

The Idea Shapers

The power of putting your thinking
into your own hands

Excerpt

Brandy
Agerbeck



Praise for *The Idea Shapers*

Once in a great while, a book comes along that turns on that lightbulb above your head. This is one of those books. As a lifelong doodler and drawer, I know I process the world visually—but it's easy to give up that spatial knowing for a more linear one, isn't it? Reading this book has re-sparked my visual way of interacting with the world, given me tools for doing just that, and created a deep sense of excitement and competence in being a visual thinker, once and for all. Thank you for this toolkit!

Patti Digh, Author of *Life is a Verb* and 7 other books
on living mindfully and intentionally

If, like me, you've stood with mouth agape, in awe of an impossibly, extraordinarily gifted person with the ability to visually explain and to draw pictures to record and even sort-of synthesize what other people are talking about: admit it.

You resent these people.

I did too, until I attended a workshop with Brandy Agerbeck, wherein she completely spilled the beans – showed us every trick in the book for doing like she does.

THIS IS THAT BOOK.

The Idea Shapers is the most approachable, dishy, memorable, implementable book on drawing in support of understanding and human communication you're going to have read this much of the blurb for: why haven't you clicked "add to cart" yet??

Dan Klyn, Information Architect and Co-Founder,
The Understanding Group, LLC

A new alphabet for the Visual Age. *The Idea Shapers* is an indispensable guide for the 21st century superpower of thinking critically and clearly in pictures.

Patricia Martin, Cultural Analyst,
author of *RenGen: Renaissance Generation*

Agerbeck's *The Idea Shapers* shares fresh insights from her years of strategic thinking. It's rare to find a book rich in systems that's clear and applicable right away.

Nancy Duarte, CEO of Duarte, Inc.
and best-selling author

Once again Brandy Agerbeck provides simple, clear and highly practical guidance for anyone who aspires to excel in visual thinking and facilitation. Brandy is a master practitioner and a natural born teacher. You can't do better than this book.

Dave Gray, Founder of XPLANE
and author of *Liminal Thinking*

In *The Idea Shapers*, Brandy Agerbeck shows us with compelling visual clarity that you don't have to be an artist to draw. And, that by drawing, we become more capable and creative problem solvers, expansive connectors of generative ideas and new possibilities, and more effective communicators. What are you waiting for? Pick up *The Idea Shapers*...and the pen!

Lisa Kay Solomon, Co-author of the bestseller *Moments of Impact: How to Design Strategic Conversations to Accelerate Change* and *Design a Better Business: New Tools, Skills and Mindset for Strategy and Innovation*

Brandy has crafted a rich encyclopedia of ideas, techniques and tricks to kickstart your visual thinking right away. Her years of experience leading rooms with her ninja-like visual skills will help build your skills immediately.

Mike Rohde, Bestselling author of *The Sketchnote Handbook* and *The Sketchnote Workbook*

The Idea Shapers is a wonderful, thought-provoking book for anyone who has wondered how visual thinking works. It holds terrific insights into the relationships between writing, drawing, teaching, learning, and making connections across disciplines. It's not just for artists, and not just for writers, it's for anyone who wants to challenge themselves to think in new and fresh ways.

Jennifer Farrington, President & CEO,
Chicago Children's Museum

The Idea Shapers is everything you wanted to know about being a visual thinking practitioner but were afraid to ask. Brandy takes us through a very thorough exploration of drawing as a thinking tool using twenty-four idea shapers. Each idea-shaper is unpacked rigorously and in detail, presenting a rich toolkit that will be of benefit to visual thinkers at all levels.

Andrew Park, Director of Cognitive
and Creator of RSA Animate

The Idea Shapers makes visual thinking accessible by showing how drawing-as-thinking expands your toolkit for puzzling through complex topics in order to clarify your ideas and make personal meaning. Explore the empowering process in this book, discover yourself as someone who draws, and open up new ways of engaging ideas and solving problems. You can draw and thereby think better, more creatively, and in more dimensions. How effective is *The Idea Shapers*? I drew this recommendation before I wrote it!

Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, Professor/Librarian,
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

As Brandy Agerbeck astutely points out in *The Idea Shapers*, the word "drawing" can imply not so much a completed, fetishized object but an active process, one that triggers a different sort of intelligence. Of course, we see this throughout the English language: we may draw pictures, but we also *draw conclusions*, we *draw inspiration* from our forebears, and when we have made up our minds about a difficult task we may *draw the line*. In this substantial new book, readers will learn how the act of drawing might be used to practice discernment

and sound judgment, and this is something from which we might all benefit greatly.

Ross Elfline, Associate Professor of Art History,
Carleton College

After fifteen years teaching Computer Science and building a 4000 square foot maker lab at our school (@LTMakers), the one thing I never thought I'd need to know or teach is drawing. Now, it is crucial that I do.

As the heart of my teaching has shifted from virtual and software-only problem solving to combined virtual and hands-on physical problem solving, there has never been a more critical need for me or my students to be able to relay thoughts, organize, and prototype ideas through pen and paper. Brandy's new book *The Idea Shapers* is helping our ideas see the light of day.

Jeff Solin, Computer Science Teacher,
Chicago Public Schools and Creator of Lane Tech Makers Lab

I have read and shared (gifted!) Brandy's first book, *The Graphic Facilitator's Guide*, and her new book, *The Idea Shapers*, is going to get the same treatment. As a visual communicator for 35 years (I was Director of Information Graphics at Newsweek for a decade), I found myself taking notes on visual storytelling concepts outlined by Brandy. As a teacher, she has a wonderful voice, a straight forward and accessible manner for conveying her knowledge and skills through words and drawings.

Karl Gude
Director of Media Sandbox,
Michigan State University

The Idea Shapers: **The Power of Putting Your** **Thinking into Your Own Hands**

Brandy Agerbeck

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Also by Brandy Agerbeck

Co-created with Pamela Meyer

Permission: A Guide to Generating More Ideas, Being More of Yourself and Having More Fun at Work

The Graphic Facilitator's Guide: How to use your listening, thinking and drawing skills to make meaning

Anthology co-edited with Kely Bird,
Sam Bradd and Jennifer Shepherd

Drawn Together through Visual Practice

The Idea Shapers



The Power
of Putting
your Thinking
into your own
hands

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


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More resources at TheIdeaShapers.com



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The Objective

What idea are you going to shape?

You begin your process by thinking about your task at hand. What are you trying to accomplish in this drawing? What is the scope and scale of the project? How will you know it is done? What resources and materials will you need to meet your goal?

Drawing is a thinking tool for a wide variety of Objectives. Drawing is an infinitely flexible tool. There is so much it can be used for. Every subsequent Idea Shaper will end with “At Work” examples of how that concept can be put to use. In those stories, you’ll see a wide variety of applications:

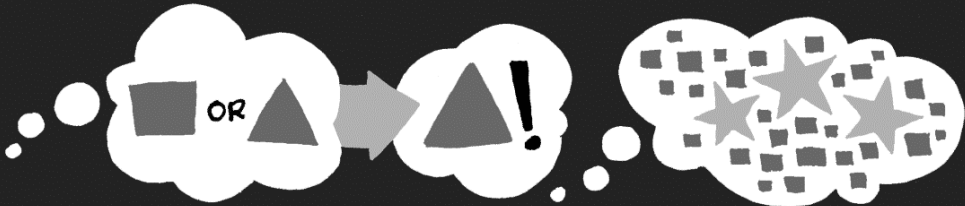
- Organizing a book, paper, presentation
- Coordinating the myriad pieces of a complex project into one big-picture format
- Learning a new topic
- Taking notes
- Making a decision
- Creating better organized and more effective communication pieces
- Managing your time and projects
- Reflecting on relationship and health issues
- Reflecting on past work to create a strategy for future work
- Simply reducing overwhelm



