

To Use, or Not to Use Graphic Organizers

Categories: Making Meaning, Teaching Tips, Being a Writer, Implementation

To use, or not to use graphic organizers—that is the question. The carefully orchestrated series of boxes, arrows, circles, and lines provides tidy ways for students to organize information and make connections between facts, ideas, and concepts.

Graphic organizers can help students:

- Create a visual image to understand information
- Think about big ideas and then narrow the topic
- Outline their learning or writing
- Organize their writing (e.g., write introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions)

I'm sold. Sign me up.

But graphic organizers can also:

- Force students into writing in a linear way
- Stifle students' creativity and independent thinking
- Stifle students' intrinsic motivation to write
- Limit the students' writing to whatever content, organization, or style is dictated by the graphic organizer
- Lead to predictable writing—each student's writing looks perfect, but lacks originality

Huh. Those are compelling reasons to cancel my subscription. Now I'm torn.

In CCC programs, we feel it is critical for the students to take responsibility for their learning, which includes developing the habits of thinking independently and creatively. We believe that graphic organizers and thinking maps could stifle students' creativity and independence, and we strive to provide the students with the opportunity to organize information and make connections on their own—without the aid of a graphic organizer.

In *Being a Writer*, for example, our concern is that graphic organizers might limit the students' writing to whatever content, organization, or style is dictated by the organizer. Rather than relying on graphic organizers to do the challenging work of organizing writing, we support teachers in encouraging students to take responsibility for developing their own ways of organizing information in preparation for writing, and to help students think about the organization of their writing during individual writing conferences and pair conferences.

There are a few instances when we do use graphic organizers in our programs—in targeted instances where we feel they help the students manage complex tasks without limiting the rigor of their thinking. For example, in *Making Meaning* grades 3-5, we introduce the use of a double-entry journal, and in grade 3 the use of a character web. In *Being a Writer* grades 3-5, the students use note cards

to organize their expository nonfiction research. We also include graphic organizers in the Writing Performance Task Preparation Guide to help students organize notes taken from several sources.

In general, we believe that using graphic organizers judiciously is the best way to help students become truly independent thinkers.

What are your thoughts about using graphic organizers with students? Let us know on our Facebook Community Page!