

VENN DIAGRAMS

What is it?

A Venn diagram or set diagram is a diagram that shows relationships among sets of numbers, information or concepts. In around 1880, John Venn introduced the world to the idea of Venn diagrams. Since then they have been used to teach elementary set theory in mathematics, statistics, linguistics and computer science. Using Venn diagrams for reading and in the English classroom allows students to explore relations among ideas. They can use Venn diagrams to organize information according to similarities and differences. Any level of reader can use a Venn diagram to process their thinking around a text. Venn diagrams are useful for comparing and contrasting ideas and are an excellent way to clearly show an overlap of ideas in texts.

Why is it important?

There is huge cognitive benefit in examining the similarities and differences among concepts. In such as activities, young children search for patterns to make connections between new information and their own background knowledge and therefore process thoughts more deeply (Dreher & Gray, 2009). Using Venn Diagrams can help students become more active in the reading process because they are being asked to analyse a text in a focused manner. As they organise their responses into the chart, they link information across sentences, paragraphs and the whole text. Venn Diagrams can also be useful when asking students to compare and contrast ideas represented in different texts. This focus helps them interpret information in relation to a broader context. For example, using a Venn Diagram to compare the ideas in two texts that have been written from different perspectives, periods of history or fields of study can lead students to deeper understanding of both texts.

Things to consider before starting

Before beginning your work with Venn Diagrams, ensure that you have selected texts or images that have rich content. The purpose of using a Venn Diagram is to identify

similarities and differences to promote synthesis of challenging ideas, so you need to make sure that your text and topic are worthy of the work you and the students will put into it.

When you first introduce Venn diagrams as a thinking tool, you will need to model the process of open-ended discussion, analysis and recording of ideas. Explicit instruction and teacher modeling are also needed to show students how they compare and contrast ideas as well as ways that students can interpret these texts by themselves (Dreher & Gray, 2009). You may need to do this a number of times before students are confident and competent enough to do this on their own. Therefore when planning a Venn Diagram session, ensure that you plan enough time for rigorous discussion of the students' analyses. Provide guidance and opportunities for students to practise this skill.

Steps in using Venn Diagrams

Model and guide the practice

1. Select the target group for instruction. It could be the whole class if you want to introduce a new idea or consolidate already taught skills.
2. Decide on your teaching focus. Some examples could include: comparing and contrasting two different species of dolphin, comparing a character's growth over time, exploring two different approaches to a single issue, comparing two different articles written on the same subject but appearing in different publications and websites.
3. Decide on the grouping format that works best for your students. Will the students work independently, in pairs or in small groups?
4. Introduce the focus text and explain the learning intention and the expectations for task completion and later discussion.
5. Model (if necessary) the process of deciding if ideas, facts and/or concepts are common to both groups or particular to only one. Talk students through the process of reading, re-reading and checking that they can justify the decisions that they make.

6. Allow students 20-30 minutes to engage in the task in sustained attention. Inform the students of the time limit so they can learn to work in appropriate time frames.
7. Check in on students from time to time to ensure they are on task and being successful.
8. Gather students together for a discussion of both the text and for a reflection on reading strategies. What did they find difficult about the task? Which parts of the text presented problems and why?

More ideas for Venn Diagrams

- Compare and contrast the attributes and backgrounds of two main characters in a novel or short story (e.g. Stanley and Zero in Louis Sachar's novel *Holes*).
- Explore the way two poets deal with a similar subject matter through poetry. What is common to the way they represent the subject matter? What is different? Do the poets deal with the same themes? Use a Venn Diagram to record the ways the topic is dealt with.
- As preparation for writing, collate information from two separate information texts on a common topic (e.g. Global Warming) using a Venn Diagram. What information is common to both reports? What information is different or contradictory? Use the Venn Diagram as notes to help you write your own report.
- Investigate the differences between commonly confused concepts or phenomena by using a Venn Diagram to record what is common to both and what makes each unique (e.g. tornadoes and cyclones, evaporation and condensation).
- Take a complex concept such as racism or sexism and explore the concept through examining popular Internet memes showing images from two different eras. What is different about the way race or gender are represented in the two different memes. What is the same?

References

Dreher, M., & Gray, J. (2009). Compare, Contrast, Comprehend: Using Compare-Contrast Text Structures with ELLs in K-3 Classrooms. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(2), 132-141.