

Get it sorted

Using the page sorter to plan essays

Teachers often complain that students fail to plan written work. Examiners echo the lament in their annual reports and the need to plan and draft features prominently in the National Curriculum and Strategy documents.



Yet this is not an easy skill to demonstrate – and there is always tension between capturing the fine careless rapture of spontaneous writing and the need to produce order out of chaos and lead the reader through a well-structured narrative or argument.

The computer has made this task easier. A word processor dramatically reduces the drudgery of revision and a grasp of the 'outline' facility can be an aid to planning. However, demonstrating this to a class and involving them in the process is not easy with software originally intended to produce printed documents. Dedicated 'concept mapping' software (such as SMART Ideas™) is designed to help users plot their ideas visually, establish links and stimulate further thinking in an interactive equivalent of 'spider diagrams'. These tools can be much more inspiring and work well with a

whiteboard, but not every school has copies and it may not be easy to demonstrate how the results translate into a structure for writing. However, every interactive whiteboard already comes with simple tools that make it easy to demonstrate and record the creative exchange of ideas in class.

The activity here assumes that the students are going to write about a controversial topic following class discussion. The sample pages, including material from recent newspapers on how much a job is worth, are used to demonstrate the method rather than provide a complete resource – the activity would need to be updated or adapted to meet the needs of your class. A similar approach could be used to explore approaches to narrative or descriptive writing.

 Notes

Suggested activity outline

- Create a number of pages in the SMART Notebook™ software containing the discussion topic (such as “What’s a job worth?”), open-ended questions (“Who is worth more: a Premier League footballer, a nurse or a school cleaner?”), points of view, relevant news items and suitable factual information. (See the SMART Notebook file, ‘Page_sort.notebook’ for an example).
- Display the topic on the whiteboard. Your class may have immediate reactions which you could quickly capture either by writing or typing them onto a blank page or by asking students themselves to write their comments on the board.
- Display the page which opens out the topic into a discussion question followed by one or more of the information and opinion pages you have created. Annotate these and highlight any key words or sentences that you as a class decide are particularly relevant to the question. Invite students to suggest additional points, either information or points of view (if necessary, ensure that the difference between fact and opinion is made visible, perhaps by colour-coding).
- At an appropriate moment, move to a page which provides a number of questions or points that could be included in an answer to the discussion question. The preceding discussion will probably have suggested additional points so invite students to add to the list.
- If each point has been created as a separate item on the page, it is a simple matter for students to come up to the board and arrange the points in an order of priority, either on the spot or following pair or group discussion. Unwanted items can simply be ‘parked’ at the bottom of the board (don’t delete them – other students may want them). At this point it would be a good idea to save the file to ensure you have a record of the discussion.
- It’s now time to move towards preparing a more formal response to the topic, perhaps in writing or as a presentation. Just as it’s easy to drag points around on a single page to display your priorities, the page sorter makes it easy to change the order of the pages so that the information and opinions can be arranged into a persuasive argument – simply drag a page to the top of the sorter and invite the class to consider whether it represents an effective opening. Is it better to begin with an arresting fact, a clear statement of your opinion or the topic itself? Each of these can be demonstrated.
- If appropriate, you may also want to help students with paragraphing. If you have a few topic sentences on a page you can display these and amend or delete them in consultation with the class in order to model effective writing. This may be an opportunity to show the difference between an arresting opening sentence and a topic sentence, for example.
- Students could spend time working on the pages themselves to construct their own outlines, editing the pages provided and adding their own before presenting these to the class.
- Pages can be printed out to provide a framework for writing or further planning – it should be possible to place several whiteboard ‘pages’ on one A4 page – the requirement to have no more than, say, six items on the printed page can be a useful discipline.

Notes

SMART specific

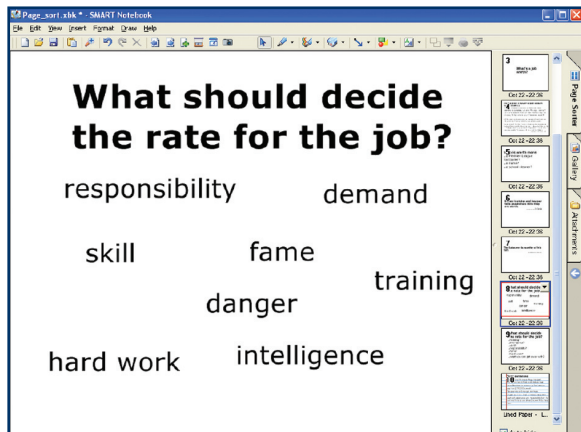
If you wish to create several similar pages, use the page sorter view, click on the page you wish to duplicate and then on the arrow in the top right – select 'clone page'.

