

Teaching Primary Texts Using Concept Mapping

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Overview: As state legislatures increasingly mandate the inclusion of foundational American documents in general education courses on American politics, instructors face both a challenge and an opportunity: how to teach these texts not only for their historical importance but also for their rhetorical structure, argumentative strength, and communicative lessons. One approach is to view primary texts as strong pieces of writing to be examined conceptually with an internal logic that must be unlocked. The analytical tool of concept mapping helps students break texts down into discrete and scaffolded analytical parts. Through concept mapping, students identify major themes of political rhetoric. When these themes (power, freedom, equality, justice, etc.) recur across texts, concept maps help students recognize and unpack the contours of a larger dialogue about the American experiment.

This teaching resource provides instructors with clear student learning objectives for content and communication, specific instructions for a concept mapping assignment, guiding questions for establishing context, and overarching reflection questions.

Student Learning Objectives:

Content

- 1) Recognize and summarize rhetorical arguments concerning the best form of government for the United States of America.
- 2) Reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of rhetorical arguments at the time in which they were made as well as for contemporary American politics.
- 3) Connect this content to major topics of the class across the semester, including but not limited to: democracy, representation, equality, justice, civil rights and liberties, Congress, interest groups, political parties, the electoral college, and state and local politics.

Communication

- 1) Apply the framework of concept mapping to summarize and evaluate an example of persuasive political rhetoric.
- 2) Reflect on the value of concept mapping to strong oral and written communication skills.

Instructions for Assignment:

Writers use concept mapping to organize ideas or topics and the relationships among them. They are helpful in the early stages of developing an argument or outlining a paper because they provide a visual representation for the writer of the plan for the entirety of the work. They help in the brainstorming, planning, and development phase because they foster more effective structure and overall coherence. As Astiantih and Akfan (2023) suggest, “By using concept

maps, writers can visually see the connections between different ideas, identify key points, and develop a coherent and logical flow in their writing” (434). Most often, concept maps involve topics or ideas written in shapes (circles, rectangles, triangles) with connectors (lines or arrows) to indicate the directionality between them. Additionally, concept maps represent ideas in a hierarchical fashion, from the most general concept, idea, or topic at the beginning or top of the map and the most specific at the bottom. Sometimes concept maps include *cross-links* – relationships between topics or ideas across different sections on the map (Novak & Canas 2008).

Concept maps can be used for idea generation, organization, and refinement. They can also be used as an evaluation tool to assist students in seeing informational patterns (ibid; see Mintzes et al. 2000; Novak 1990; Novak & Gowin 1984).

In this assignment, you will use a framework for concept mapping provided by Novak & Canas (2008) to trace and evaluate Madison’s argument in *Federalist 10*. They suggest the following steps for using concept mapping. Here we apply the steps to unpack a persuasive text in American political thought for the purposes of understanding content and strengthening our own written communication skills.

Step 1: Construct a *Focus Question* – What is author (Madison) clearly specifying is the problem or issue that this concept map should resolve?

Step 2: Identify the *Key Concept Parking Lot* – Note the 15-25 concepts that are relevant to the focus question.

Step 3: Organize the Concepts from *General to Specific* – Look for the most hierarchical way to organize the identified key concepts from most broad or inclusive at the top to most specific or particular at the bottom.

Step 4: Draft the *Preliminary Map* – Using Post-Its™ or notecards, develop a first draft of a concept map for the author’s argument. Pay attention to the connectors between ideas/topics/concepts as well as the directionality of the connection.

Step 5: Look for *Cross-Links* – Consider any relationships across major ideas/topics/concepts that the author highlights.

Step 6: Distill the Concepts and Relationships to *Essential Elements* – Consider ways to be even more precise and concise in your organization of the author’s conceptual argument.

Step 7: Revise and Finalize – Move from notecards or Post-Its™ to a digital format to create your final concept map of the author’s argument.

Instructor Notes for Federalist 10 as an Exercise in Thesis Development and Concept Mapping

1. Establishing the Rhetorical Context

In the classroom, either before or after the assignment, I would situate the reading material within its rhetorical context. Questions such as the ones provided below spur discussion in the classroom and prime students for a close reading of the text.

- a. Who was the audience?
- b. What was the immediate historical context?
- c. What marked this political moment as philosophically and politically significant?
- d. What was the author's motivation or bias?
- e. What was at stake?

2. Identifying the Focus Question or Thesis Statement

A strong thesis statement should do the following.

- a. Introduce the topic
- b. Encapsulate the paper/work/argument
- c. Suggest the significance of the issue

3. Identifying Madison's Thesis Statement in *Federalist 10*

"AMONG the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction."

4. Concept Mapping *Federalist 10*

The overview of concept mapping suggests using these steps. Madison's thesis statement in *Federalist 10* offers a great example of a "focus question" or topic sentence. Encourage students to work through these steps. Ultimately, however, they need to develop something akin to the concept map example provided below.

- a. Thesis Map of *Focus Question*
- b. Key Concept Parking Lot
- c. Organize the Concepts from *General to Specific*
- d. Draft the *Preliminary Map*
- e. Look for *Cross-Links*
- f. Distill the Concepts and Relationships to *Essential Elements*
- g. Revise and Finalize

5. Summarizing the Argument (Conclusion)

- a. Faction is a dangerous problem.
- b. The only solution is through controlling its effects.
- c. Majority faction is not controlled through the vote or the Constitution.
- d. Republican government provides indirect representation and multiplies the number of factions, thus providing more security against the oppression of minority rights by majority faction.
- e. Large republics provide even more security.
- f. The Federalists are right.... A Union is the way to go.

