

Organizing & Arranging: Strategies for Understanding

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Presentation at Key Middle School
Springfield, Virginia
November 30, 2000

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Power Thinking

What Is Power Thinking?

Power Thinking is an alternative system for outlining information that is hierarchical in nature. In other words, the information can be grouped according to main ideas, subtopics, and details. It considers information according to which level it belongs on, and we use numbers to signify those levels.

How Does It Work?

Power 1: main idea, thesis, topic

Power 2: subtopic, category of Power 1, detail of a Power 1

Power 3: detail or subtopic of a Power 2

Power 4: detail or subtopic of a Power 3

...and so on...

Can You Show Me What a Power Thinking Outline Would Look Like?

1: TV Shows

2: Dramas

3: E.R.

3: Pretender

3: Law & Order

2: SitComs

3: Fresh Prince of Bel Air

3: Kramer

3: Everybody Loves Raymond

2: Soap Operas

3: All My Children

3: As the World Turns

3: Young & the Restless

What might Power 4s be? (Perhaps characters on those shows.) Power 5s? (Traits or characteristics of those characters.)

Selective Underlining

What Is Selective Underlining?

Well, there's underlining, and there's underlining selectively. [By the way, even though I'm using the word "underlining," you can feel free to know that that also means highlighting.] The way to make underlining useful as a tool for comprehension is for it to be strategic, selective, and purposeful. The underlining must be undertaken toward particular ends.

Do you remember how wonderful it was to discover the highlighter, perhaps when you were in college? I know that for me, I was more likely NOT to read the stuff I was highlighting. For some reason, that's the effect that a highlighter had on me. Or maybe I'd look back at the selection and find I'd pretty much colored the whole darn thing yellow. With selective underlining (and highlighting!), the idea is to underline ONLY the key words, phrases, vocabulary, and ideas that are central to understanding the piece. Students should be taught this strategy explicitly, given time and means to practice, and reinforced for successful performance.

How Can I Teach My Students to Selectively Underline?

There are several ways to go about it. You may be saying, "Selective underlining is all well and good, but have you eggheads up in the university forgotten that we use textbooks, and that our kids only get to use them for the year, but we have to use them at least five years??" That's a fair question, so how can you teach this strategy anyway?

1. First of all, let's realize that not every single bit of text you have students read is in a textbook and untouchable.
2. Second, consider seeking out appropriate content sources, such as newspapers, that students can indeed learn this strategy with while still pursuing meaningful social studies goals.
3. Third, think about how you can get around the problem of textbooks that can't be marked in. For instance, in order to teach the strategy, you might photocopy a page or two out of the text that students use and distribute it to them. Make an overhead of that selection for yourself. Model for them and guide them in practicing the strategy on the photocopies. Alternatively, if you have enough of the materials available to you, give each student a sheet of transparency film, some paperclips, and some overhead pens. Let them practice directly on their texts by using the transparencies.

Think about how this strategy would work when combined with power thinking. Students might put a box around Power 1 ideas; an oval around Power 2 ideas; and an underline under Power 3 ideas. Students might also use different colors in their underlining. Power 1s could be blue, Power 2s could be red, and Power 3s could be green.

Practice selective underlining for different purposes: underline key vocabulary and its definitions or explanations, and use this as an opportunity to focus on how authors reveal the meaning of new terms within the context. Or have students underline cause and effect. Or ask them to underline the facts and concepts that support a particular viewpoint, as might be useful with a strategy such as Opinion-Proof. Remember, you're limited only by your own imagination with teaching and applying selective underlining.

Graphic Organizers: Power Mapping

What Are Graphic Organizers?

You can call them graphic organizers, pictorial organizers, webs, maps, concept maps, or whatever other name you wish to give them...but graphic organizers are basically visual ways to represent information. You can create maps that arrange information:

- according to main ideas, subtopics, and details
 - in sequence
 - to show the relationships between the different parts
 - according to the similarities and differences between two or more concepts
 - by its components, as in the elements of a story
- ...and lots of other ways

There are literally dozens upon dozens of versions of graphic organizers; there are almost as many books, manuals, and guides, not to mention websites, that can give you a whole range of examples. For our purposes here, I only want to show you how graphic organizers can be simply an extension or adaptation of the Power Thinking strategy. KEEP IN MIND: it's the making of the graphic organizer when students attach relevance and meaning to the information. Don't get stuck in the rut of having students fill out pre-made versions...

