Note Taking for Beginners

Let's begin by doing something we do all the time: writing some notes.

Let's imagine that you're going to give a speech, five minutes from now, about **Canadian Society**. So, take a few minutes to write down the notes you would use to make this speech.

Now, it's clear that you will not actually have to make this speech, but the exercise is important. It will focus you on how you make notes and identify issues.

So, take the time and make your notes about **Canadian Society**!

After a few minutes, let's consider the kinds of issues people have with an exercise like this:
- Where to start?
- How do I organize my notes?
- I have many ideas, but as I write them down, I only write down a few.
- I'm not doing this correctly: I'll take a new sheet of paper and start over (my favourite!).

Ask yourself: how much do your notes reflect what you know about Canadian Society? Would you be ready to make a speech now?

The problem here is not that you lack information: the problem is, really, that we all know so much about Canadian Society that it's difficult to start and organize our thoughts.

The real point of the exercise is to make clear that the outline note-taking techniques that we've been taught in school don't help us with this task.

> **Canadian Society**
> i) **History**
>   (1) **pre-colonial**
>   (2) **colonial**
>   (3) **Confederation**
>   (4) **Modern Era**
> ii) **Geography**
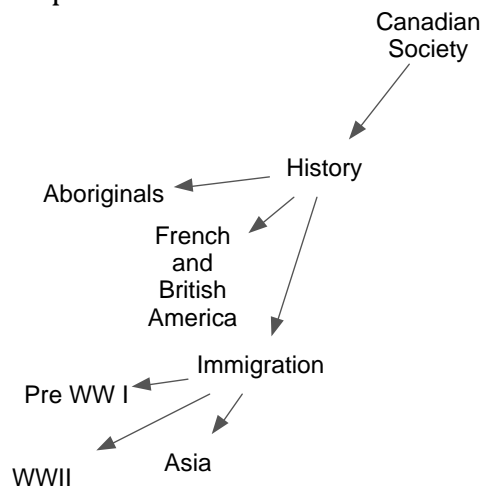>   (1) **Regions** ...etc

If we start with a point-form outline, we get stuck with questions of organization and it really assumes that we know what we're going to speak about before we start our outline, and it's very difficult quickly to get our thoughts on paper.

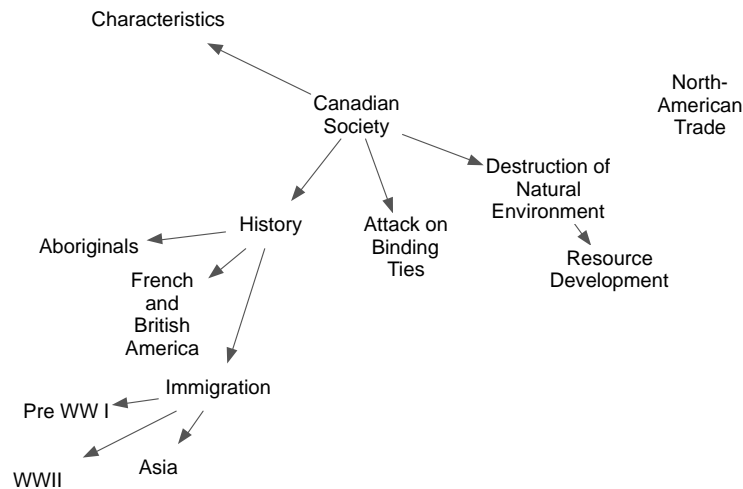A different approach to this problem is the **Mind-map**.

