



## Napkin Sketches 101, continued

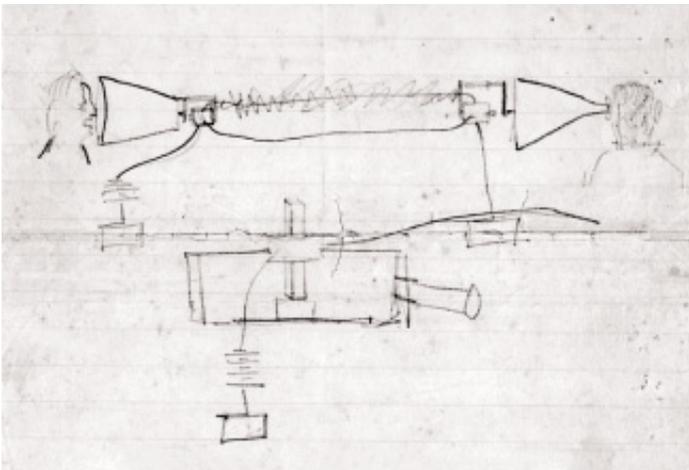
Apart from the fact that they are handy, there's something about worthless scraps of paper that makes it easy to put your ideas down. A napkin holds none of the expectations of a stretched canvas or a crisp sheet of writing paper. It's nonthreatening. It invites half-baked ideas and forgives false starts. And that's just how many great ideas begin.

Here are nine tips to help you make better napkin sketches.

### 1 Realize ugly is beautiful

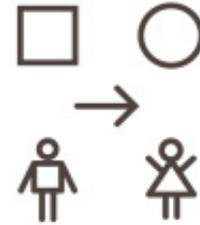
In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell picked up a pen and scribbled a napkin sketch of the telephone. A new invention. Eventually a gazillion-dollar industry.

Like most napkin sketches, Bell's didn't look like much—just a couple of big funnels and some squiggly wires. But it captured the main elements of his idea. So the first lesson—don't worry that your sketch isn't beautiful. Aesthetics aren't the point at this point. Crude, ugly, blunt, vague, and wobbly are okay. If the idea you capture is valid, you'll have time later to make it beautiful.



Initial design of the telephone as shown in Alexander Graham Bell's preliminary sketch. (Courtesy of The Library of Congress.)

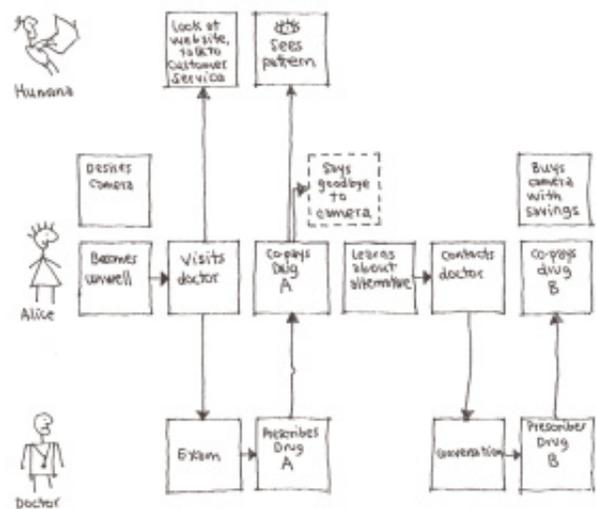
### 2 Master the basics



A handful of basic shapes—square, circle, arrow, man, woman—is all that's needed to build useful napkins sketches about any topic.

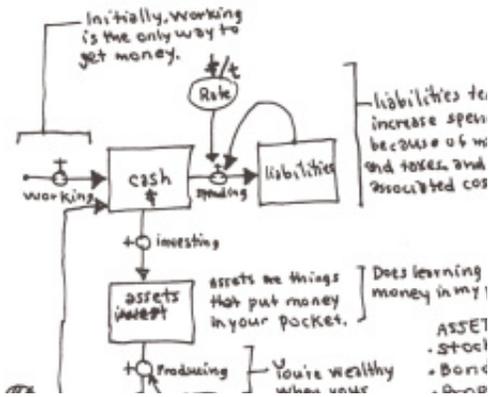
If you can draw a half dozen simple forms, you're ready to take on almost any topic. You can build a whole world with just stick people, squares, and arrows—manufacturing processes, ecosystems, supply chains, and new technology gizmos. A simple square can represent anything from a microchip to a building and beyond.

If you want to move beyond the basics and add more actors to your cast, see my Cheat Sheet.



Any person, place, or thing can be depicted by drawing a square and adding a name. This same approach works fine for intangible things, too.

### 3 Use labels



Include lots of labels, notes, and explanations in your sketches so that they'll make sense to you when you review them months, or even years, later.

Suppose you are designing a cookie factory and draw a square to represent an oven. Add a label right away that says "oven." If you don't you'll forget what it is, especially if it doesn't look much like an oven. Labels are also a big help when it's time to share your sketches with others. Never skimp on labels.

If you don't know how to draw something, just make some kind of squiggle and use a label to explain it. Most of the time, that's good enough to get your point across.

### 4 Keep it simple

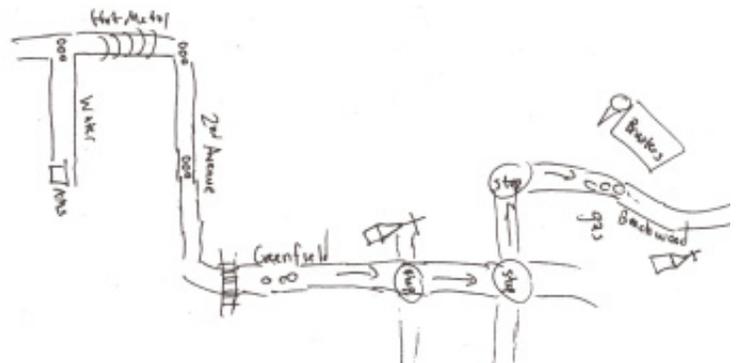
If your drawing looks like a four-year-old could have done it, you're probably doing fine. Although a finished napkin sketch may end up being complex, try to keep all the parts simple.