reduce
overwhelm

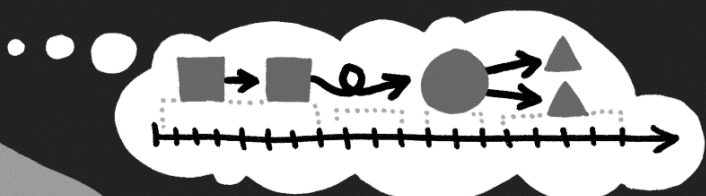
learn new
things

brainstorm

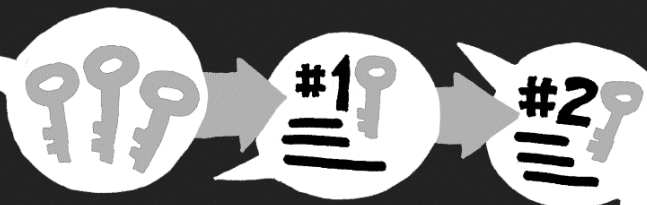


make decisions

prioritize



manage processes and time

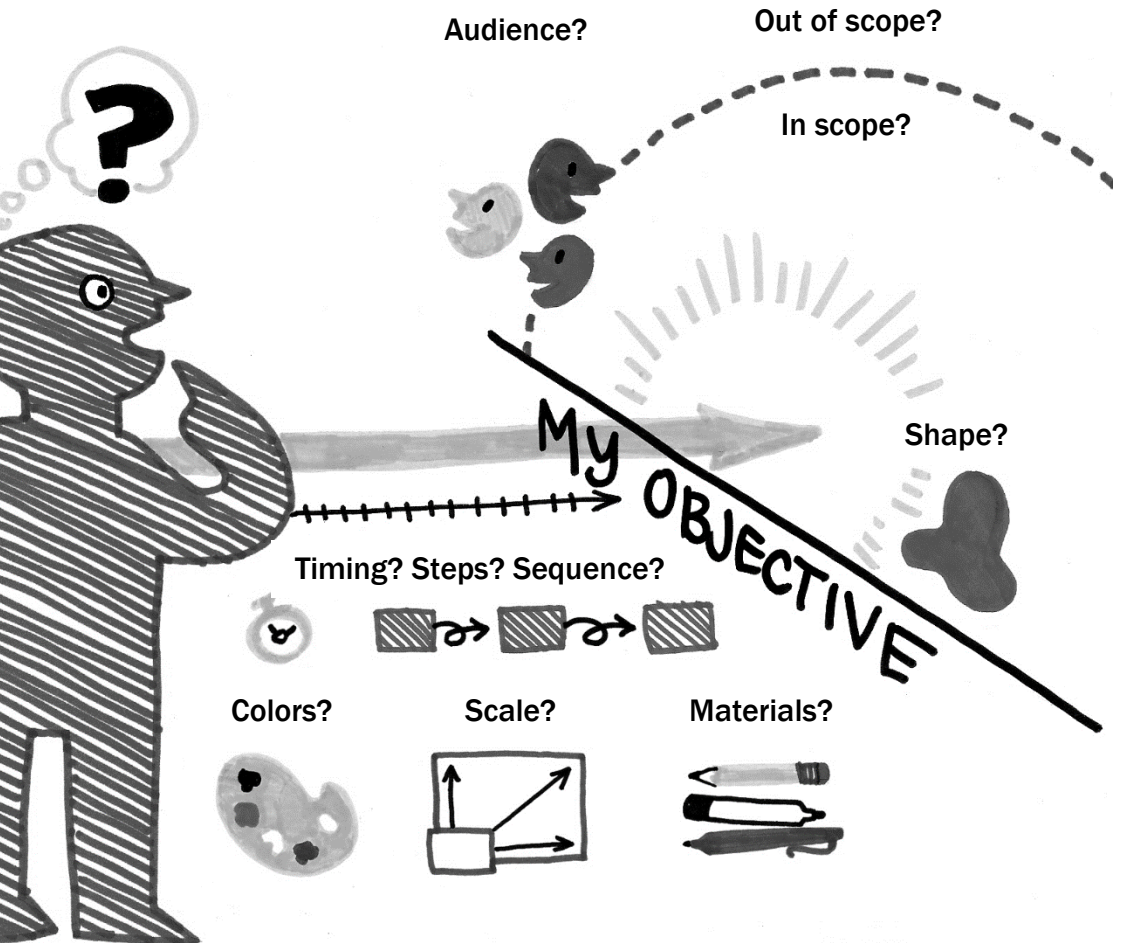


think + communicate clearly



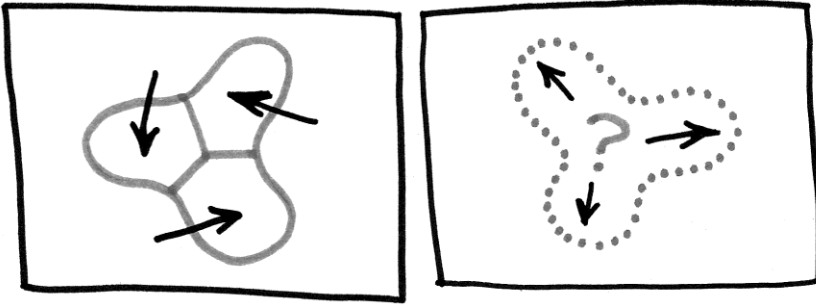
Having a clear **Objective** guides your choices and motivates you. You start with the end in mind. Let's begin. Imagine the task you have before you. What are you trying to get done? What is your goal? What result or reward awaits once you accomplish it? Your **Objective** should be the single judge of the success of your drawing. As said in the Power of Making, page 39, the only test of a drawing is if it gets you closer to your goal. Will your drawing help you make progress? Clarity on these questions can help create your motivation for the task ahead.

Visual Choices Guided by Your Objective



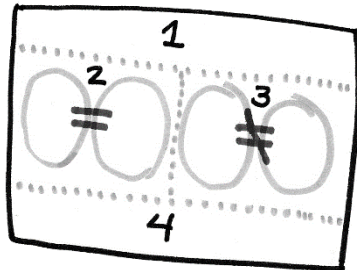
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Your drawings can be directed or emergent. A directed drawing begins with a shape in mind, then you fit your ideas within your shape. An emergent drawing starts with a blank sheet of paper. You simply begin, and, as you work, you see what shape your ideas take.