To build a mind-map, place your topic in the centre of the page, and, on branches, like a tree, write down your thoughts.
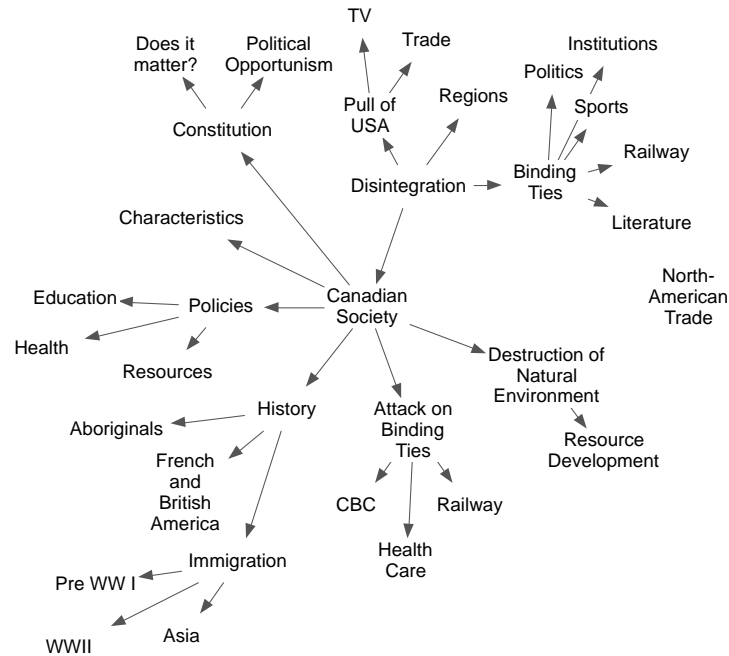
Canadian Society

Your mind-map might develop like this:

Canadian Society

History

Aboriginals

French and British America

Immigration

Pre WW I

WWII

Asia

And

Characteristics

Canadian Society

North-American Trade

History

Attack on Binding Ties

Destruction of Natural Environment

Aboriginals

French and British America
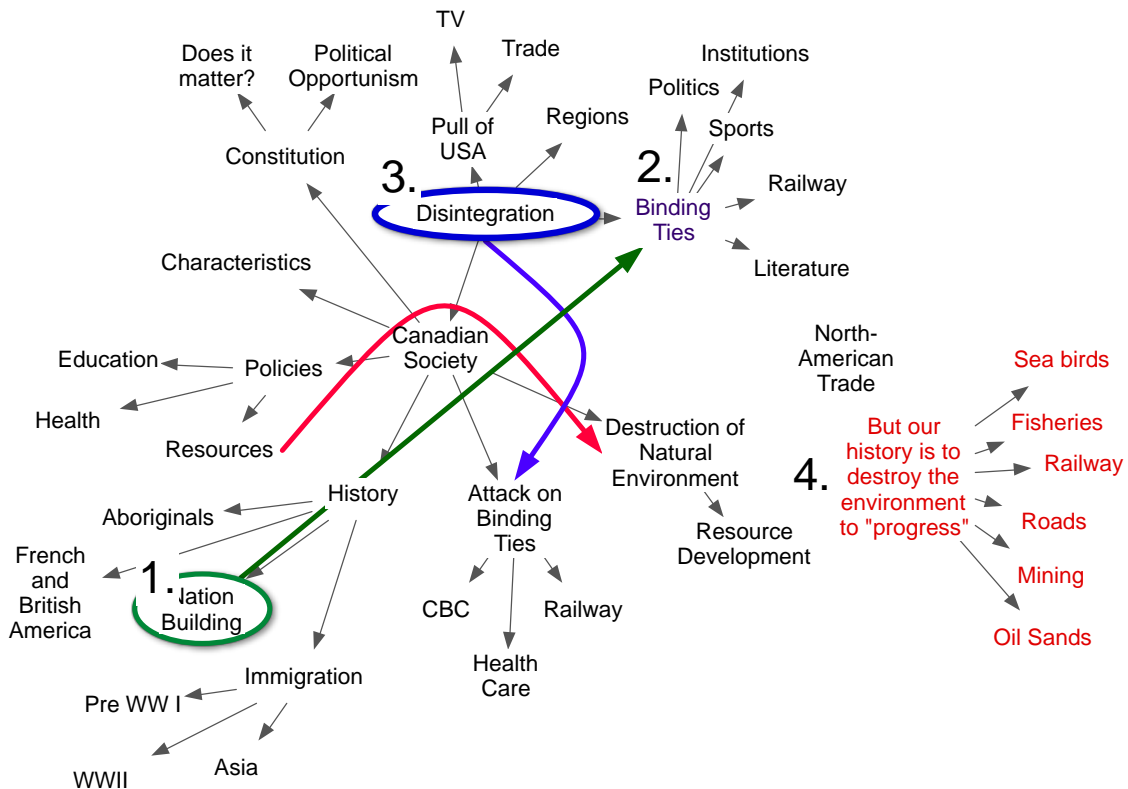
Resource Development

Immigration

Pre WW I

WWII

Asia

And further, still within 5 minutes:

To organize these notes to make a speech, add some colour, arrows, lines and numbers.

