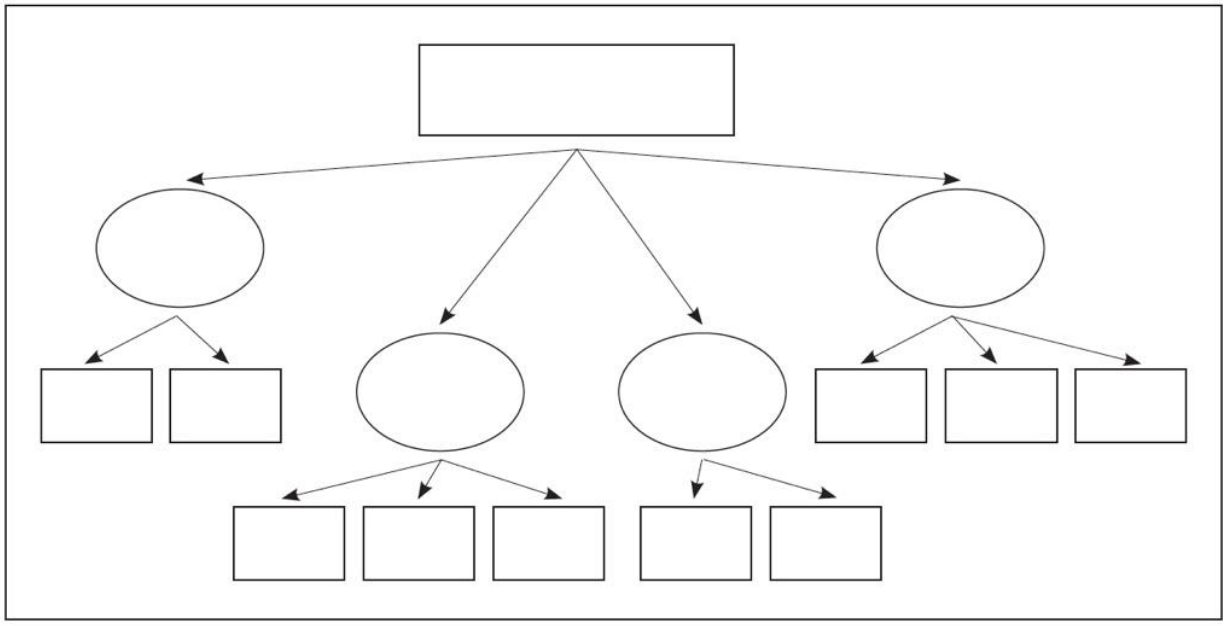
Top-Down Topic Webs

Research supports the use of graphic and semantic organizers to represent the relationships between underlying ideas in text. Teaching students to organize ideas in a systematic, visual graph improves their ability to remember what they read. More generally, the use of graphic organizers also contributes to better comprehension and achievement in the content areas, such as social studies and science (National Reading Panel, 2000).

The top-down topic web is the main graphic organizer used in *The Key Comprehension Routine* (Sedita, 2003, 2015), an instructional routine for teaching comprehension strategies. A top-down topic web is a flexible tool that can support learning across all grades and content areas. Figure 1 is an example of a blank top-down topic web. It can be used to show the "big picture" of anything that is read, said, or done in the classroom. The overarching topic of the text or information that is presented by the teacher or in a multimedia source is placed at the top (shown as the top rectangle). The main topics or ideas are added in the next level down (shown as the circles), and sub-topics are added in the final level (shown as boxes). Additional details about creating a topic web are provided below. This graphic organizer can be used *before* reading or when new information is presented to help students see the topics that we will be covered and make connections to background knowledge. It can be used *during* reading and learning to help students make connections among topics. It can be used as an *after* strategy as a scaffold for summarizing or for planning to study for a quiz or test.

Figure 1



Top-Down Topic Web vs. Other Graphic Organizers

There are many graphic organizers that can be used for specific purposes or to represent specific kinds of information. For example, a pair of overlapping circles can be used to represent like and unlike features for comparing and contrasting (Figure 2). Another commonly used graphic organizer is a brainstorming web. This is often used to generate ideas about a topic before reading or writing (Figure 3). However, the availability of many different types of graphic organizers can result in confusion about when and how to

use them. As they move from class to class and encounter teachers using different kinds of graphic organizers, students may become overwhelmed and focus more on mastering the use of each new template rather than using the graphic organizer to learn information. The top-down topic web offers a flexible format that can be used in many ways, which is why it is a good choice for a generic tool to support learning that can be used across multiple grades and subjects.

