

How to get up and running quickly with BrainStorm

This document is intended to give a fast start and a deep insight into BrainStorm's usefulness.

1. Why BrainStorm is different...

Rather than write a long-winded narrative, these are the essential points to bear in mind before taking a look at BrainStorm:

- It is a thinking and planning aid
- It helps you capture and arrange information and ideas
- The Web-publish button means you can share your thoughts with others
- It doesn't force you into a structure or discipline
- It gives you tools to structure information when it suits you
- It automatically creates hypertext links between identical pieces of information
- It allows you to launch links to valid email, web, file and program addresses
- It is not like any other thought-organising program, so don't look for parallels
- It is scalable from the smallest to the largest project (eg a speech, wedding or tv series)
- It is very easy to learn and use
- It becomes almost transparent in use
- It accelerates your information gathering, organising and thinking processes
- It is far more powerful than it appears at first glance
- Although a BrainStorm model is three-dimensional (a hierarchy of ideas and lateral links between some of them) and therefore loses something when printed, it can be output in a form that can be navigated using a web browser

2. A model is...

A BrainStorm model is a single file much like a text document or an image file. Its contents may include entries (notes, thoughts, text, etc.) on a wide range of subjects or on a very specific focused topic, as you wish.

It is a free-form collection of paragraphs (or sentences, or words) which may be linked in different ways according to your mood and the stage of development of your information. It can be a single list or a hierarchical structure.

In practical terms, a model is a collection of entries. Each entry can have any number of sub-entries, and they can have sub-entries, and so on, and so on. An entry can be up to 64,000 characters and can contain multiple paragraphs - useful for lines of a poem or a song, for example. Normally an entry would contain a line, a sentence or a paragraph. Your choice.

How to get up and running quickly with BrainStorm

While this structure can be thought of as a list with underlying sub-lists, it can also represent any type of hierarchical structure. One example is a book where the structure is represented by chapters, subjects, topics, and paragraphs.

When working within BrainStorm, any number of models may be open simultaneously and entries can easily be moved between the open models. You can copy and paste or, more easily, use Magic paste to collect information from any on-screen display (web page, Word document, Acrobat document etc.)

Here are illustrations of three types of program which work with textual information. They show a key BrainStorm difference quite clearly:

A logical view of the information inside a word processor, an outline and a BrainStorm model
Each block represents a paragraph, idea, entry or note: depending on the terminology of the program.

A word processor document

In a word processor document, paragraphs are in a connected series.

Each paragraph follows its predecessor.

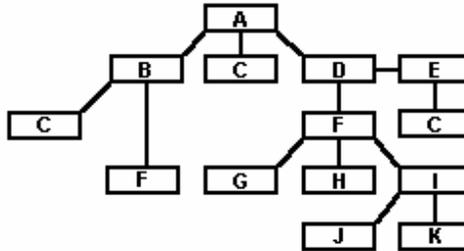


How to get up and running quickly with BrainStorm

An outline

In an outline, paragraphs can be subsidiary to other paragraphs.

They are arranged in a tree-like form. There are no cross-links.



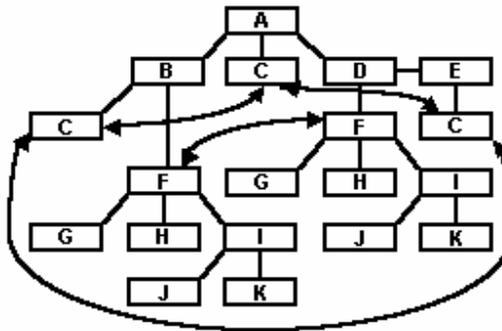
In BrainStorm, paragraphs can be subsidiary to other paragraphs.

They are arranged in a tree-like form.

But, they can also be automatically connected through hypertext links, called 'namesakes'.

Any subsidiary paragraphs of the original namesake appear to belong to the new one as well.

The same entries as a BrainStorm model



See how the entries connected to the two sets of arrowed lines mirror each other? The power of the namesake will become clearer as we proceed.

3. Everything in BrainStorm is an entry...

Each entry in BrainStorm is identified by a button in the left margin. An entry can be anything from a blank line or a single character to multiple paragraphs.

A BrainStorm model starts with a root entry called the Title, signified by a T in its button. This is the only entry that cannot be moved. But it can be edited and is offered as the default file name.

How to get up and running quickly with BrainStorm

4. Namesakes give you information exactly where you need it

Namesakes are any entries in a BrainStorm model with identical text. They are created automatically but you can disconnect them if you want to. They enable you to see when you've already entered or pasted something. They give you a way of leading people round your work. And they provide the same key information at all points in your model where you need it.

Namesakes allow all identical entries to share the same underlying entries. Here's an example:

Let's assume your model has top level entries for contacts, notes, and letters. Under contacts, you have entries for all of the people you know. Each entry has sub-entries for address, phone, etc. One such entry is for Bob Quincy. If you go into your letters entry and create a new entry for Bob Quincy, a namesake is automatically created and sub-entries for Bob's address, phone, etc. automatically appear. Later you may make a note with an entry for Bob Quincy and another namesake is created. Now if Bob should change his name or phone number, etc., a change in any one namesake is automatically reflected in all namesakes.

