡 idea, ❤️ value, 🔁 connection

Classroom Ideas

- Sketchnote a video, lecture, reading, debate, presentation, field trip, guest speaker, today's lesson summary
- Create visual summaries of chapters, videos, articles
- Compare two perspectives using split-page sketchnotes
- Turn a brainstorming into a collaborative visual map
- Make a visual "exit ticket" — one drawing + one word that sums up what you learned.

Extension Activity: Try This

1. Choose a lesson you just completed
2. Draw today's big idea in the center and add 3–5 connected ideas with small images and labels
3. Link/emphasize with color, lines, arrows, shapes, symbols
4. Share with a partner and explain your choices.

Example: **The Fall of Berlin Wall | Sketchnote Explained**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSN2KJtJrzo

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Teacher's Facilitation Guide

Help your students use sketchnoting as a *thinking tool*, encouraging critical thinking, synthesis, and visual literacy.

1. Warm-Up Prompt: Discuss how visuals can help with *focus* and *understanding.* "*Think about how you normally take notes. What happens when you try to write everything down?*"
2. Model a Simple Example: Project your own sketchnote and narrate your thought process. "*Notice I drew an arrow here to show cause-and-effect. This symbol reminds me that these two ideas connect. Here I used colour to separate out this piece of information*"
3. Invite Playfulness: Let students experiment without pressure. Remind them that "ugly" drawings still work perfectly — it's about *thinking visually,* not artistic skill.
4. Scaffolding Tips: **Before -** Introduce icon vocabulary ("What symbol could represent this idea?"); **During -** Pause mid-lesson for them draw one metaphor ("How could you show this idea as a picture?"); **After -** Reflection and sharing ("What was easy or hard about visualizing your ideas?" "What did you notice about others' pages?")

Assessment Ideas

- **Formative:** completion/comprehension, not artistic merit.
- **Reflective:** explain/reflect on their visual choices.
- **Collaborative:** combine as a wall display or digital gallery.

Discussion Prompts

- "How do visuals help you remember and connect ideas?"
- "What parts of sketchnoting felt natural or challenging?"
- "How does your sketchnote show that *you* understand this?"