Figure 2

Compare & Contrast

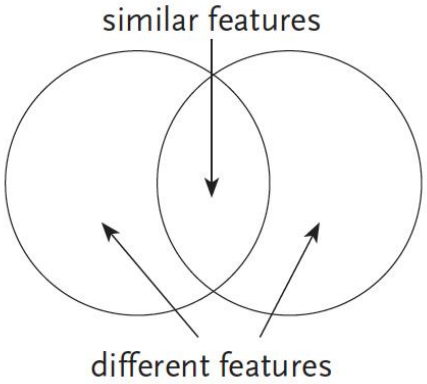
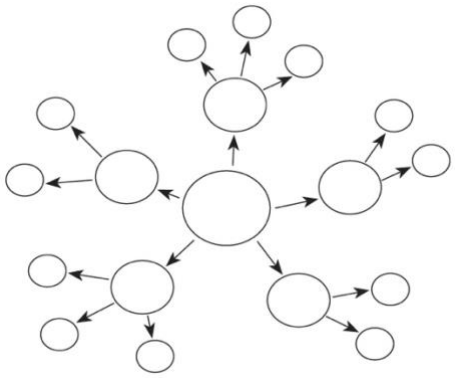


Figure 3

Brainstorm Web



Top-Down Topic Web Format

Many students become overwhelmed by too much information, focus excessively on details, and lose sight of the big picture when they read. A top-down topic web provides a clear, visual overview of the main ideas. As illustrated in Figure 1, levels of topics and sub-topics are arranged in a top-down format. Each level of topics is arranged vertically to represent the relationship of a topic to the others in a hierarchy.

A Visual Schema

An important contribution made by cognitive scientists to the understanding of how comprehension works is schema theory. As people learn about the world, they develop a large network of knowledge structures, also called schemas, that organize categories of information. A mental schema is essentially a "mind map" for organizing the related knowledge and the words used to represent that knowledge for a given topic. Proficient readers constantly connect the new knowledge they encounter with their background knowledge. In this way, the brain seeks to make connections between old and new ideas.

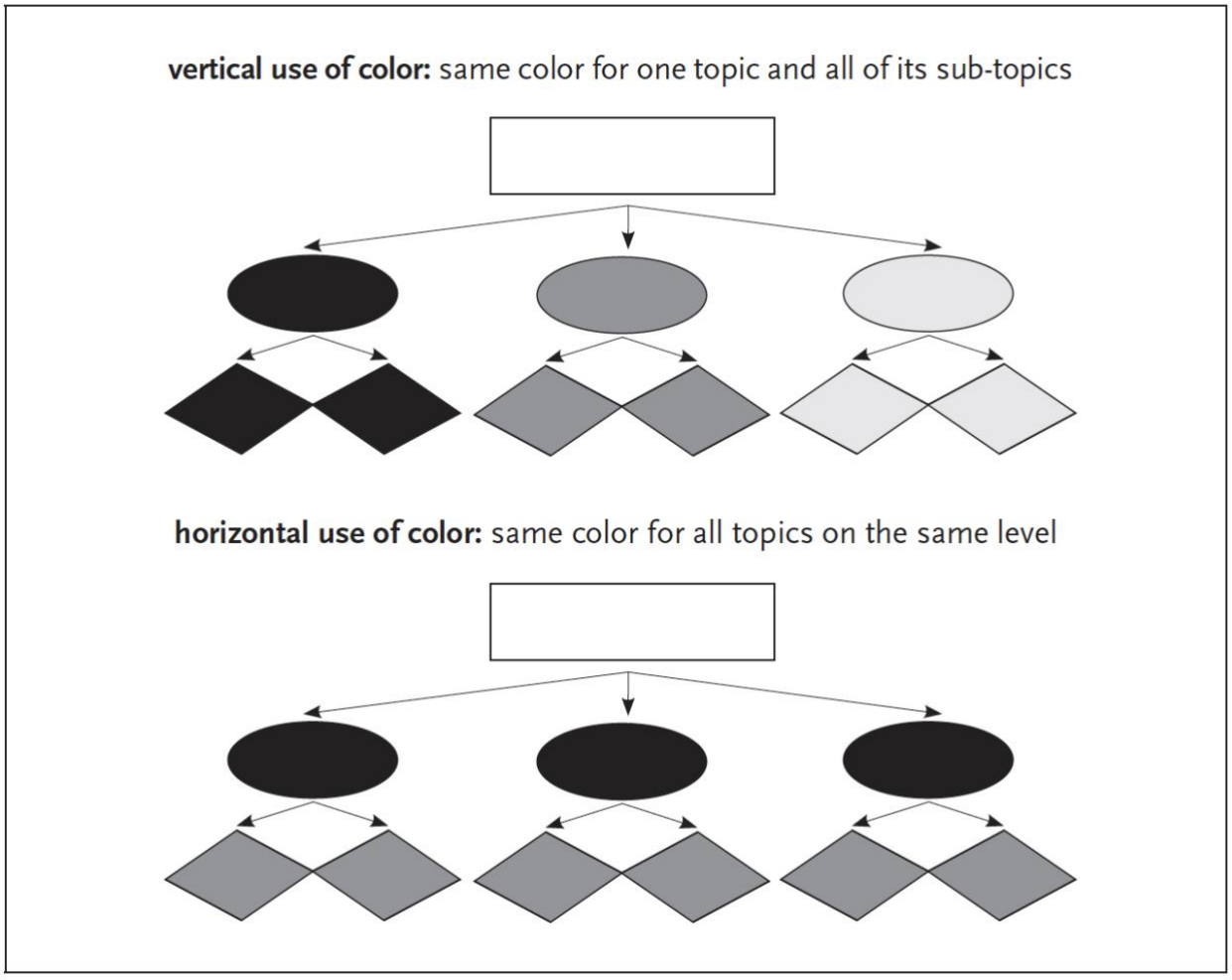
A top-down topic web is a visual schema that helps students make those connections. The connections among the big ideas presented in content instruction and reading material are easy to recognize in a top-down topic web. When students see a topic web before they read or learn new information, it gives them a road map to begin making connections to their existing background knowledge. When students generate their own topic webs, they become more aware of these connections.