Einstein was on the right track when he said, "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not one bit simpler." In general, you want to leave out any detail that won't be missed. Look at each element and ask yourself if you can leave it out. Could you still make your point without that computer, ear, or steering wheel? Skip anything that's superfluous. A really good napkin sketch is so simple that, after you explain it only once, someone else can reproduce it accurately in a drawing of their own. Utter simplicity allows your idea to spread like a virus.

### 5 Be consistent

Avoid variations that don't mean anything. For example, if you use a box with wheels to represent a truck, use that icon for all trucks. If you find that you need to differentiate individual trucks or types of trucks, use color, labels, or letter codes. Unintentional variations will confuse your audience and they'll probably confuse you.

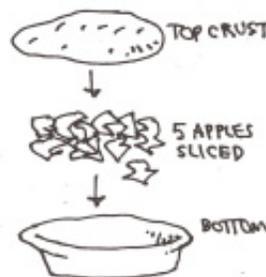


This map showing a driving short cut uses three little circles to represent traffic lights and the word "stop" in a circle to indicate stop signs. Find shapes that work and stick with them.

### 6 Break some rules

We all know that drawing has rules. Close-up things look bigger; far away things are small; things overlap and get foreshortened. When doing a napkin sketch, forget these rules.

Don't worry about keeping objects in the "right" scale relative to one another. Let the importance of objects determine their sizes. Show important things larger than other objects. Skip perspective. Show everything as a simple silhouette.



Defy gravity if that helps you show what's important. You can ignore all the rules of "proper" drawing in a napkin sketch.

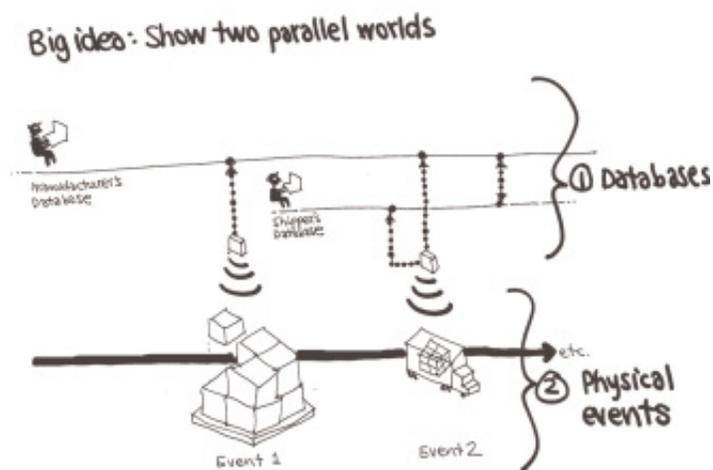
## 7 Let your arrows speak

Pointing arrows are the verbs in a napkin sketch. They express how shapes relate to and act on one another—sending, receiving, causing, blocking, supplying, demanding, etc.

Label your arrows to eliminate ambiguity. What is the link? Spell it out.

If you're showing different kinds of actions, use different kinds of arrows to differentiate them. Solid, dashed, dotted, or colored line variations can easily eliminate mysteries and make broad patterns visible.

And, be discriminating in your use of arrow heads. If you end up with a sketch showing every arrow pointing in both directions so everything is related to everything else, you're being lazy. That's not a useful insight.



Arrows made with dotted lines represent data moving while arrows made with heavy lines represent the movement of physical goods.

## Napkin Sketches 101, continued

## 8 Use the right tools

Of course, you don't have to draw on a napkin. Use whatever surface is available—paper, whiteboard, Post-it® note, or whatever. The important thing is to capture the idea. Scratch it in the sand if you need to.

Use any writing instrument you like. But your work will be easier if you choose something that you can erase. It's also helpful to have color. Make sure you choose materials that allow you to make a permanent record—something you can copy, scan, or photograph with a digital camera. Pale colors, skinny lines, and subtle contrasts won't work.

The main purpose is to capture your ideas, so use any drawing instrument that suits you. When you have a choice, use drawing instruments that are easy to change and easy to copy.

## 9 Don't keep the napkin on your lap

Napkin sketch can help you figure out what notions you have. While that's good, a sketch is even more useful if you can use it to share your thoughts with others. Don't hide your sketches in a file folder. Get them up on the wall where your teammates can see them.

Take time to explain your sketches to others. A good napkin sketch may contain volumes of thought that you can unpack and explain. Often, you'll get feedback that will help you make the idea and the sketch better. That can't happen if the napkin sketch is hidden in a file.

Whiteboards and similar display surfaces are ideal for creating and sharing napkin sketches. Technology such as CopyCam™ by PolyVision® or interactive plasma screens also make it easier to show sketches.



## Suggested reading

Henning Nelm's *Thinking with a Pencil* is a 1957 classic intended for people who want to use drawing as a communication tool. It's loaded with simple, practical advice for people who claim that they cannot draw a straight line, including techniques for drawing a straight line.

Morgan D. Jones' *The Thinker's Toolkit* includes descriptions of more than a dozen visual techniques that can be useful to organize and reach conclusions about difficult business problems. Some of these can become useful napkin sketches during the early stages of a project.

Terry Richey's *The Marketer's Visual Tool Kit* describes some visual techniques that he thinks are especially useful for solving marketing problems, but most could also be applied to other kinds of problems.

## Cheat sheet

