

## The power of drawing: an interview with Sarah Clark

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Communication is becoming more and more visual, and mostly that means more digital. [Sarah Clark](#) is passionate about the lower-tech trend for visualisation — with coloured pens, chalk and a large roll of paper rather than the latest web tools (for now).

Consultant, facilitator, trainer, founder of [Clear Thinking – Clear Communication](#), and mountain addict, Sarah is increasingly using **visual thinking, visual language and visual recording** in her work with diverse organisations from the public and private sectors.

She creates hand-drawn visuals — from simple diagrams to complex, colourful wall hangings — to **engage groups and work with individuals on problem-solving**. Recording meetings and presentations, energizing teams, creating space for insights and innovation — the practical applications of a visual approach using simple tools are endless.

### In a nutshell, what are visual thinking and visual language?

The soul never thinks without a picture — *Aristotle*  
Without images we can neither think nor understand anything — *Luther*

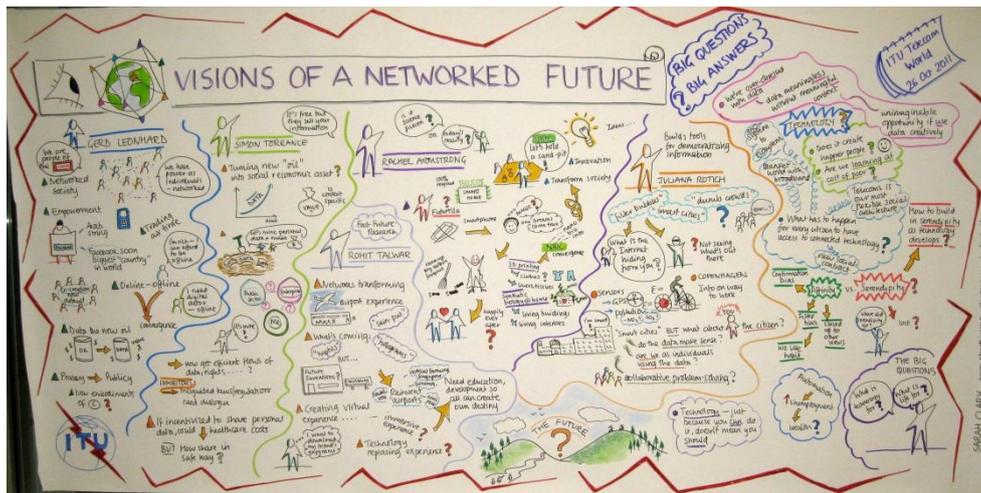
On a mundane level, visual thinking is what almost all of us do daily when we imagine our ideal summer holiday, a new arrangement of furniture in the office, or a celebratory reunion with friends or family. We conjure up images in our heads that help us make sense of the world and how things work. But sometimes that's as far as it goes; we may then communicate our thoughts only with spoken or written words.

If we go one step further, we can translate these mental images into visible visual forms. Artists, designers and architects do this all the time.

The **visual thinking approach I enjoy is to represent ideas on large expanses of paper** as a mix of simple drawings, colours, graphic metaphors and words in a way that shows connections and patterns. These sorts of visuals can be powerful means of synthesising the “big picture”, raising understanding and catalysing creative discussion. You may be familiar with [Tony Buzan](#)'s mind-mapping method, but visual thinking tools go way beyond this.

Visual language is simply the set of shapes, images and links we can use in this way to create meaning. Think of the icons you recognize every day: a no-smoking sign, a bicycle lane, or an access for wheelchair users. And metaphors like a light bulb to represent an idea. Then add colour, which provides another powerful dimension. Plus lines, arrows and different spatial groupings of images on the page and you have a visual language.

This isn't anything new. Cavemen knew the power of drawings to communicate, as did the ancient Egyptians with their hieroglyphics.



## What are the practical uses? Please give us the broad picture.

The practical applications are endless. I don't work at all in some of the possible areas, especially those needing expert artistic or design talent! Infographics, for example. This is really data visualization, turning numbers into images to make them easier to understand. You can see some examples on [David McCandless's](#) blog.

News channels, magazines and information websites are increasingly using [infographics](#) instead of charts and tables of statistics.

The sort of visual tools I use are ideal for **engaging groups**. But they also work really well if you **work with individuals on problem-solving**. Or as part of a coaching process. The possibilities range from simple diagrams, idea trees and templates via huge, colourful wall hangings to complex visual maps of strategies and systems. This way of working integrates both the left and right sides of the brain, our analytical and our creative capacities.