6. Taking Time to Reflect

After students have submitted their final concept map, it is important to take time to reflect on the exercise, the text, and the broader impact. How this reflection is structured depends on the student population, the level of the course, and the stakes of the assignment. I would either field a discussion in the classroom in which I explicitly ask them to “think, pair, share” on the reflection questions or generally ask the class as a whole to reflect on and articulate their learning. These are two questions that could be used with each text and worked into an overarching course assessment.

1) What does this piece say about the broader American experiment?

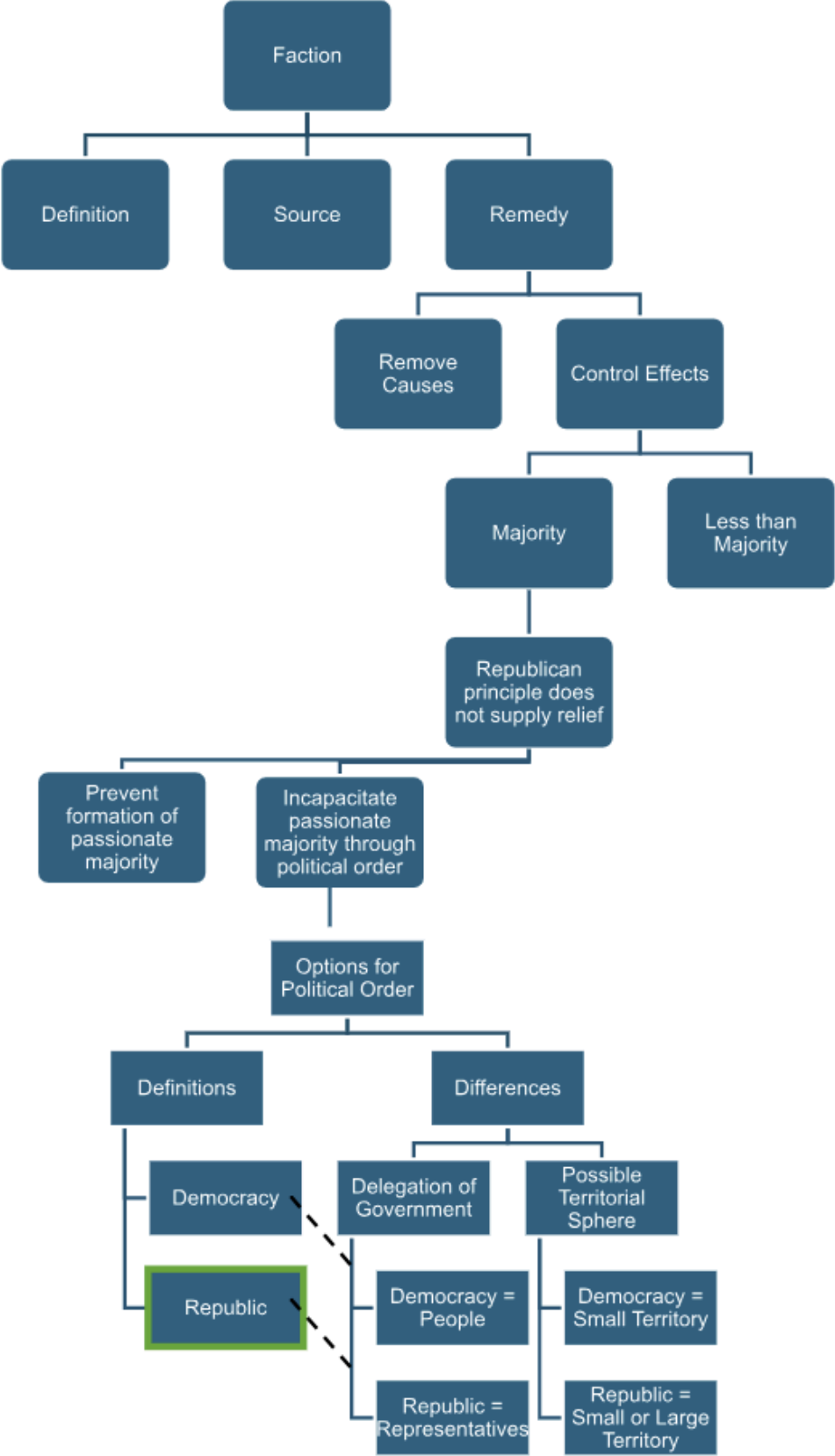
The answers to this question would depend on the primary text used.

2) How can I use concept mapping in my own writing across general education courses and in my major to organize my brainstorming, organization, and refinement of ideas particularly in my written communication?

I would want students to demonstrate the following awareness through the conversation.

Through the exercise of concept mapping, I have learned the elements of a strong thesis statement, the value of brainstorming key ideas to construct a general outline, and the importance of organizing an argument hierarchically (both overall and within each substantive section). This technique should help me in courses on public speaking, English composition, the social sciences and scientific writing, and general humanities. I can see the value of visualizing a spoken or written argument for purposes of refinement and communication of my ideas.

Illustration of Concept Map:



Conclusion:

As political scientists contributing to general education as well as covering civic literacy requirements, we forward student learning objectives related to critical thinking, written communication, and analytical reasoning. Concept mapping frames primary texts as lessons in strong argumentation to foster deeper critical engagement and better writing - both incredibly important soft skills of value to all majors. This easy tool can be modified for ready use with any primary text in American politics to enhance student understanding of individual texts as well as overarching themes across texts.

References

Astiantih, S., & Akfan, S.S. 2023. "Utilizing Concept Maps to Enhance Students' Writing Skills." *Journal of Languages and Language Teaching* 11(3): 433-446.

Novak, Joseph D. & Alberto J. Canas. 2008. "The Theory Underlying Concept Maps and How to Construct and Use Them."

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