Which type of drawing should you use? The answer is entirely situational. The answer is both, at different times.

For example, let's say you have a paper to write for class comparing and contrasting two items. Your teacher has told you that she wants an introduction, a comparison, a contrast and a conclusion. You could be greatly served by making a **Landscape drawing** that lets you see all of your main points next to each other on the same level. Your assignment was clear and the drawing kept your writing on task and organized by the parameters given.



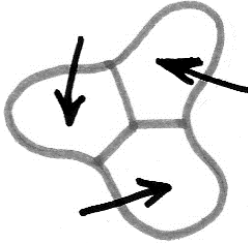
By contrast, let's say you're trying to map out a strategy for your business. There is no set template or shape to begin with. The shape will emerge as you populate your drawing with both your past experiences and the new ideas you want to incorporate.

One danger with a directed drawing is not choosing the right shape, process or template in the first place. Then your means are working toward the wrong ends. Have you ever begun a project thinking it was

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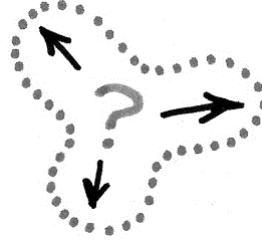
about one thing and headed fully in that one direction? And then it took a left turn and you discovered the project had an entirely different goal? Yeah. That's life.