How Do They Work?

Since you know that some of your students are visual learners, and that a picture is worth a thousand words, then you should have in your toolbox some ways to organize ideas, facts, and concepts graphically. Graphic organizers are just the thing. Using boxes, circles, ovals, rectangles, and other shapes, not to mention lines for connecting, students can show information according to its level (main ideas, subtopics, details or elaboration, and so on). They can show how two ideas compare to one another (as in a Venn Diagram) or Comparison-Contrast Chart. They can trace the order or sequence or stages of a process. They can show how characters in a story, or officeholders in a government, work with and relate to one another. In economics, that time-honored Circular Flow Diagram is an example of a graphic organizer.

Column Notes

What Are Column Notes?

Some of you will think, Gosh - this sounds like the old Cornell note-taking system. Column notes share characteristics in common with the Cornell system: information is grouped according to its type, and then arranged in columns. We'll begin with 2-column notes, but you should quickly see that the number of columns one uses is dependent upon the type of information you are dealing with and what your purpose for engaging in it is.

How Do Column Notes Work?

The column notes format lends itself to many variations. It may be that students would use it as a note-taking guide for their textbook reading; if so, then main ideas or headings would be listed in the left column, and details or explanations for each would be written in the right column. Alternatively, you might have students reading for cause and effect; if so, then causes can be listed in the left column and the effects in the right column. Students might list key vocabulary in the left column and definitions, examples, or sentences in the right. It may be as simple as reworking your typical question worksheets so that questions are on the left and answers are put on the right.

The Cornell system recommended that the left column be one-third of the page, and the right column two-thirds. It really doesn't matter much; students may find it much easier simply to fold their notebook paper down the middle to create the two columns neatly. Using the folded sheet can be a great study aide: students can quiz themselves or each other with the answers safely hidden on the other side of the folded sheet, but they can also check back and forth between questions and answers. This format becomes a very handy tool, but it also shows the organization of information more clearly, more dramatically, and certainly in a more visually-useful manner.

Pattern Puzzles

What Are Pattern Puzzles?

The crux of Pattern Puzzles is that you have some things that are arranged one way, and students impose a new scheme of organization on them. Or, perhaps things are not arranged at all, and students have to arrange them in a way that shows their relationships, order, sequence, cause and effect, progression, connectedness, and so on.

How Do Pattern Puzzles Work?

Students can arrange notecards or sticky notes that have main ideas and details on them so that they create a new outline or graphic organizer. You might ask them to order the steps of a process or show the events in timeline order. It's great for looking at parts of speech in sentences, placement of prepositional phrases, or the way grammar changes according to which language a sentence is translated into. Math teachers might have students pay attention to orders of operation or the columns in a geometry proof.

Sticky Note Discussions

What Are Sticky Note Discussions?

A means for active engagement with text, sticky-note discussions are a way to have students responding directly to text as they read it. Simple office sticky (Post-It) notes are used for students to record questions, thoughts, comments, reactions, and notes directly on the text where they feel provoked in their thinking.

How Do They Work?

Sticky Notes are a means for purposeful reading of text. Students can use sticky notes for a variety of purposes, ranging from note taking to question-asking to personal reaction. The sticky notes can be used extremely well in conjunction with Power Thinking: imagine having students putting sticky notes where they find Power 1s (main ideas), Power 2s (subtopics), and Power 3s (details). Or maybe they just jot notes down about key ideas as they encounter them, which they will subsequently arrange into categories or groups. Perhaps you would build an outline on the board at the front of the room by having students come up and place their sticky notes into the appropriate outline. The sticky note activity can be open-ended (very little direction) or a very directed activity (answer these five questions on your sticky notes at the point in the text where you find the key information). Students may complete outcome sentences on sticky notes (also called JumpStarters, such as: "I learned that..." "I would ask the author...")