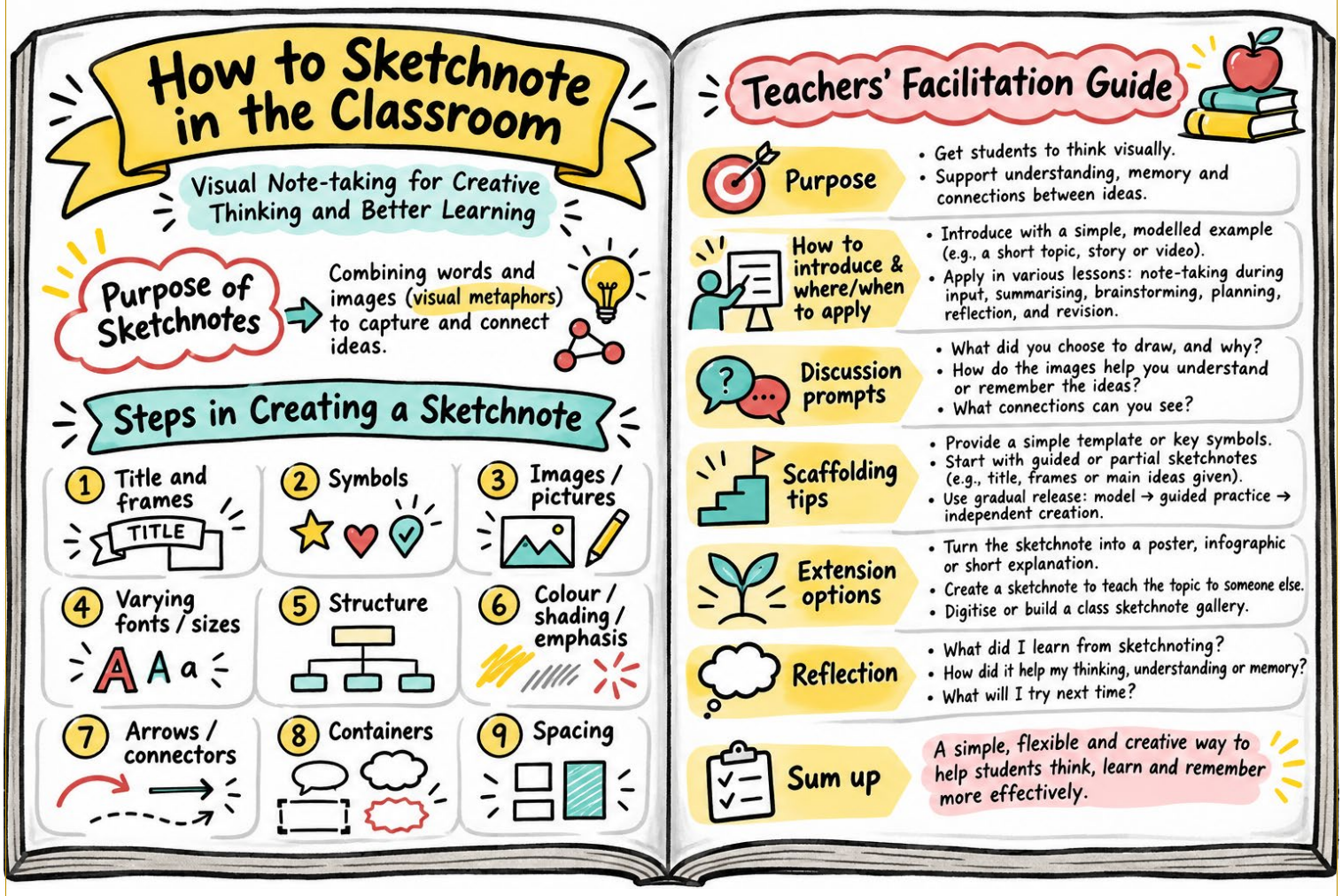
Extension Options

- Assign **"Sketchnote of the Week"** from readings or lectures.
- Use sketchnotes as **study guides** before exams.
- Build a **class icon library** on chart paper.
- **Partner sketchnotes**: one listens/speaks, other visualizes

Teacher Reflection

After the activity, jot down:

- How they engage differently than with written notes?
- Did visualizing help them discuss/remember key concepts?
- What tweaks would make this even smoother next time?



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What the research says

Dual-coding & memory/recall

Research rooted in cognitive science (like Allan Paivio's *dual-coding theory*) indicates that when learners process information both verbally and visually, retention improves.

- Visual notetaking (words + images) gives two "paths" into memory: verbal + visual.
- One article cited that drawing information led to **~49.5% recall** vs ~28% for writing only in one study.
- The "picture superiority effect": adding images to text increases recall substantially.

Engagement/attention/active processing

Sketchnoting encourages students to be **active**, not passive: They must decide what's important, how to represent it, how to connect ideas visually.

Visual note-taking can be more motivating/interesting for students who struggle with traditional text-heavy notes).

It offers a modality alternative for diverse learners through non-linguistic representations.

Synthesis, higher-order thinking

Because students must choose what to draw, how to group ideas, how to link them, sketchnoting supports synthesis (not just transcription) and helps learners see **connections**.

One study in STEM contexts found sketchnoting helped students visualize patterns and relationships, not just isolated facts.

Well-being/stress reduction/creativity

Some pieces point out that drawing, doodling, visual note-taking can reduce stress (lower cortisol) and provide an outlet for creativity alongside learning.

Caveats

While the research is promising, there are a few things to keep in mind:

- Many studies are small, context-specific. Some results may not be statistically significant
- Sketchnoting is one of many note-taking options, including text-based – encourage student choice based on preference/comfort
- Over focus on "pretty" visuals takes time away from processing the ideas.
- As sketchnoting won't be intuitive for some, you should model/train/support students on how to choose icons, how to map relationships, how to integrate visual and text meaningfully

Practical Classroom Implications

Introduce the "why" explicitly

- Explain that drawing engages deeper thinking. We decide what to emphasize and create a memorable visual system.
- Frame it as thinking tool rather than art class.

