

When Visual Thinking enhances Communication – Using a Visual Vocabulary

When people peek inside my notebook during meetings or while I am attending a talk, they usually are amazed by the **wild mixture of drawing, writing and doodles**. Besides being nice to look at, they sketches allow the content to **sink way deeper into my brain** than it would, if I was taking text notes only. They are more fun to do as well and if the meeting turns out to be rather dull, my note taking can brighten up my day.

However: the biggest pay-off happens, when I use those sketches to visualize what we are talking about in a meeting – visuals have an enormous power to **further a common understanding, show alternatives** on first glance and **support joined problem solving**. And it really is so simple.

It is not about perfection, it is not about accuracy, it is not even about drawing. I am sure, everyone can learn it, even people who state that they can't draw a straight line. It is not about straight lines anyway. The way I like to look at it, is more as a **slightly different and more versatile way of writing** – as if the various elements were nothing more than a few new letters in your alphabet.

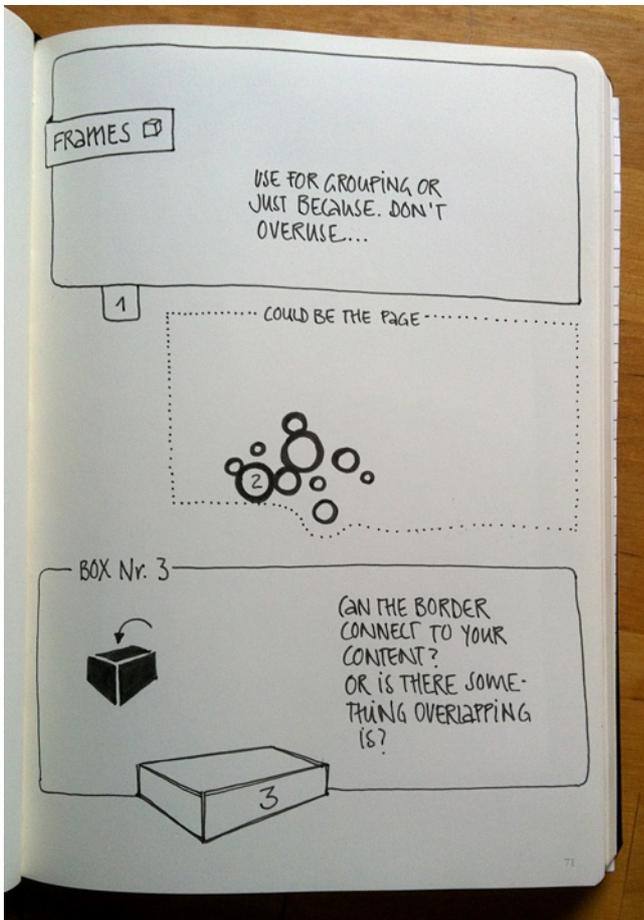
When my father was redecorating a room, he used to draw a big nosed guy on the walls, peeking over a brick wall, before repainting or hanging the wallpaper. Though he never had any inclination to doing artwork and would certainly deny that he had particular artistic skills, he could draw this figure perfectly and without hesitation. It was part of his vocabulary, so there was no need for him to doubt his skills.

So if you ever thought about keeping a visual journal or documenting meetings in a graphical way, **do not worry about drawing skills** but just go ahead and learn some new vocabulary! For the start, I have put together a few snippets. As you work with visuals in your everyday notes, your own pool of elements will emerge. So feel free to start with some borrowed elements :)



