Mind maps can be used for a multitude of purposes. This article outlines how they can effectively be used to help support and develop students' writing skills.

* A mind map is ...
* The advantages of mind maps
* How to make mind maps with your students
  + Choosing a topic
  + Note making
  + Feedback
  + Organising mind maps
  + Writing
  + Continuation

 A mind map is ...  
A mind map, or spidergram, is a strategy for making notes on a topic, prior to writing. It is a structured strategy, which shows the (hierarchical) relationship of ideas, as opposed to an unstructured strategy, such as brainstorming, in which students produce notes at random on paper.

Having an organised display of information from the outset of the writing process may help some students, as it is more easily converted into a draft, whereas in brainstorming, the random recording of ideas might lead to problems with the structure of students' texts.

The advantages of mind maps  
Making a mind map should be a spontaneous pre-writing activity. Students start with a topic at the centre and then generate a web of ideas from that, developing and relating these ideas as their mind makes associations.

Mind maps work well as their visual design enables students to see the relationship between ideas, and encourages them to group certain ideas together as they proceed. Mind maps work especially well when created in groups, since the discussion this engenders aids the production of ideas, and makes the task livelier and more enjoyable.

How to make mind maps with your students  
Choosing a topic  
Traditionally, students are given a topic to write on by the teacher. However, with certain classes, students may prefer to nominate the topic themselves. This can lead to greater interest in the task on the part of the student, as well as, perhaps, greater knowledge of the topic under study.

The mind map strategy can be used to explore almost any topic, though discursive essays and narrative work particularly well as they front students' ideas and lend themselves to discussing ideas in groups.

I usually start by writing the topic on the board. In the last writing class I taught, with a group of upper-intermediate students, I chose a discursive essay with the title ***"Why do people start smoking?"*** I chose this genre as we had recently been looking at the language used to give reasons and explanations. The discursive text is useful in highlighting this feature of English, and in raising awareness of the noun phrase, a particularly tricky area for intermediate students.

Note making  
Once the topic has been introduced, I encourage my students to close their eyes and think about it for a minute or two, in silence. They then have two minutes in which to note down their ideas. If they do not know a word in English, they can write it in L1 at this stage, as dictionaries or too much teacher intervention tend to halt and inhibit the creative flow.

Then, working in groups, they can compare and discuss their ideas, perhaps adding to their mind maps as they go. This stage also provides the opportunity for peer teaching, as other students may be available to provide the English word for the idea that was noted down in L1.

Feedback  
The next stage, in which the teacher makes a collective mind map on the board, is optional, but is useful for students who are new to the idea of mind maps, or for weak classes. It is also in this feedback stage that any remaining language problems can be ironed out. As the teacher elicits students' ideas, and reformulates expressions or corrects, students will learn how to express their ideas in English. Such personalisation is said to aid vocabulary learning.

The map is fluid and changeable, and new connections or subgroups can be made, or branches added, as the students make suggestions. The end result should be an organised display of information, showing the central topic, and a number of subtopics and further points that stem from it.  
  
Organising mind maps  
In the next stage the students organise their mind maps into a linear format to decide the best way in which to present their points. They should first think about the overall structure, i.e. the order in which to relay the information, and then focus on the precise function each paragraph will have in their final text, as this helps to clarify their writing. This can be done in groups, or as a class with the teacher leading the discussion.

However it is carried out, it is important to provide a context and audience. I told my class, who were writing about drugs, that they were writing for their college magazine. Having an audience in mind helps students to decide which ideas are most important, and also helps students to choose the appropriate style.

Writing  
Students should then begin to write their compositions, working in pairs if they wish. After two paragraphs, they should exchange their compositions, so they become readers of each other's work. This allows for feedback, and possible re-writing. Once they have finished, they should again exchange their texts. This gives their texts a communicative purpose, as well as developing an awareness of the fact that a writer is always producing something to be read by someone else, rather than for the display of writing alone.

Continuation  
Once students are familiar with the idea of making mind maps, they can be encouraged to use this skill for further writing activities. It is a useful technique and often improves the clarity and organisation of student texts.