Scaffold the process

- Provide/co-create icon library (symbols, arrows, frames, shapes)
- Do a guided sketchnote together to model your thinking.
- Then gradually release students to work independently.

Offer choice & flexibility

- Let students decide: text-only, mixed, or primarily visual.
- Encourage sketchnotes but use note-taking methods too.
- Offer digital options for drawing accessiblity.

Emphasize connections not just pictures

- Prompt students: "What links these ideas?" "Can you draw how this concept influences that?"
- Use your interdisciplinary lens: Have them map how an anthropology concept relates to maker movement, or knowledge construction — using visual note maps.

Embed reflection & sharing

- Ask students to explain their visuals to a partner: why did you choose that icon? what's the relationship here?
- Use sketchnotes as exit tickets: one drawing + one word summarizing today's big concept.

Use for multiple purposes

- Lectures, labs and experiments, reading summaries, research planning, visualizing project timelines, audio books, videos, field trips, guest speakers, presentations, creating "knowledge ecosystem" frameworks
- Encourage students to develop reflective practice by using sketchnotes to express class "take aways" or to keep visual reflection or research journals.

Monitor and adapt

- Collect Student sketchnote samples (formatively) to see how they're doing; focus on thinking and connections, not artistry.
- Ask students: what helped you? What didn't? Adjust your scaffolding accordingly.

Be mindful of workload & time

- Because some students will take more time on visuals, set clear time-limits for initial practice.
- Emphasize that "good enough" is OK; meaning is more important than perfection.

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Key Research References

Csachová, S., & Kidonová, D. (2022). *Exploring potential of sketchnoting as a tool for constructing learner's knowledge in geography.* European Journal of Educational Research, 11(2), 1151-1159.

Summary: Empirical study with 20 secondary geography students. Sketchnoting framed via dual-coding & multimedia learning theory. Findings: students tended to focus on isolated facts rather than relations. Recommendation: scaffolding organizational/connection aspect

Why it's useful: Focused on how sketchnoting supports knowledge construction (rather than just memorization)

"Exploring current practices and perspectives re student note taking" (2022). Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education

Summary: Covers note-taking variations (including visual, mind-mapping, concept mapping) and student perspectives on them

Why it's useful: Helps situate sketchnoting within note-taking research — interdisciplinary framing of knowledge construction

Ferreira, J. (2023). *Learning to make sense: Sketchnoting in undergraduate design education.* (Paper, IADE–Portugal)

Summary: Explores pedagogical intervention using sketchnoting in design education; examines how students synthesize and make sense of complex information via visual + verbal representations - highlights challenges and issues around assessment

Why it's useful: Aligns with interdisciplinary knowledge ecosystems and curriculum design — especially design thinking + visual literacy

"How Learners Sketch Data Stories" (Bhargava, Williams & D'Ignazio, 2021). arXiv preprint.

Summary: Investigates data-story sketching by learners; deals with sketching for sense-making and visual-verbal synthesis

Why it's useful: Ties visual note-taking with data literacy and maker movement approaches; contexts "being human as AI evolves"

Ohmes, L., Schlesier, J., & Moschner, B. (2024). *Feeling better when working with creative tools? Exploring the effects of a sketchnote intervention on students' achievement emotions.* Zeitschrift für Pädagogische Psychologie.

Summary: Investigates how a sketchnoting intervention influences students' emotions (e.g., enjoyment, anxiety) while learning challenging grammatical content. Suggests sketchnoting may reduce negative learning emotions and support more positive engagement

Why it's useful: Connects emotional epistemologies - how learning feels, not just what is learned; inclusive pedagogy learner well-being

Paepcke-Hjeltness, V., Mina, M., & Cyamani, A. (2019). *Sketchnoting: A new approach to developing visual communication ability, improving critical thinking and creative confidence for engineering and design students.* (Iowa State University report)

Summary: Study of freshman engineering/design students using sketchnoting to build visual communication, critical thinking, and creative confidence. Draws on dual-coding, visual thinking.