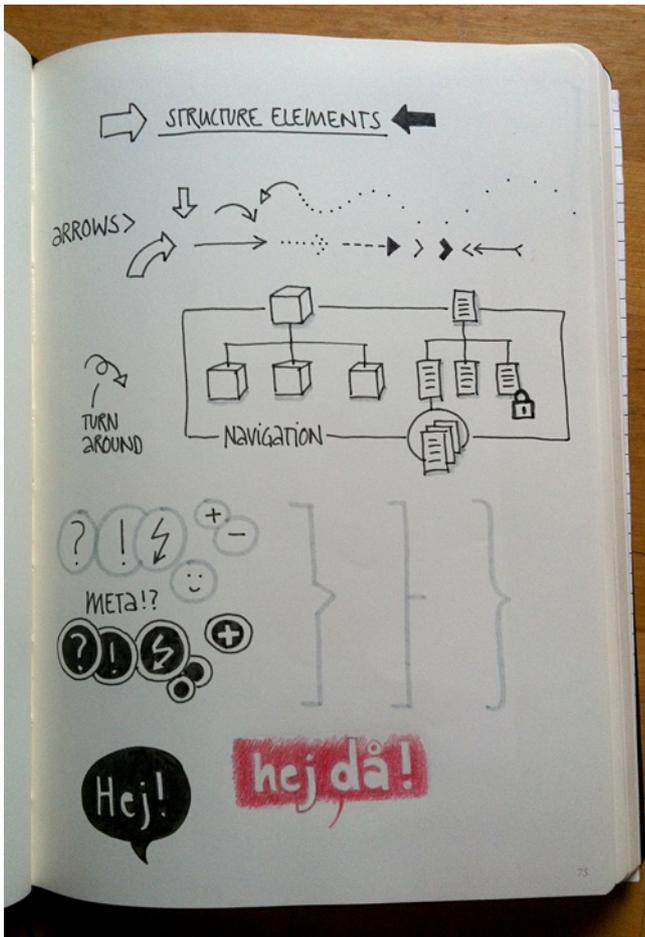
Starting each page with a **headline** sets the tone for the content and helps overcome the white page feeling.

Leave a few pages empty to make a page index when the book is full. If your note book does not come with page numbers, just draw them in.



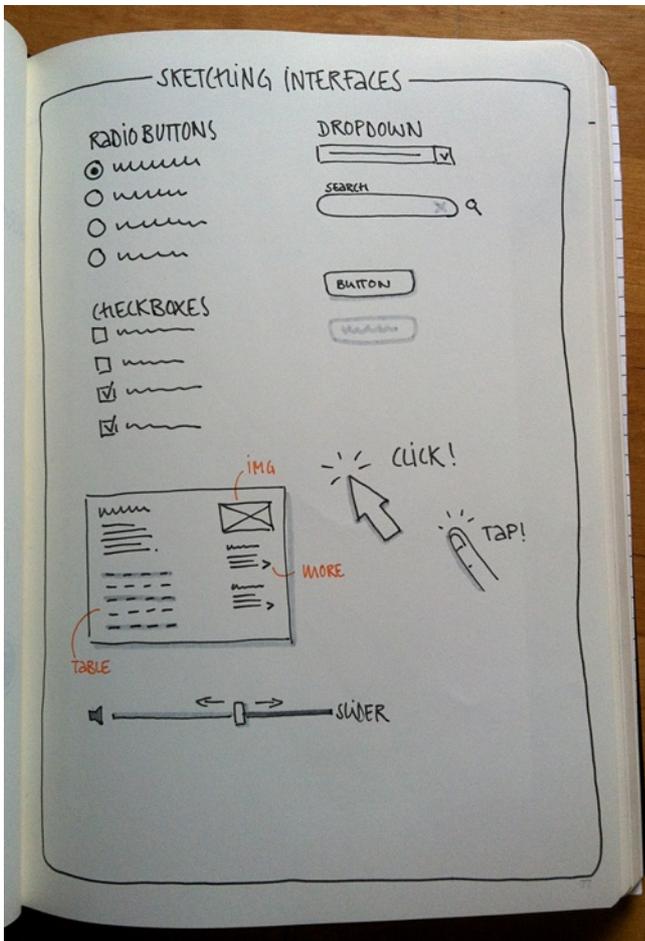
Some pages need lines that hold all the content together. Sometimes there are page areas you want to group. Here are three examples for **frames and boxes**.