It can be hard to distinguish between pages in the page view unless the text is very large. It will help if you give each page a title of a few words – this makes sorting easier. Click on the arrow in the top right of the page and select 'rename page'.

Show the 'page sorter' by clicking on the tab on the edge of the SMART Notebook screen. However, the sorter is hidden again when you click on the main page. To prevent this, so that it's quicker to see and sort pages, click to remove the tick in the 'Auto-hide' box at the bottom of the 'page sorter'.

If you want to give students printed copies of the pages, select 'Print' and then in the 'Print What Section', select handouts – you can choose between two, four and six pages per sheet. You can also choose which pages (or 'slides') you wish to print, so that different groups could print out their own selections.

One way of quickly distinguishing between pages is to select different backgrounds by using the 'Format' menu. You could use colours to separate facts from opinions, statements from questions and so on.



Example 1

Extension activities

Information collected from newspapers or magazines is often difficult to handle effectively. Some extracts in the example file, although reduced to fit one screen, are still quite long. Have students show how they would select the most effective sentences.

This activity could be used to help with narrative or descriptive writing. Here too it's important to stress the need for an effective opening and to explore a range of alternatives. You could have a range of story elements prepared as pages and explore with the class how these might be arranged or you might wish to build up a narrative on the spot with your students. The whiteboard makes it easy to demonstrate the difference between a pedestrian and a dramatic opening sentence.

No mention has been made here of images – these can be used to powerful effect to support an argument. Students could be invited to collect their own or you could have some ready and then demonstrate on the whiteboard how and where they might be used. The whiteboard pen allows pictures to be annotated and instant captions provided.

Resources

Concept mapping software:

SMART Ideas® software concept-mapping software is available from SMART; you can download a free 30-day evaluation copy from their site: www.smartboard.co.uk

Inspiration and Kidspiration are available from TAG learning: www.taglearning.com

These are commercial products designed for primary and secondary schools, also available for short-term trial.

Cmap Tools, a free alternative, can be downloaded from cmap.ihmc.us

Newspaper sites provide plenty of topical items on controversial issues and you may want to use some of the opinion pages as examples of how to present an argument, exploring aspects such as structure and bias. There are also some sites which provide discussion material specifically for schools, such as Newswise.

Although it is a subscription service, the free samples of the Junior and Senior versions should provide plenty of material to begin with: www.dialogueworks.co.uk/newswise/index.html

Text extracts

Text from some of the SMART Notebook pages in "Page_sort.xbk"

- 1 David Beckham is demanding Real Madrid give him a pay deal worth £770,000 a WEEK.

The England skipper, 30, wants his weekly salary to leap from £145,000 a week to £190,000 plus all the profits from his shirt sales that have made the Spanish club the richest in the world.

Becks tabled the demand - which adds up to £40 million a year - because he realises he is Madrid's most valuable asset.

Daily Mirror, 22 October 2005

- 2 EXCLUSIVE: I WANT MORE MONEY SAYS COWELL

Simon Cowell is worth a fortune, has homes in London, LA and Malaga, owns 7 cars and bosses two of the world's top TV shows. What more could he ever want?

He's a multi-millionaire with a model girlfriend and has the power to make or break future showbiz stars.

He owns a £7.5 million home in West London's exclusive Holland Park, a £20 million mansion in Beverly Hills, a villa in Malaga, seven luxury cars and appears in two of the most successful TV shows in Britain and the States.

Daily Mirror, 22 October 2005

- 3 Money is status and low pay tells people how little they are worth.

Polly Toynbee The Guardian, August 26, 2005

- 4 The National Minimum Wage for workers aged 22 and over was raised to £5.05 an hour, from £4.85 on 1 October 2005

The rate for 18-21 year olds was raised to £4.25 an hour, from £4.10.

The rate for 16-17 year olds is £3.00 an hour.

Notes

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