Why it's useful: Leans into visual-literacy/arts-based methods, maker movement, arts-based academic expression

Singh, P., & Guleria, J. (2023). *Attitude of undergraduate students towards sketchnoting activity in classroom.* Journal of e-Learning & Knowledge Society, 19(3), 87-91.

Summary: Survey of undergrads in India sketchnoting in class; Findings: positive attitude, helps focus/retention, engaging, relaxing, accessible (drawing skill was *not* required)

Why it's useful: Student-voice data, inclusive engagement; how varied learner profiles (ADHD/work-style differences perceive method

"Sketchnoting: A Visual Literacy Methodology." (2019) *International Journal of Art & Design Education*.

Summary: Positions sketchnoting as a methodology for visual literacy development. Argues it helps increase observation skills, visual-textual fluency, and reflection.

Why it's useful: Validates visual literacy and graphic-based academic expression within higher ed

"The art of sketchnoting" (2023). *TelTales (University of Portsmouth)*.

Summary: Various research findings, notably that visual note-taking strategies improved recall and practical tips for teachers

Why it's useful: Quick synthesis to provide context to sketchnoting practice.

Tidy, H., Burnham, R., & Elkington, S. (2022). *Using sketchnoting as a revision aid with forensic students.* Science & Justice.

Summary: Higher-ed forensic science students asked to sketchnote after each lecture to build a revision resource. Students reported higher satisfaction, and some improvement in recall/grades.

Why it's useful: Practical implementation of visual note-taking within a rigorous academic

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Sketchnoting Toolkit: Materials to Make Your Mark

Simple, Inexpensive

beginners, limited budgets, portability

- Sketchbook/Notepad coil-bound to lay flat; pocket-sized for spontaneous ideas
- Black Pen/felt tip fine-liner; highlighters for emphasis; pencil/eraser for rough sketching and layout; colour pencils for more expression
- Sticky Notes/Index Cards for quick visual metaphors/moveable ideas, mini sketchnotes; Washi tape for frames/dividers; glue stick for layering visuals
- Portable kit bag/box; binder clips