## Some concrete examples

1. You can use visual thinking tools to **record presentations, meetings and decisions** — generally more vivid and memorable than a written set of minutes.
2. You can **energize a team** by encouraging everyone to contribute with coloured pens and sticky notes to a visual version of goals and strategy, creating shared vision and commitment.
3. Or use simple visuals in a **facilitated workshop** to create space for insights and innovation or to communicate complex concepts.
4. As an individual, you can use visuals in the office or at home to **organize your own ideas** or as a memory aid.

## Doesn't what you do require a special talent for art or excellent eye-to-hand coordination?

Absolutely not — witness the examples of my work, with easy-to-draw star people and basic representations of houses, computers, vehicles and the like. In fact, a lot of people start by saying, “I can't do this; I can't draw.” That was my excuse a few years back, but playing with coloured pens and chalks was too much fun. Of course, there are real artists and talented cartoonists who do this sort of thing too. But you can still create powerful visuals by mastering some basic images and simply being willing to experiment.

If you get involved in real-time visual/graphic recording then you do need to develop deep listening skills and your own visual vocabulary so that you can rapidly translate concepts into pictures.

## What are the advantages compared to, for example, video?

I think all the visual tools are complementary. Think of a conference with a motivational speaker or a [TED](#) talk. It's great to be able to replay a video, to hear the person's voice and to see emotions and body language. And it's sometimes -- but unfortunately too rarely -- worth keeping the speaker's PowerPoint slides as a reminder.

But a hand-drawn visual recording can add a lot, capturing and linking the key ideas in a new format. People prefer to assimilate information in different ways (seeing, listening, experiencing etc.), so why stick to one form?

## Are there any disadvantages to be overcome?

It depends. You always need to ask, “Who and what is this for?”

If I or a group create a large-scale coloured visual during a meeting or presentation, it has meaning for that group. But it is sometimes hard for outsiders to grasp unless someone from the original group is there to explain it.

Also what comes out on paper is inevitably just one possible reflection of what was said. If I create a visual record, I filter what I hear through my own mental models and experience. Another person would create a different record.

Real-time visual records are always spontaneous — hence much of their appeal. But you have to live with the rawness, possible misunderstandings and omissions. If you want something more refined to scan, reproduce and keep for posterity, it's always possible to create a second, polished version later.

There is also the point that a visual record is never intended to capture everything and therefore doesn't substitute for detailed minutes of a meeting. The term "visual minutes" is sometimes used, but can be misleading.

Finally, on a practical front, it can be cumbersome travelling about on foot and public transport with rolls of 90 x 120 cm paper! And soft pastels (chalk), which I often use to create coloured backgrounds, can make a real mess of carpets and clothes. I never did wear designer clothes and won't start now ...

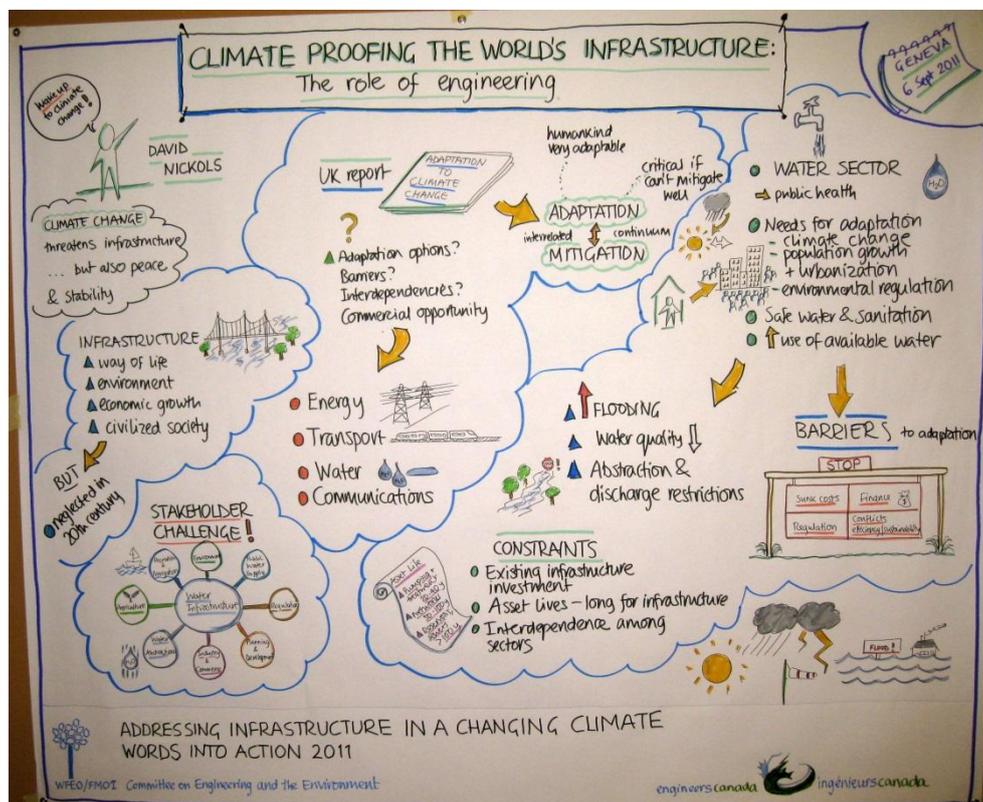
### Can you give some examples of when and how you've used visuals recently?