Mind-maps also solve one of the big problems in note-taking, namely organization. The map framework invites you to add more thoughts to your notes and, it's easy to organize it afterwards by adding numbers and lines and colours.

While computer graphics have been used here, to make the notes clear, in reality this works better on a piece of paper, usually in landscape mode. The actual notes that were taken for this exercise, in 1993, look like this:


What's also notable is that these notes, taken 20 years ago, are still comprehensible to-day. And, while I wouldn't make the same speech to-day, I can see that in 1993 I was concerned about Free Trade, the Environment and destruction of many of the ties that bind us together as a society.

To go back even further, in my library I've found a set of notes I took on a CBC program on the CBC, in September 1983, in which two famous radio personalities, Lister Sinclair and Peter Gzowski, discuss George Orwell's 1984.

Even after all this time, looking at the notes I can easily remember the program, its general organization and specific detailed points. If you're interested in this topic, and would like to hear the program, listen to 1984.MP3 in this folder. But here are the notes:
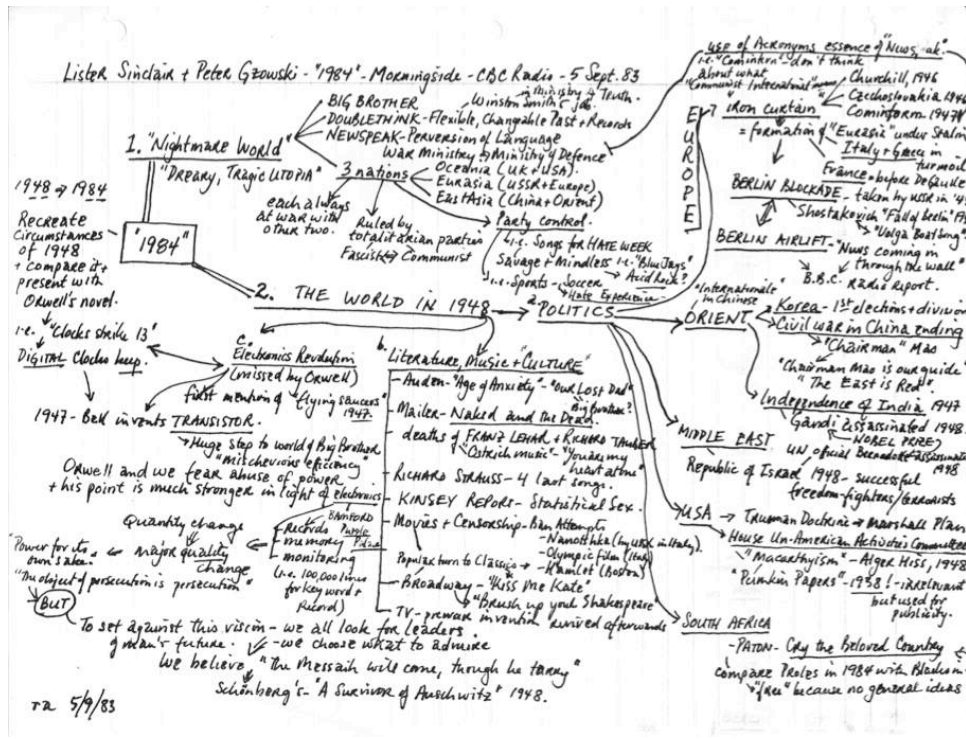
And one final example. Last February I attended a very interesting presentation by some elders associated with Tungasuvvingat Inuit on Savard Street in Vanier:
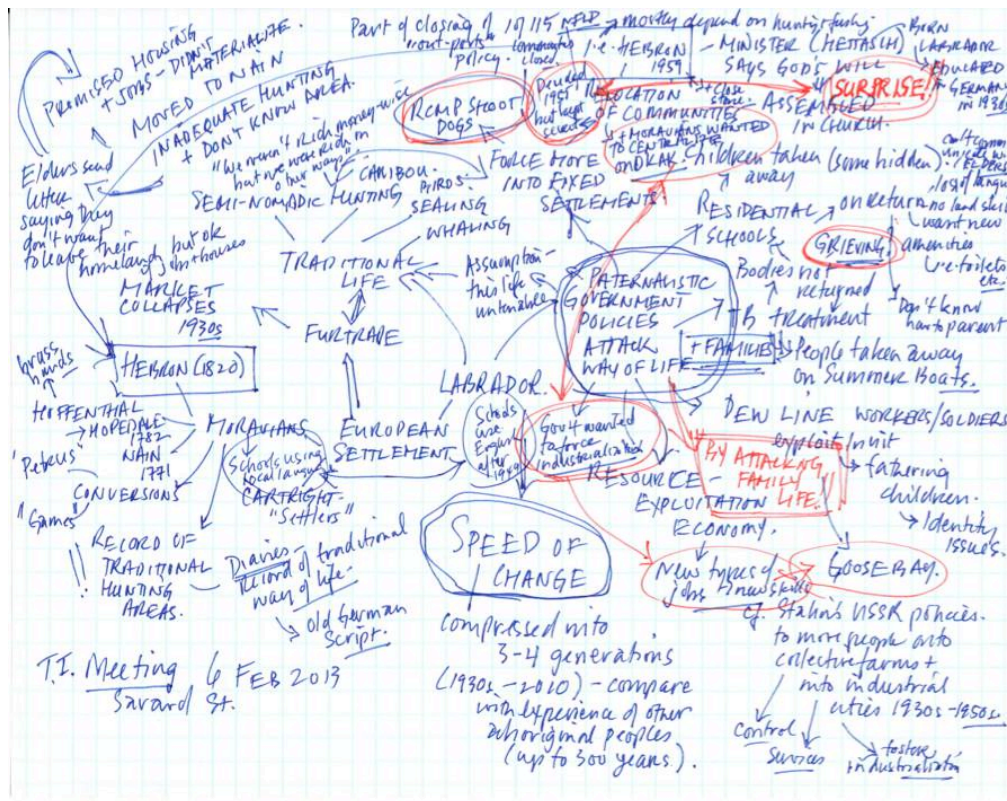
Afterthought: Mind Mapping Software

