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ABSTRACT

A graphic organizer is a tree diagram that consists of vocabulary related to one particular concept. A modified version of a graphic organizer contains empty slots that represent missing information and actively involves students during the reading process as opposed to before or after. This modified graphic organizer can provide both the motivation and the structure necessary to turn inactive readers into active readers. It is motivating because it contains very few words, and those that are included serve as cues to information the student will be expected to search for, read, and write in. Retention is improved because the imposed structure also acts as a cuing device. Finally, it is useful in letting students in on what the teacher considers important in the textbook. Eight steps involved in its use include (1) selecting a portion of the textbook which discusses the concept being taught, (2) listing on index cards all the words that are representative of the concept, (3) arranging the words to show a relationship, (4) transferring that arrangement to paper but substituting empty slots for certain words, (5) copying the completed graphic organizer on the board or overhead transparency, (6) discussing with students the purpose of the organizer, (7) assigning pages in the textbook while reminding students that they are reading to locate the missing information, and (8) discussing the completed organizer with the students. (HOD)

# A Strategy for Making Content Reading Successful: Grades 4-6

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## What is a Graphic Organizer?

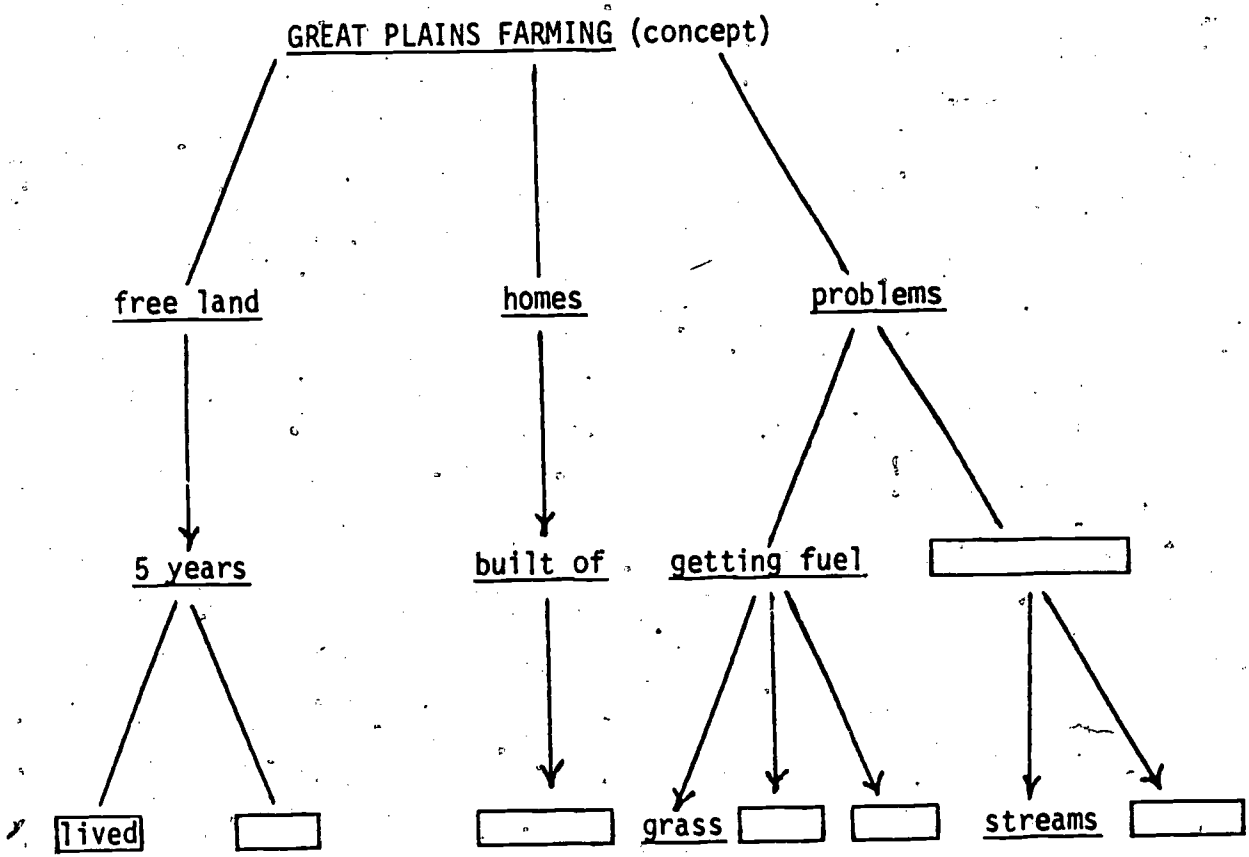
Essentially, a graphic organizer is a tree diagram that consists of vocabulary related to one particular concept (see Figure 1). Richard Barron and Richard Earle (1969) originally developed the graphic organizer as an instructional planning device for teachers and as a vocabulary strategy for students. Since then its popularity has grown to include post-reading uses as well.

Part of the procedure for helping students learn from text involves creating a need to use their textbooks. This need, I believe, is present in a modified form of the graphic organizer. The modified version differs in two important ways from earlier graphic organizers. One, it contains empty slots which represent missing information, and two, it actively involves students during the reading process as opposed to before or after.

## Its Potential for Disabled Learners

Disabled learners, according to Joseph Torgesen (1977), are inactive learners; that is, they are not motivated to employ strategies which will aid their comprehension and retention of material. It is easy for them to ignore previously learned strategies such as SQ3R and outlining because these require prolonged self-direction and little structuring from the teacher.

