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Why Use Graphic Organizers?

Understanding how the brain works helps us understand why graphic organizers are valuable tools for learning. In the book *Science Continuum of Concepts for Grades K–6*, Karen Olsen states:

From brain research we have come to understand that the brain is a pattern-seeking device in search of meaning and that learning is the acquisition of mental programs for using what we understand. Thus, the most usable and useful curriculum for classroom teachers would be one that made clear for teacher and student what the patterns are and how those understandings would be used in the real world. (Olsen, 1995, p. 5)

Other researchers say that graphic organizers are one of the most powerful ways to build semantic memories (Sprenger, 1999). Eric Jensen says that semantic memory is “activated by association, similarities, or contrasts” and graphic organizers assist students with such necessary connections (1998, p. 106).

How does the brain do this? The brain stores information much like the way that a graphic organizer shows information. It screens large amounts of information and looks for patterns that are linked together. The brain is able to take meaning much easier from a visual format like a graphic organizer than from merely written words on a page. Graphic organizers not only help students manage information, but they offer information that students can understand at a glance. When connections are made on paper, the information engages other parts of the brain. When these connections happen, the brain transfers the information from short-term memory to long-term memory.

Using graphic organizers enriches students’ reading abilities. First of all, graphic organizers help students learn to focus on key concepts taken from a text or broad idea.

As a result, they help students understand how concepts develop and evolve. As already mentioned, graphic organizers take new knowledge and integrate it with prior knowledge.

Using graphic organizers also enriches students' writing abilities. When students fill out graphic organizers, they learn to summarize information. Students cannot merely copy information to their page. When using graphic organizers, students have to think about how to write the information in a different way. This provides a unique way for students to take notes during a lecture or while reading a passage. Graphic organizers are also a great way to assess and evaluate students' learning.

Finally, using graphic organizers enriches students' thinking abilities. Especially when used with the brainstorming technique, graphic organizers can help students generate creative ideas. These organizers also help students clarify their thinking and demonstrate their understanding of a topic.

It is important to consider learning styles. Many students are visual learners. Visual learners remember information better through pictures, like graphic organizers. Students get into the habit of thinking in terms of symbols or key words. Not only are graphic organizers a great tool for those who are already visual thinkers, they are a great tool for helping others become stronger visual thinkers.

Ideas for Using Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers can be used before, during, and after instruction in a classroom. They help us predict, plan, organize and reorganize, interpret, and compare and contrast.

Graphic organizers can be used for:

- Brainstorming
- Note-taking while reading a text or listening to a lecture
- Summarizing and organizing information
- Prewriting tools
- Comparing and contrasting information
- Finding the main idea and supporting details
- Showing sequence of events
- Organizing a story
- Finding cause and effect relationships
- Character maps/traits
- Differentiating between facts and opinions
- Helping with decision making
- Showing cycles
- Finding the 5 Ws

Look at the following pages for printed samples of graphic organizers that you can copy and use in your classroom.