I recommend to save them for special occasions though. Do not put each and every thing inside a box.

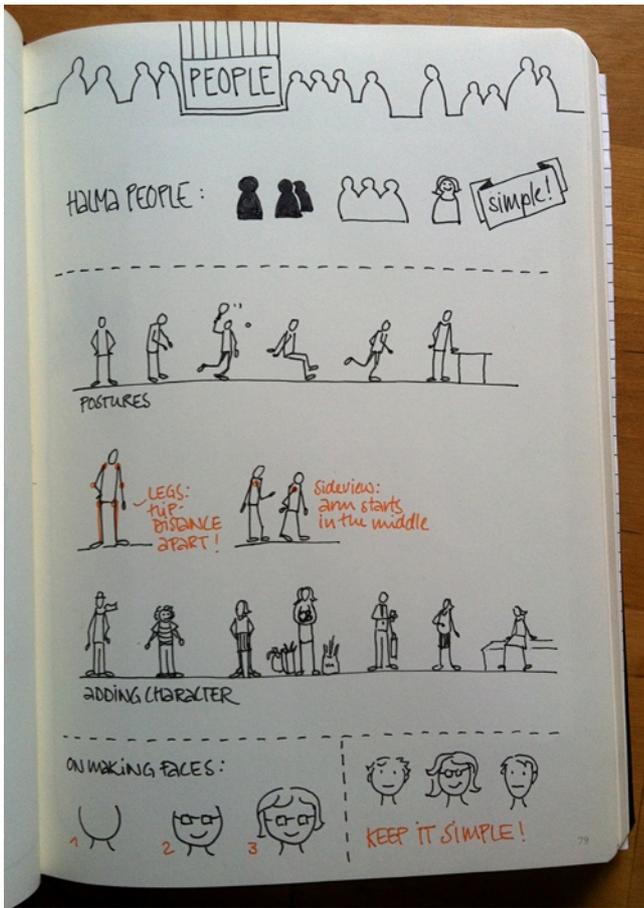


Here are some **structure elements**, that come in handy in many contexts. I use circles for marking open questions, problems or pros and cons.

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Sketching interfaces is no big thing – just remember to add only the level of detail that is of interest in your notes. The more detail is needed, the bigger you lay out the sketch.



Sometimes you will need **people** to convey your concept. It is easy if you accept that they are only placeholders for reality.

So as it is not about academic art and it is not about doing great portraits, in some cases simple **halma figures** will do the trick. Note how you can group them to get quite a crowd.

If you need your folks to wander around or do stuff, halma figures won't be much of a help.

Try to use this adaption of **stick figures** instead. They are pretty easy: the torso is a rectangle, on its top corners the arms are hinged, on its lower corners (not in the middle!) the legs are growing out until they reach the floor. Put an egg on top of it and you are set. By giving them a little twist, lifting a foot off the floor or adding some props, they come into life.

If you need faces, keep it real simple – remember there is no need to hang in the louvre or win a beauty contest.

Avoid stepping into **the gender trap** here – just because it is fun to draw them, not every woman needs a skirt or long hair.



Of course there are countless **things** you may need in your notes. Here are just a few examples... Often it is a good idea to keep forms very basic: two eggs and two lines make scissors, why do more?



The essential **tools** need to fit into every pocket. I mostly use a simple **fineliner** (black or gray) for the essentials. Adding a bit of color where it conveys meaning or helps highlight the most important details works great with colored fineliners.

I use a brush pen for filling in larger areas and very rarely colored pencils.

These are the tools I use on my notebook or on A3 Paper on meeting tables. I find it difficult to adapt my technique to flip boards – the ruled paper is in my way, the size is uncomfortable and the pens feel way too bold – but I figure it is just like learning to write on a new medium, so I try not to be intimidated :)

Have fun working on your own visual vocabulary! I'd be happy to see some of your notes! (mail@svenjanoae.de)