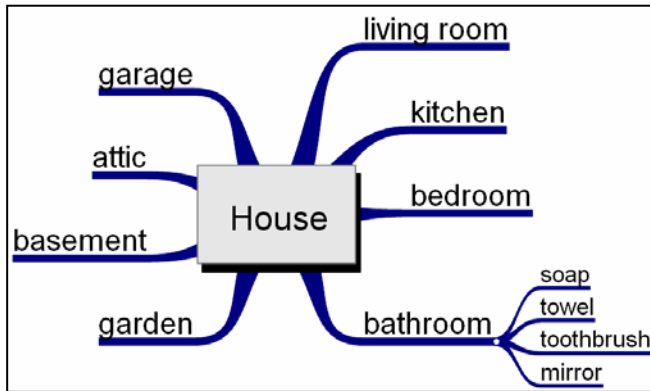


Clusters

By Dónal Thompson



A 'Cluster' or a 'Mind Map'

I'm going to show you a technique used by writers to generate ideas. You can use it to massively improve your vocabulary.

I know how hard it is for you. You work all day in a busy office trying to please your boss. The only time you get to study English is in your lunch hour. When you get home you have kids to feed, dogs to walk and, if you're lucky, partners to pander to.

There is simply no time to make lists of holiday vocabulary, house vocabulary, food vocabulary etcetera.

So, don't.

Free yourself from lists and make clusters instead. Clusters (sometimes called 'mind maps') start off with one idea or, as we're studying vocabulary, one word. Let's take the word 'house' for example.

Get a sheet of paper and write 'house' in a box in the middle. Now, think of all the words you can connected with the word 'house'. Maybe you will think of 'bedroom', 'bathroom', 'living room' and 'kitchen'.

Write these words in around your first word - house.

So far, so good.
You have created a 'cluster'.

Now choose one of those words, let's say, 'bathroom'. Forget all the other words for now. Think of all the words that come to mind when you think 'bathroom'. Maybe you will think of 'toothbrush', 'soap', 'towel'. And then maybe you will think of something in your own language. Maybe you will think 'espejo'.

That's okay.

Quickly look up 'espejo' in your dictionary and continue with the exercise. When you have exhausted your 'bathroom' cluster. Move on to another word.

The clusters don't have to be logical. You might make a 'house' cluster of words that begin with 'H' like 'head', 'horror', 'hard' and 'hello'. Or maybe you will make a 'house' cluster of building words such as 'tent', 'hotel', 'skyscraper' 'hospital' etc.

You can do this in a notebook when you're on the train or bus. While you have a coffee in the morning why not make a 'Coffee Bar' cluster? Make a cluster about your partner's qualities - 'tall', 'happy', 'energetic' or 'short', 'gloomy', 'lazy'!

Look to your left now. Write the name of something you see. Make a cluster. Now. Go on. Why not?

If, like me, you are a technophile, you can buy mind-mapping software for PC and Pda. There is even a free version called Freemind available.

Get into the habit of making one cluster every lunchtime or every journey to and from work. In no time at all, you will find that you have more words to choose from when you speak or write English.

Happy clustering!