Yes, perhaps three different uses.

1. In October 2011, I spent a few days creating real-time graphic recordings at [ITU Telecom World](#) in Geneva.

One challenge was to record concise visual summaries of the amazing ideas proposed by a group of young digital innovators who were competing for a prize.

In September I also used real-time recording to capture key points during presentations at a fascinating special session of the World Engineers' Convention on infrastructure adaptation to climate change.



2. Second, I've been working one-on-one with a few individuals using simple visuals to help clarify thinking on a specific topic and in a coaching capacity. For the latter, visual metaphors are really useful, for example a journey across a landscape or climbing a mountain to meet a challenge.

3. Finally, I've been using these visual tools in my scientific writing courses for doctoral students. At the end of the workshop, I ask the students to work in small groups to generate a visual summary of their learning using coloured pens and several sheets of flipchart paper. It raises energy at the end of the day, brings out creativity and is often remarked upon in the feedback forms as one of the most useful activities.

### **What kind of feedback have you received?**

Often curiosity from the uninitiated coupled with surprise at the power of the technique, especially in capturing and linking the main themes of a discussion in a single visual space. It's very rewarding when people whose presentations I have captured visually want their photo taken in front of the recording! People have surprised me with their appreciation of my naïve-style imagery. But of course every visual practitioner has a personal style and mine doesn't suit everyone.

### **Are you working on any new techniques or ideas related to this?**

Several of my colleagues are developing their talents in doing all this on tablet computers. The great advantage is that you can have real-time recording projected live on a screen in front of a group. And you can edit and finalize things digitally afterwards.

I'm more of a low-tech practitioner at present. **But I'm working on integrating these methods with my other passion, the mountains. Both open up spaces (real and in the mind) for fresh thinking and for leaving day-to-day concerns behind in the office.**

My ideal is to be spending more time working visually with small groups in a mountain environment, for team-building, creative problem-solving or personal development. This year I'm offering visual thinking days in the mountains for anyone needing a day's breathing space to map out an individual strategy to meet professional or personal objectives.

### **How does it fit into your overall business as an independent consultant, facilitator and trainer?**

It fits in everywhere. I use visual thinking tools whenever and wherever they can help.

### **Where can we explore the topic further?**

Some helpful books are:

[Visual Meetings](#): how graphics, sticky notes and idea mapping can transform group productivity ([David Sibbet](#), 2010)

[The Back of the Napkin](#): solving problems and selling ideas with pictures ([Dan Roam](#), 2008)

[Bikablo: facilitators' dictionary of visual language](#)

[The Visual Display of Quantitative Information](#), 2nd edn ([Edward Tufte](#), 2001)

There are also some explanations and resources on the website of the [International Forum of Visual Practitioners](#). Plus several communities of visual practitioners on LinkedIn. And for some high-end examples of how graphic recording can animate a talk, check out [the RSA Animate videos on YouTube](#).



## About Sarah

A former bioscientist and scientific editor, Sarah gained management and policy experience in the United Nations system. She established [Clear Thinking – Clear Communication](#), now based in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 2004.

She holds a 1st-class Bachelors and a Masters degree in pharmacology from Cambridge University as well an MBA with Distinction from the Open University, UK.

Born in Singapore and educated in England, Sarah has lived for the past 25 years in Switzerland.

She is a Member of the [Chartered Management Institute](#), an Associate of the [Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development](#), and a [Belbin Team Role](#) accredited consultant.

Sarah spends as much of her free time as possible in the Swiss Alps, enjoying ski touring, mountaineering and leading summer hikes. She photographs mountains and publishes her work as a [calendar](#).