If you are familiar with relational databases, the namesake concept is very similar. If the text or underlying entries of a namesake are changed anywhere in the model, they are changed for all other namesakes. Sub-entries to all levels are called 'descendants' in BrainStorm.

Namesakes are normally formed automatically, although the user can force their appearance by using 'wildcards'.

For example, you may remember part of a book title and author, but you know there's an entry and a bunch of descendants in the model somewhere.

Just type (for example) *Audubon* and, if it's there and you've spelt it right the matching entry might be "John James Audubon, Birds of America." In which case, this will replace the *Audubon* and the entry will become a namesake.

All the descendant information of "John James Audubon, Birds of America." now appears to be attached to this new namesake.

Namesakes give you a very neat way of 'hypertexting' your way around a model. For example, you may be sharing a model with someone else and you read their thoughts and decide to add some of your own.

To save them viewing the whole model and looking for your comments, you could just add a line after each comment that says "Joe 01/03/04". Make sure you put the same entry in the Title list as a start point and your colleague can start there and skip around all your entries using the right or left arrow keys. It is that simple.

How to get up and running quickly with BrainStorm

5. Navigating a model...

Navigating the hierarchy of entries in a model is accomplished by using the buttons that appear in the left margin of the each entry, including the button that appears beside the heading entry.

You will notice that there are several different buttons which can appear next to an entry. Here is an explanation of what they mean:

-  This is an entry with no descendants.
-  This is the same entry selected.
-  This is an entry with at least one descendant (sub-entry).
-  This is the same entry selected.
-  This entry is a namesake.
-  The user has prevented this entry from becoming a namesake.
-  This is a marked entry.

To make them stand out, the entries with descendants are now more brightly coloured.

You only need a few keys to move around a BrainStorm model: the four arrow keys, Home and End, ctrl+m (for mark) and ctrl+j (for jump). You could also use Find and Find again. And that's it. Or, of course, you can use the mouse.

- Up and down arrows move you up and down a list.
- Left and right arrows move you between namesaked entries.
- Home and End move an entry up to the heading and the heading down into its list - this is like going deeper into the model and further out. Or you can click on the entry button.

The model can have one entry marked and you can jump to this mark. It's a good way to switch focus back and forth between two parts of the model. The mark travels back along the direction of the jump so that another jump takes you back to where you started.

6. Different views of a model...

How to get up and running quickly with BrainStorm

The working view of the model (the default display when a model is opened) is where all the work takes place. Entries are added and edited, moved and deleted here. It's the usual place for navigating round, finding, printing, web publishing and doing all the other good things.

You can view your model as a read-only outline in an Aerial view by using the Balloon toolbar button or Ctrl+B. Each entry in Aerial view is shown as a single line so that you can see clearly the indented structure of your work. You can scroll left to right and modify the font size in order to see more. This is quite deliberate because the aim is to let you see how things are progressing and give you a short-cut back into the model at the point you choose. Double-click an entry in the Aerial view to return to the working model at that entry.

You can have multiple windows open different parts of the same model. Each window can contain an Aerial or working view or, indeed, switch back and forth between them.

7. Entering data in BrainStorm is a little different...

The first thing you should know about BrainStorm is that you do not need to see a text cursor prior to entering text...

To enter data just start typing. Your text will appear above the currently selected entry.

Or, you can copy and paste from a variety of sources that contain textual information, e.g. the Web, word processor documents, PDF documents and so on. Again, the pasted text, which will be created as one entry per paragraph, will be inserted above the selected entry.

BrainStorm offers a number of paste options, the best of which is Magic paste. When this is activated, the textual element of anything you copy from any screen of any program is automatically stored in BrainStorm with or without useful separators at the start of each block of pasted information.

With Web pages, BrainStorm strips out the textual elements, ignoring the mark-up information and images. It also does a good job of identifying entries (ie paragraphs) and just generally making the result readable and usable. You can even set BrainStorm to recognise an outline and store the incoming material hierarchically.

If a list is empty, a marker entry icon, gives you a focal point for new entries.

To edit an entry, press [Tab].

To complete an entry, press [Enter].

If you want to divide an entry into two entries, press Ctrl+[Enter] and if you want to join two entries together, go to the beginning or the end and press [Bksp] or [Del].

How to get up and running quickly with BrainStorm

BrainStorm will ask your permission to continue if you are trying to do something potentially harmful, like merge separate entries each of which has descendants.

If you want to break an entry into multiple paragraphs or lines, shift+[Enter] will insert a line/paragraph break without beginning a new entry.

8. Reorganising your entries...

BrainStorm offers several ways to reorganize (move) data both within and between models. Cut & Paste and Drag & Drop are both fully supported. Shift and Drag allows you to move entries 'into' another entry - ie make them descendants. (And, in fact, you can do the opposite by Shifting and Dragging entries to the heading of the current list.) Finally, Throw & Retrieve offers a powerful way of moving entries around.

