How to Build a Concept Map

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1. What is the purpose of this concept map?

Identify a focus question that addresses the problem, issues or knowledge domain you want to map. Guided by this question, identify and list 10 to 20 concepts (nodes) that are pertinent to the question. Concept labels should be a single word, or at most two or three words.

2. Pick the main idea

Rank order the concepts by placing the broadest and most inclusive idea (Main Idea) at the top or center of the map.

3. Add more

Work down the list and add more concepts as needed.

4. Organize the most general concepts first

Begin to build your map by placing the most inclusive, most general concept(s) at the top or center. Usually, there will be 1-3 most general concepts at the top of the map.

5. Pick the subconcepts

Next select up to four subconcepts to place under each general concept. Avoid placing more than three or four concepts under any other concept. If there seem to be six or eight concepts that belong under a major concept, reorganize them by creating another level of hierarchy in your map.

6. Link the concepts and subconcepts

Connect the concepts by lines (links). Label the links with a few words. The linking words should define the relationship between the two concepts so that it reads as a valid statement or proposition. The connection creates meaning. When you hierarchically link together a large number of related ideas, you can see the structure of meaning for a given subject domain.

7. Reorganize!

Rework the structure of your map, which may include adding, subtracting, or changing superordinate concepts. You may need to do this reworking several times.

8. Look for new linkages (cross-connect concepts)

Look for crosslinks between concepts in different sections of the map and label these links. Crosslinks can often help to see new, creative relationships in the knowledge domain.

9. Add graphics

Specific examples of concepts (graphics, pictures, symbols) can be used as a concept label (node).

10. Own it, it's yours

Concept maps are your own creation of your knowledge; there is no one way to draw a concept map. As your understanding of relationships between concepts changes, so will your maps. One way to help you remember the meaning of your concept map a few weeks later is to write a 2-3 page narrative that describes your concept map, its organization, groupings, and the links.