Detailed, Professional

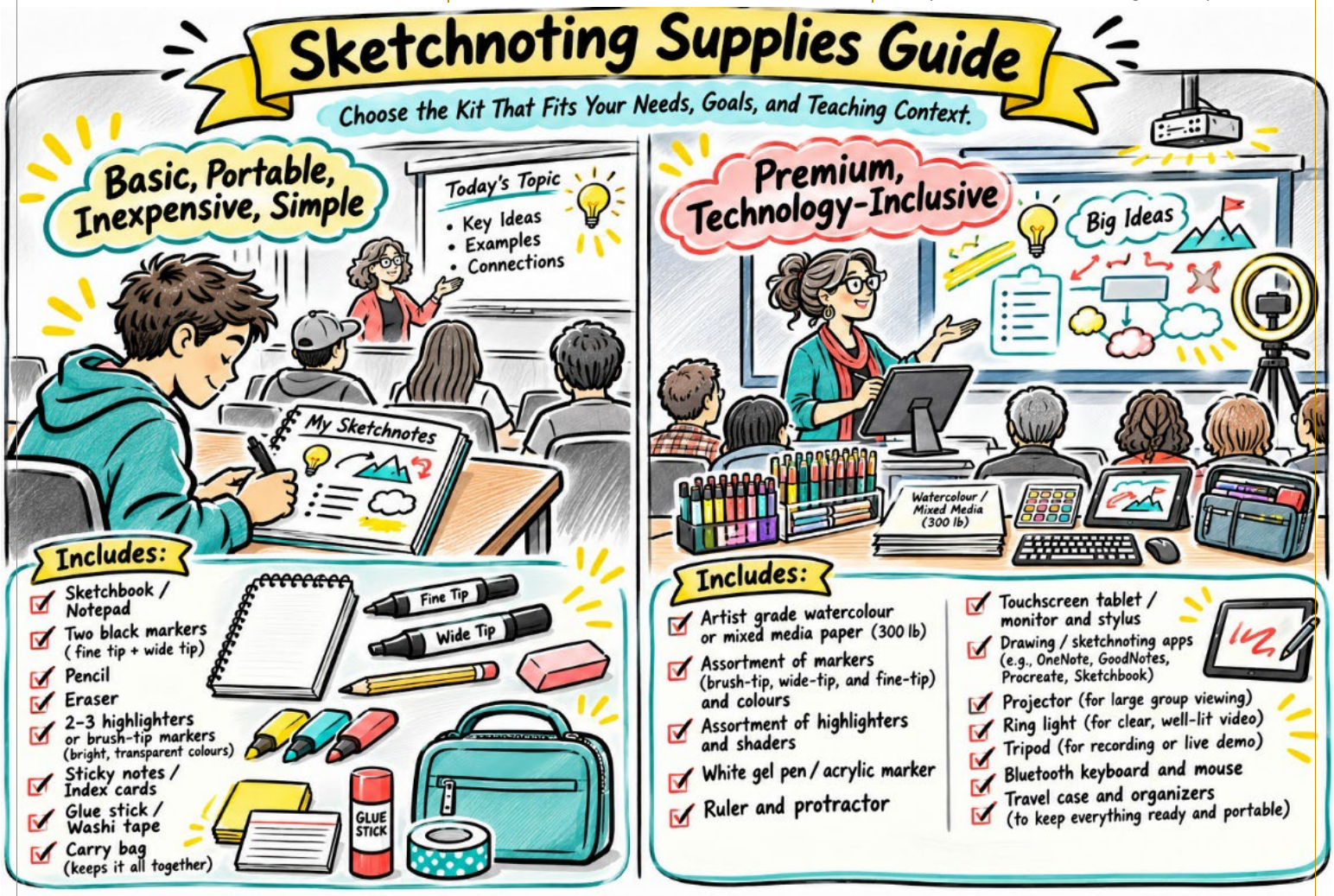
digital capture, high quality visuals

- Thick, bleed proof art paper; Graph paper/dot pads ideal for structure and spacing
- Professional Pens, Markers with various nib widths and types, Fineliners: (01–08); Mildliners/highlighters for colour accent emphasis; white gel pen/marker for dark backgrounds; Water brushfor wash effects)
- Portable pencil case or rolling tool pouch; mechanical pencil/eraser for precision; ruler/protractor set for boxes/arrows/icons

Technology-Assisted

hybrid/online/digital teaching and creation

- Touchscreen ablet or iPad with stylus; bluetooth keyboard; portable stand/tripod; ring/clip light for filming
- Procreate (iPad app) or similar for digital sketching; GoodNotes/Notability App for digital integration; Concepts App with infinite canvas for mind-maps; Whiteboard/Padlet/Jamboard for collaboration; Miro / Mural for team brainstorming
- Video capacity for live; screen-capture for asynchronous; cloud storage backup



How to Use This in Class

- Create **"Sketchnote Starter Kits"** (one per table or student)
- Set up a **Sketchnote Station** with extra pens, cards, paper.
- Offer students **analog/digital choice** — both are equally valid paths to visual learning.
- Limit 2-3 colours for clarity; create colour palette for consistency; use colour-coding to organization
- Have students personalize sketchbook covers
- Encourage students to share photos of their kits or digital setups on a class Padlet or Teams board.

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Sketchy Thinking

We want to thank you for sharing this time with us and exploring this creative tool for your teaching repertoire. We are passionate about this as its works well in our unique northern context, helping us to decolonize language, empower students as co-creators of knowledge, and offer alternative options of knowledge curation and expression. This is all consistent with our commitment to the pedagogy of care.

We invite you to visit our website (still very much a new project and under construction) but this is where we will archive resource, share ideas on the blog, spotlight examples and share resources. We would love to hear from you. We would love for this experience to evolve in to a global learning community, both casual and creative. Sketchnotes bring learning to life

Thanks again,
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