The thing is that if you are really taking notes in a meeting or planning something, you don't need the complication of computer software -- but the software is useful for organizing and presenting your initial mind-map, or for sharing your thoughts with other people online. Mind mapping software can also be very useful in taking notes on your readings. See An Overview Approach to Textbook Reading and in An Overview Approach to Reading Online Materials.

	For collaboration, I use Mindmeister: http://www.mindmeister.com/ Mindmeister is a Cloud tool that enables collaboration and works on tablets, smartphones and laptops, for which there are special apps. Basic Plan is free and allows you to have up to three maps (at one time) and to collaborate on those maps with other users. Paid plans start at $6.00 a month or $59.00 for a year (personal). All paid plans give *unlimited* mind maps and collaboration. Pro plan ($10.00 a month, $99.00 for a year) exports to .docx and pptx formats.
	XMind6 -- http://www.xmind.net The free version of this software creates all kinds of mind maps on Windows, Mac OS, Linux, will save these diagrams to Evernote and share them on the web. Sadly, XMind does not support collaboration by more than one person on one map at this point.
	FreeMind -- **Free** mind mapping software for Windows, Mac OS X, Linux, etc. (Individual user, no collaboration, requires Java runtime, no apps for smartphones or iPads) http://freemind.sourceforge.net/wiki/index.php/Main_Page
	For my own diagrams on which I'm not collaborating with others, I use Inspiration, because it gives me the greatest flexibility in the placement and arrangement of my maps. http://www.inspiration.com/ 30-day free trial; Inspiration 9: $49.95 (Single user, installed on 1 machine) Inspiration Maps app for iPad($9.99), exchanges maps with Inspiration.

There are many mind-mapping products available on the Internet. Go to the Mind Mapping Product Directory to learn more about these visual mapping products.