Both approaches have their functions and their limitations:



Directed drawings

- + Useful when your **Objective** has clear givens or parameters
- May miss good ideas or details that don't fit into your shape
- Has built-in assumptions
- Can lapse into "fill-in-the-box" thinking



Emergent drawings

- + Is open-ended
- + Allows for discovery
- + Can be made more directed later, if needed
- Lacks structure in the beginning, which can be scary

Emergent drawings are an open-ended process, which may make you uncomfortable. It is natural to feel uncomfortable with the unknown. This is especially true given many of us live in cultures that are more product-focused than process-focused.

Recognize that a big part of the magic of drawing is seeing what emerges. It is giving yourself paper and pens and the time and space to sit with your ideas. It is feeling the discomfort of that white expanse of paper in front of you. It is trusting that that feeling will not swallow you whole. It is the courage to get some marks down on paper all messy and disorganized. It is trusting these tools and your growing visual thinking skills – knowing they will help you move from this creative tension through to a new discovery. You will discover what

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you want to do, what you never want to do again, what ideas make you sick and which ones make you swoon. You will make meaning as you make these drawings.

Your thinking is expansive, that blank **Landscape** can hold any possibility.

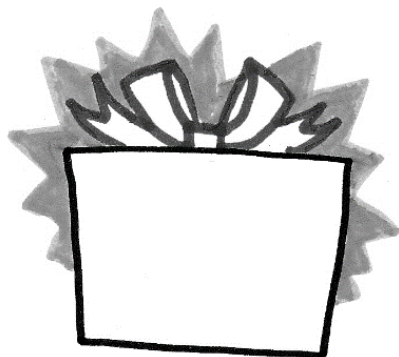
You may feel lost. At points you may feel tense.

And then there will be a moment, when it clicks. When you discover something new, find a pattern in your thinking, make a new connection between two ideas you had never thought of before. These accomplishments feel terrific. You made the drawing and you made the meaning for yourself.

Be mindful of when you are discovering your idea's shape and when you are controlling your idea's shape. Throughout your idea shaping, you'll fluctuate between these two states. Sometimes you will let ideas emerge and then observe them. Sometimes you will be more directed in your drawing. Perhaps you are drawing toward a specific outcome. Or you could be using a template or a specific process or model.

You will gain a sense of mastery with your ideas as you learn when you need to sit and observe your ideas, when you need to give them space to emerge, and when it is best to whip those ideas into shape. The beauty of drawing is that it allows all those three things to happen.

Please grant yourself the gift of the blank page. In my experience watching people learn, speak, and work together, we are pretty uncomfortable with a lack of structure. For example, I often see speakers present on a topic in sets of 3, 5, or 10 points. Was that the true number of pieces within their whole topic? Did they miss a crucial fourth item to get



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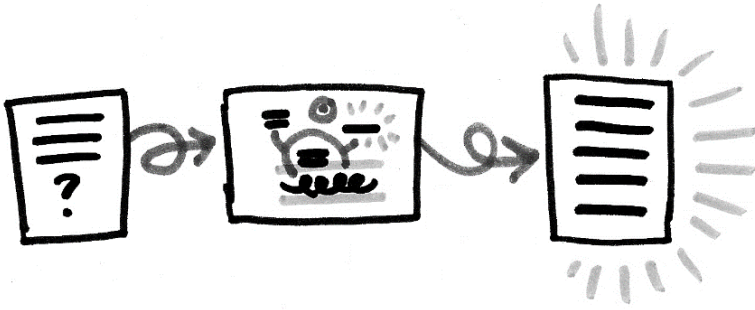
down to a pithy three? Did they scrounge up a fifth item to raise their number to the expected 5? A facilitator asks for the top three priorities from each team in the room. It is certainly good to be selective and succinct. Has the facilitator given the teams time to generate a large enough number of tasks to truly choose their most important or urgent three from? Did the team merely fill in their first three ideas to complete the assignment without truly giving it their full consideration?