Use of Position, Shape, and Color

Both the placement of topics in the web and the use of shape and color play an important role in making a top-down topic web user-friendly to students because they visually accentuate the relationships between topics. To generate a top-down topic web:

- Place the broadest topic at the top of the web, sub-topics beneath those, and more subordinate sub-topics at the bottom.
- Use different shapes to denote the level of the topic. For example, as shown in Figure 4, the broadest topic at the top might be in a rectangle, the sub-topics in circles, and the subordinate sub-topics in diamond shapes. While the choice of shapes does not matter, be sure that the same shape is used consistently across each level. For example, two shapes (rectangle, oval) alternate levels in Figure 1.
- Use arrows to accentuate the connections between the topics.
- Use color to further emphasize the relationship among ideas. Color can be used in two ways, as shown in Figure 4.
    - Vertically: same color for one topic and its sub-topics
    - Horizontally: same color for the sub-topics on one level, different color for the subordinate sub-topics on a lower level

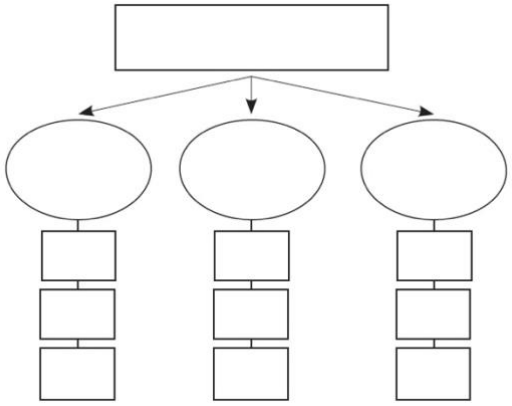
Figure 4



Stacking

If there is enough room on the page, it is best to keep topics at the same level (and shape) in an even line across the page horizontally, as shown in Figure 4. If that is not possible because of limited space, topics at the same level can be stacked instead. Figure 5 shows stacked subordinate topics (rectangles) under the three sub-topics (ovals).

Figure 5



Wording Inside the Shapes

Depending on the kind of information represented in a topic web, the wording inside the shapes may vary from a single word to an entire phrase (i.e., main idea statement). Also note that pictures and symbols can be placed in the shapes to represent ideas.

Sources of Information for Generating Top-Down Topic Webs

Top-down topic webs can be generated from content that is read, said, or done. Here are some examples:

- Content that is read:
  - Expository text examples: textbook, article, letter, editorial, instructions or directions, subject area report
  - Narrative text examples: fictional story, biography, personal narrative, folktale, fable, play
- Content that is said or presented:
  - lectures, video, class discussion
- Content that is done:
  - identify stages in a process, summarize steps to complete a problem, organize items or actions, overview of a course syllabus, plan an event or trip

References:

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Sedita, J (2003, 2015). *The key comprehension routine.* Rowlley, MA: Keys to Literacy.

Keys to Literacy

For more information about top-down topic webs and other instructional strategies to support reading and writing across grades K-12, contact Keys to Literacy:

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