Concept Mapping

A concept map is a type of graphic organizer that is used to visually represent ideas, concepts, and relationships. Concept maps can be useful in several settings, such as:

- For generating content when **planning papers**, developing topics, and eventually composing. As we are limited by the number of items we can remember in our short term memory at any single moment, organizing our thinking using a concept map or other type of graphic organizer reduces the number of items we must focus on at one time. The resulting map documents your thought process, preventing you from forgetting your insights if you become distracted.

- For **studying and memorization.** Especially for visual learners, translating text from a textbook into an interconnected web of ideas (often including mini diagrams where relevant), can highlight similarities and relationships across concepts, allowing you to understand intermediate steps within complex processes and recognize hidden memorization cues.

- For supporting **intuitive leaps**. Many students describe frustration when they must articulate a concept they know is "right" at a gut level. Concept mapping allows you to explore these types of intuitive conclusions and support them with logic and hard facts.

Steps for productive concept mapping

1. Select a fairly large space to use for the map; it can be difficult to predict how and in which directions your ideas will develop. You can draw a concept map free-hand on paper or on a whiteboard, or by filling in a hardcopy template (there are many available online). For the technologically-inclined, you might want to explore an online tool (see below). Whichever medium you choose, make sure you are able to save your concept map (for example, take a photo of a whiteboard concept map so that your ideas don't get erased).

    For an easy, free online concept mapping tool, try https://bubbl.us. This site allows you to create maps quickly and easily. It also allows you to return to an existing map and rearrange relationships and connections at a later time.

2. If you want to explore a topic, write a single word or short phrase in the middle of your page and circle it. This first circle is your nucleus and you map will grow around this central idea.

    If you are trying to make connections (e.g., for a "compare and contrast" style paper), write the two topics on opposite ends of your page. You will build a mini map around each nucleus, eventually connecting your maps when you recognize similarities and differences across your topics.

3. Write down any and all associations that come to mind when thinking of the topic, even if the words or phrases initially seem unrelated. These ideas will radiate outward from the nucleus.

4. Draw circles around subsequent ideas or groups of terms and connect them with related lines, adding arrows to indicate direction.

    Colour coding can be very helpful. For example, highlight or use the same coloured pen for related ideas and a contrasting colour for conflicting ideas. Or use one colour for your own ideas, and a second colour when adding support from the literature.

5. Continue the process of drawing and re-drawing the connecting lines indicating relationships between separate ideas, concepts, or phenomena. Try to identify similar things and link them in groups.

    Feel free to break connections or rearrange relationships; this activity is the most productive part of the mapping process and will serve to deepen your understanding of your topic.

6. Once you have finished your "brain dump," start pruning away information that is unnecessary. Not everything identified during the mapping process needs to be included in an essay. After identifying the core concepts, redrawing the map without any extraneous information gives you more room to re-explore or reorganize your main concepts.

7. Use the information to create an outline and a thesis statement for your assignment.

    Using a concept map and the "Visual Essay Planner" (available from the ASC), it is possible to transform a concept map into an essay outline.