Throw & Retrieve

In order for Throw and Retrieve to work, one entry in the model needs to be marked (ctrl+m or click in the space between the chosen entry and its icon).

Throw (ctrl+t) sends the current entry to the position above the currently marked entry.

As you move entries around, they retain their links to their descendants and their namesakes.

Retrieve (ctrl+r) brings the currently marked entry to just above the current entry.

Jump (ctrl+j), described earlier, may be used to keep track of what's going on.

Alternatively, you can open a second window on the same model and watch the moves happen before your eyes.

You may also Throw a copy (shift+ctrl+t) of the current entry.

Just moving one entry is no big deal, but these commands come into their own when you are moving blocks of entries around. Just press the command key and watch those entries fly to their new destination.

Drag & Drop

How to get up and running quickly with BrainStorm

You can drag and drop entries or collections of entries between open windows, but this is often a slower way of working.

Drag & Drop works on single or multiple entries. Select the entries and drag them to the entry icon below where you would like them to appear.

You may also 'Drop in' and 'Drop out'. Select a group of entries and Shift+Drag them to another entry and they will be made descendants. Or if they are dragged to the heading, they will be put at the foot of the list to which the heading belongs.

Cut, Copy & Paste

Cut & Paste and Copy & Paste are also sometimes preferable. It really depends on volume and whether you want to resequence entries as well. Please note that Magic paste needs to be switched off for Cut and Copy to be active within BrainStorm. Otherwise it would replicate anything you cut or copied to the clipboard...

9. Output options...

BrainStorm gives you a number of different ways to output your BrainStorm models:

Save and Publish HTML

Save (in BrainStorm's native .brn format). A saved file can be opened by any BrainStorm user or viewed through a separately-licensed Java browser. This latter option is sometimes taken up by organisations who want to display their web-server-based BrainStorm models to visitors to their websites.

Publish HTML (this produces an HTML and JavaScript version of the model which can be read by anyone with a web browser). This is a one-click operation. You may include HTML tags if you wish, which gives you the ability to include links to other web pages, pictures and so on.

Both Save and Publish HTML store the entire model and preserve the internal linkages between entries.

Write and Print

How to get up and running quickly with BrainStorm

Write (this stores all, or selected parts, of a model in a .txt format which can be read by many other applications). It can output it as a file or to the clipboard, ready for pasting into another program.

Print (this prints all, or selected parts, of a model).

Write and Print allow you to do the following useful things:

Output all of the model or from a selected entry downwards (ie its own descendants). Or output only entries containing certain text.

Then for both of the above, you may vary the indent, level-by-level and choose the number of levels to output. And you may opt to use Tab for each level of indent. Some other programs are able to accept files with 'tabbed indents'.

Additionally, the Write command has a 'line break' value so that you can 'word wrap' the output at a certain column if you wish.

What does this mean in practice? Well, you exercise a high degree of choice over what you output. Take an example of a BrainStorm report on computer companies. Sometimes entries will contain the name of one company, sometimes several. Using the text-matching option, you could print only entries containing IBM (and descendants to two levels, say), the same for Dell and the same for Hewlett-Packard. Some of the entries (those with one or more of the chosen names) will appear in each report.

Another way to look at it might be a bowl of cooked and mixed multicoloured pasta. It's like being able to pull out all the green strands together, all the orange ones and all the white ones.

10. One large model or several smaller ones, your considerations...

Some people throw everything into a single huge model and use it as their 'thinking space'. Some will be fairly unstructured while others prefer to enter data in a fully organized structure. Where material needs to be in two places at once, the namesake function comes into play and lets you have the illusion of multiple copies of stuff sprinkled around but taking up hardly any storage space.

The advantage of this approach is that everything is on tap at all times. We know a television producer who has been doing this with various incarnations of BrainStorm since the early 80's. Every programme is a major project and he stores every relevant fact in BrainStorm.

How to get up and running quickly with BrainStorm

He says, "these models now constitute a searchable database of each of my past projects, so the usefulness continues on well beyond the transmission of the programmes." (*He has given us permission to share a suitably disguised copy of one of his thirty models should you be interested. You can download it from <http://www.brainstormsw.com/pctv.brn> or view it as a web-published model, at <http://www.brainstormsw.com/pctv.html>*)

Merging Models

The powerful Merge command enables BrainStorm models to be merged in a variety of interesting and useful ways. In particular, namesakes can be recognised and integrated, or not. Colours can be preserved or not. It's up to you.

The Merge facility is useful in team work. Suppose a group of people, maybe separated by time or distance, want to collaborate on a project. The team leader could issue a BrainStorm model with the headings to be considered. By merging the contributions, the team leader will end up with the collected thoughts of the team all under the appropriate headings.

So, whether you opt for one model or several, a structured or unstructured approach, BrainStorm is flexible and will accommodate your work style. It becomes completely unobtrusive. After an hour or so, you forget you are working in a computer program --thoughts flow and your information is stored in a natural intuitive way.

The Brainstorm Software website is at <http://www.brainstormsw.com/>

Thinkerlog (a blog about BrainStorm and associated tools) is at <http://brainstormsw.typepad.com/>