Allowing for emergence is vital to critical thinking. The mental space for collecting ideas without judgment gives you the opportunity to find patterns and make connections.

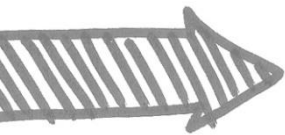
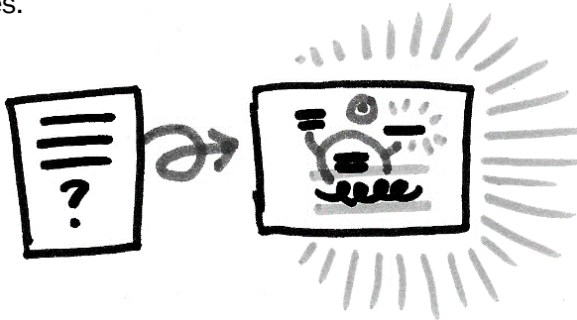
For example, the five step organizational structure of *The Idea Shapers* emerged while I was developing my 2013 TEDx talk, *Shape Your Thinking*. I had made plenty of messy sketches that got me to the final steps. I distinctly remember having the first four when I saw that these could be the four fingers. In a flash, I realized the thumb was GRASP. I got goosebumps and a wave of elation, after being in that tense, amorphous state of exploring.

I knew these five steps would become the major sections of this book, but it was well after that speech that I began contemplating the specific visual thinking concepts within each of the steps. As you'll see in **The Stack**, I used **The Iterator** to define the 24 Idea Shapers you see here. I wasn't going to limit my thinking to a set number of concepts per step. The numbers were going to reveal themselves through the process. That is how I ended up with three to seven Idea Shapers per step. I didn't cram in or lop off concepts to get a tidy, consistent number for each step. Complexity doesn't tend to be that tidy.

Your drawing and the outcome of your Objective may be two different things. For example, with the compare and contrast paper described above, your teacher wants you to hand in a five-page paper, not a drawing. Here the drawing is facilitating your writing process, but it is not the final outcome.



While our culture is becoming more and more visual, often school and work products are still very verbal and text-based. Perhaps your drawing is the work that happens “behind the curtain” that guides you to your goal. Perhaps, you’ll create visual elements that you can incorporate into your final product, like a visual model that leads your audience through your presentation. Or better yet, you may talk to your teacher or supervisor and discover they are receptive to your drawing, they see what you have learned, even learned from it themselves.



The Objective at Work: Christina Draws Out Her New Year

Every year, Christina gives herself time at the end of one year to think about the next. Cozying up with tea and lighting a couple candles, she gets into a reflective mood.

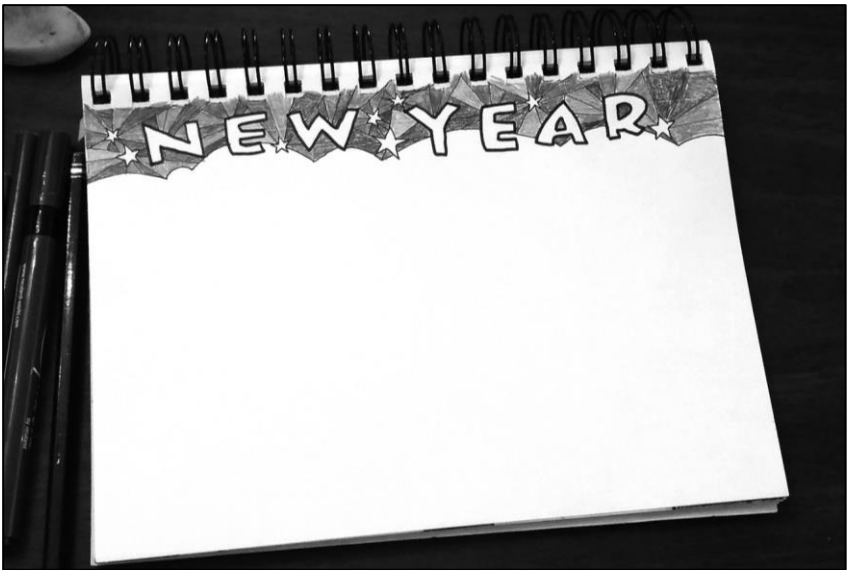
Curled up in her favorite overstuffed chair, Christina sat with her favorite markers and colored pencils. Eschewing specific resolutions, Christina liked to think about what she was letting go of from the previous year and what she wanted to bring with her in the new one. Her **Objective** was to capture these thoughts and feelings.