Figure 1


GREAT PLAINS FARMING (concept)
free land
homes
problems
5 years
built of
getting fuel
lived
grass
streams

The modified graphic organizer, on the other hand, provides both the motivation and structure necessary to turn inactive readers into active readers. It is motivating because it contains very few words and those that are included serve as cues to information the student will be expected to search for, read, and write in.

Retention of what is read is improved because the imposed structure of the graphic organizer also acts as a cuing device. For example, in Figure 1, remembering that "getting fuel" was one of the problems Plains farmers faced would likely trigger recall of the second problem ("getting water"). The fact that the reader had to search in the text for the second problem makes it even more likely that "getting water" would be recalled.

Finally, perhaps the greatest potential a graphic organizer holds for disabled learners is its usefulness in letting them in on what the teacher considers important in the textbook. If students are encouraged to save their completed organizers, studying for unit tests is then simplified.

## Step-by-Step Procedure

Step 1. Select a portion of the textbook which discusses the concept you wish to teach. It is best to start small. Think in terms of 4 to 5 pages, not a chapter. To illustrate the remaining steps in the procedure, a section from The Making of Our America (1974) appears in excerpt form below.

"Farmers Come to the Plains"

Before the Transcontinental Railroad was finished the United States government made a law about the unsettled land. The law said a person who lived on some land and farmed it for five years could own the land. The government gave the land to the farmer.

The people knew that pioneering on the Great Plains would be different from pioneering in the other regions. This did not make them give up. They had the pioneer spirit. They thought they could conquer the Plains as they had conquered the woodlands. And they did. Thousands of pioneers went to the Plains to claim the free land . . . .

Since they had no wood, these pioneers built their houses of earth. Wherever the grass grew, the earth was very tough. The roots of the grass held the earth together. This covering of grass and earth was called sod. To build homes, the pioneers cut big chunks of sod. Then they piled the sod up like bricks . . . . Most pioneers hung buffalo skins over the doorways. They made their roofs of sod . . . .

Getting fuel was a big problem. Some pioneers tied grass into tight bundles and burned it. Others used buffalo chips. These chips were the dried droppings of buffalo. Later, when most of the buffalo were killed off, the pioneers grew sunflowers. Their woody stems made good fuel . . . .

Water was the biggest problem on the Great Plains. You know how much water your family uses every day. What if you had to go several miles to a stream every time you needed water? That is what Plains pioneers had to do. When it rained, pioneers put all their pots and pans outside to catch the drops.

The settlers dug wells as soon as they could. Sometimes they had to dig hundreds of feet into dry earth before they struck water. Windmills were used for power to pump the water out of the wells.

Step 2. After you have selected a portion of text, list all words on small slips of paper or index cards that you think are representative of the major concept you want the students to understand. In the above text, the words which I thought related to the concept of plains farming included the following:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Great Plains | sod | getting water |
| farmed | getting fuel | stream |
| 5 years | grass | rain |
| pioneering | buffalo chips | wells |
| free land | sunflowers | windmills |
| homes | | |

Step 3. Next, arrange the words to show a relationship between them and the concept. At this point you may need to add or delete words in order to clarify relationships. For example, I deleted the words pioneering, rain, and windmills. I added farming, lived, built of, and problems.

Step 4. When you are satisfied with the diagramatic arrangement of words on index cards, transfer that arrangement to paper. But this time substitute empty slots for certain words. Choosing which words to replace with empty slots is a matter of personal preference. However, there are certain basic guidelines:

a) The concept (Great Plains Farming) as well as the most important topics in the passage (free land, homes, problems) must remain intact.

b) Substitute slots for words that are parallel to each other. For instance in Figure 1, getting fuel and getting water were parallel in their relationship to problems.

c) Often an unfamiliar word, such as sod, is omitted to force students to deal with it on a more extended basis. They must search for the word in the text, read it, and then write it in the empty slot.

Step 5. Copy the completed graphic organizer on the chalkboard, or make an overhead transparency of it. Provide enough copies of the organizer so that each student has one.

Step 6. Prior to making the textbook reading assignment, discuss with students the purpose of the organizer. Tell them that you are going to show them how to improve their comprehension and ability to remember what they read. Then go over the graphic organizer, pointing out the concept students will read about and pronouncing any unfamiliar words.

Step 7. Assign pages in the textbook, and remind students that they are reading to locate the missing information. As they find this information, they are to write it in the empty slots.

Step 8. Discuss the completed organizer with students, either in small groups or individually. Demonstrate how it highlights and organizes the information from the textbook.

## Looking Toward Independence

After students have acquired skill in using the graphic organizer as a study aid to textbook learning, the teacher may choose to involve them in the construction of one. This is best accomplished by gradually increasing the amount of student input.

Initially, students might be encouraged to supply words in step 3 that they believe relate to or clarify the concept under discussion. By putting their previously learned knowledge to work, they are likely to feel greater "ownership" in the graphic organizer and hence be more motivated to use it. Also, through their suggestions, the teacher may gain a better understanding of what it is students do or do not know about a particular concept. This type of information is invaluable for instructional planning.

To increase student involvement in the construction of organizers, the teacher might write a concept on the board and ask students to list words

or phrases they predict the textbook will include. Their predictions could then be used as a framework in which to examine what the author actually said.

Eventually, as some students approach independence in constructing their own graphic organizers, the teacher may suggest that they pair up and trade organizers so that each student "field tests" the other's organizer. Besides being highly motivating, this type of activity seems to demonstrate to students that graphic organizers can make the textbook a viable source of personal learning.

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