

Word Sorts

Vocabulary Development

What is it?

Word sorts (Gillett & Temple, 1983) help students recognize the semantic relationships among key concepts. This strategy can be used in two different ways. In a "closed sort," the teacher provides categories into which students assign the words. In an "open sort," students group words into categories and create their own labels for each category. Word sorts help students develop a deeper understanding of key concepts. They also can be used to develop the complex reasoning skills of classification and deduction.

How could it be used in social studies instruction?

Sorting words can serve as an activity to assess what students already know about the terms. It also can be used to build and monitor understanding throughout a unit. In social studies, terms can be classified into categories such as: regions, places, events, historical eras, and political or economic systems. This activity also can be used to sort historical characters, events, and ideas into categories. This activity helps students better understand the chronology of people and events, as well as the relationships between people, events, and places. Sorting helps students visualize how concepts are connected. There are unlimited variations in which this activity can be used in social studies.

How to use it:

1. List terms on 3" X 5" cards (one concept per card).
2. Allow students, individually or in groups, to sort the words into categories. Depending on the concepts and students' level of understanding, the sorts can be "closed" (teacher provided categories) or "open" (student generated categories). Model this process for students by "thinking aloud" as cards are sorted.
3. As students become more proficient at classifying, they should be encouraged to complete "open sorts" and to find more than one way to classify the vocabulary terms. Classifying and then reclassifying helps students extend and refine their understanding of the concepts.