

Concept Circles {12 Days: Tool 2}

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Tool 2: Concept Circles

The Common Core ELA and literacy standards place an emphasis on increasing the amount of informational text in the classroom. Many teachers I work with have comfort and expertise with fiction but sometimes feel less comfortable when teaching students how to read and comprehend informational text.



What makes informational text so challenging for students is that informational text – textbooks, manuals, pamphlets, journal articles, encyclopedia entries - typically includes less familiar content and organizational text patterns. Informational text selections also include a great deal of academic vocabulary, often unfamiliar to students. And, if students aren't familiar with the vocabulary, their comprehension will suffer.

Concept Circles

What are Concept Circles?

- The Concept Circle is a visual organizer that categorizes words related to a concept or topic. It is simply a circle divided into four sections. A word is written in each section that is related to the concept. Concept Circles provide an opportunity to categorize words and for students to explain connections between those words either in writing or orally. It is a perfect tool to use for checking for understanding, promoting discussion about terms, having students quiz one another, and more.

Why are they Important?

- The Concept Circle, first introduced by Vacca and Vacca (1986), is particularly relevant today as teachers prepare to use more informational text in their instruction. This simple tool helps students analyze connections between words and to explain relationships among words and the topic.
- The big idea behind the Concept Circle is that, while informational text is organized around concepts or topics, organizing ideas, and details and facts, it all rests on vocabulary knowledge. Sometimes, well-intentioned teachers get so caught up in teaching vocabulary that students learn many words but fail to connect those words to each other and back to the overarching concept or topic. The Concept Circle helps students make the connection between vocabulary/terms and the topic or concept.

What Works in the Classroom?

Concept Circles can be used in a variety of ways – for discussion, quick checks, assessment, and more. Listed below are a few ideas for how to use them – I'm sure you'll think of more. For example, if you teach primary grades, you'll probably use them with more teacher direction. If you teach at the intermediate or secondary level, students should complete them independently.

- I'll walk you through one way to use the Concept Circle using the **Hurricane Katrina example** (see figure). First, display a blank 4-part circle. One by one reveal or write a word in each section until all 4 words are in place. Students determine what the words have in common. In this case, the terms are related to "Hurricane Katrina," the natural disaster students had recently discussed. Then, students use these words and have conversation between partners using these specific terms to talk about Hurricane Katrina.
- Another way to use this tool is for the teacher to provide 2 words and each student records 2 additional words in their notebook or laptop. Then students defend why they chose those 2 words – either in writing or verbally to a partner.
- Still another way to use the Concept Circle is to provide **blank templates** (template download) to groups of students. Students fill in words for 2 of the 4 circles on the template and then quiz other students whose job is to determine the concept/topic for each circle. Then students switch places and determine the topic/concept for their partner's circles.
- How about another idea? The topic is "**Bodies of Water**" (see elementary example). This time the teacher fills in three words that "fit" and one word that does not. Students determine which word doesn't fit and talk or write about why that word doesn't support the concept and how the other words do.
- Finally, mini-versions of the circles could be included on a quiz or assessment tool. The teacher could determine the concept for a few circles and students complete the circle with supporting vocabulary words. Then, students write how the vocabulary terms support the concept. (see download).