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She thought about the year coming to a close. What colors would it be? Yellow and gray came to mind. It was a turbulent year reminding her of a thundercloud, but there were some positive flashes of sunny yellow. It was a year of contrasts.

What colors did she want for the New Year? Instantly, she thought of blues. Blues felt calming and constant. From a watery light blue to a deep, inky blue like the sky just after dusk. She grabbed the blue pens and pencils that gave her that sense of calm.

First, she drew a header for her page —



Christina enjoyed drawing the little stars around the words and shading in the background. Then she looked at the big empty space on the page. It overwhelmed her.

The only things that came to mind were the things from the previous year she didn't want to repeat. Like getting three colds over the winter, or letting the summer slip by without tuning up her bike and going for a ride. She resisted putting paper to pen.

Thinking about the seasons, and wanting more structure, she flipped the sketchbook page and began a new drawing. She made a grid of

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twelve boxes for the twelve months. She started filling in the things she knew she had coming up. A family reunion in August, a conference in April. She added a little drawing of a bike to March to remember to get it tuned up early.

She added birthdays in their respective boxes and a few work deadlines she knew were coming. Studiously filling in boxes, Christina soon felt unmotivated. Sure, she could see the whole year ahead, but that felt like the same old, same old, while looking like a blah schedule.

Christina got up and steeped a new cup of tea. She stretched and rubbed her face. A new year is a new opportunity. A new trip around the sun. It wasn't really a big blank slate because there are always holidays and family plans and work schedules. But looking at the year like a dozen rectangles had no sense of joy, flow or energy.



She stretched again and thought, “That’s what I want — a sense of stretching into this new time. I want to feel open.”

Collapsing back into the comfy chair didn't feel right now. She brought her sketchbook and drawing supplies over to the kitchen table where she could stretch out and sit up tall. She began by putting herself in the middle of the page, a simple, drawn avatar with

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stretching, open body language. Christina's mood lightened. This felt more like it.

She then thought of the year as a cycle, not boxes on a wall calendar. Christina drew a set of lines radiating out from her avatar, creating twelve rays or wedges that fanned out around her. She labeled those sections with the months. Now she had a shape for her drawing that both met her **Objective** and made her excited about the work of meeting it.

The sections gave her the chance to mark specific events in their spots, but also create arcs that represented larger waves in time. For example, Christina gave herself a specific time to get her bicycle tuned up and then a path showing the season of biking, reminding her of the summer season.



She used herself as **The Anchor** in her drawing and the circle of the year around her created a natural **Flow**. She had plenty of chunks she could add to her drawing, but she didn't want her joyous drawing to feel like a boring, boxy drawing, all filled in. So, she kept her chunks small, using **The Pyramid**, and gave herself plenty of white space, **The Buffer**, keeping a sense of openness and possibility. She

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consistently used bow-shaped **Flags** to signal birthdays of loved ones.

Christina began with an emergent drawing, but the lack of structure felt intimidating. Then she switched to a directed drawing with a too-rigid structure. She found a happy medium with a more organic framework that felt inspiring.

Christina made two color copies of her cycle drawing: one hung by her work desk, the other was folded and tucked into her day planner in her purse. When she felt bogged down moving from one rectangle to another in her schedule, she would open up her drawing and remind herself of the bigger picture.

