Clustering Ideas

Inquire: Building a Road Map with Words

Overview
If you look at a road map, you can see that from each city, multiple roads lead off in different directions, each heading toward a new destination that itself is a convergence of more roads. But, what do the images of a road map actually help us do? They help us orient and find our way, of course. Of equal importance, they also show the relationships between each of these destinations in terms of distance and direction.

Clustering is a writing technique that offers a similar means of mapping the relationships between ideas, instead of driving destinations. This free-associative exercise uses words and basic concepts to build “idea maps” that will help you start thinking about the relationships between different concepts so that you can build a well-developed and focused project.

Big Question: How can I visualize the connections between basic words and ideas?

Watch: Mapping an Idea
Say you unfold a road map and look at it more closely. Or review the route proposed to you by your GPS or smart phone’s map application. You can see that each city acts as a hub for multiple roads that lead away from it (or toward it) in different directions. Each road heading out of a city leads eventually to a new destination that itself is the converging point of more roads. But what do the images on a road map actually mean? How do they help us navigate in our world? They help us find our way, of course, but they also show the relationships between each of these destinations in terms of distance and direction.

In writing, when we are trying to build relationships between concepts in an essay, it can be hard to visualize where each topic connects to another. We may not even have a firm grasp on which topic is our central topic, much less how other topics relate to it and each other. This is where clustering can be useful.

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A key strategy in this exercise is to use word association to develop a broader context for the topic you want to write about. No word or concept exists in a vacuum. Each idea has something that came before it that helped it develop into a complete form, and many ideas themselves spawn new concepts that can be
further developed over time. When building an idea map, you use word association to identify the key aspects of the topic you want to explore - what images, or words, come to mind when thinking about the topic and what concepts are meaningfully related to your chosen topic. As you develop your essay, you may explore the relationships between the different topics in your idea map. This is the central idea behind clustering; identify words or basic ideas related to broad subjects and then build and elaborate on the connections.

Remember that clustering is simply a first step towards writing a paper, so when you finish this exercise, it may seem that all you’ve really accomplished from this is a bunch of seemingly random words crazily scribbled over a sheet of paper. You may begin to question your sanity. Don’t let your own thoughts overwhelm you. The real goal of clustering is to help you recognize and understand the relationships between words and concepts so that you can begin to develop well-constructed arguments or analyses from a basic concept.

Have you ever tried to connect different concepts? Did you find it difficult to see the connections without writing them out? How do you think an idea might improve with a visualization of the connections between its components?

Read: How Clustering Works

Overview: Building a Web

Clustering is an exercise that fosters thinking about the concepts associated with your topic, and the relationships between those concepts. This technique allows you to create a web of interconnected words – a visual representation of the connections – that will help you skillfully articulate the points you want to make, draft an outline for your paper, and ultimately craft well-developed arguments. You don’t necessarily need to have an idea in mind to start a cluster, either. So long as you are able to identify one word associated with the subject you are writing about, which could even be the subject itself, you can build a cluster by simply expanding your thoughts out from that word. While it may seem like all that you are ending up with is a confusing mess of words and lines, the goal here is not a neat, finished product, but more like a general road map that will help you get started on your project.

Write Your Words

Start with a word central to a topic or subject you are interested in exploring. If you use more than one word, try to keep your idea as simple and contained as possible. Write that word, or words, in the center of a piece of paper, then draw a circle around it. For example, if you are wanting to explore libraries in the modern world, you might write “libraries” in the center of your page, and then circle that. Now, start writing words that come to mind in association with your keyword(s). In the case of our example, you might write “books,” “computers,” and “librarians.” Circle each of these as you write them, then draw a line from each of these circles to your keyword(s) in the center. Now work your way around to each of these secondary words, and write words you associate with each of these. Again, circle these words and draw lines connecting them to each concept to which they relate. As you work outward, you should see a loose web-like collection of words with lines connecting them start to appear. Some words may have more links to them than others. These grouped connections are your clusters.

Build Relationships

Each word can have multiple relationships across your cluster, so be sure to look out for words that may have multiple connections, but don’t get too caught up with trying to find these connections. Rather, keep writing words that come to mind in connection with other words. Even if they seem unnecessary or
inappropriate for your paper, the more words you have to make connections with, the more developed the relationships between words and concepts will be. These relationships will help you build a web of words or concepts that are interrelated. By examining these relationships, you can develop arguments or ideas that are supported by diverse, interlocking topics.

Don’t Limit Yourself
You also don’t necessarily need to limit your branching to the original word that you used to start the cluster. As you work outward, you may find that you are building more relationships around a different word than the one you started with. You may even have multiple clusters that start appearing around different words. This is good. Keep going, and see how many words you can add to any of these clusters. Again, the point here is idea generation, so the more ideas that you are able to develop, the more benefit you will derive from the clustering exercise.

Examine Clusters
Once you have filled your paper, examine the places where multiple words are grouped together and connected by lines. Think about the relationships between these words. How are they connected? What ideas come to mind when you see these interrelated words together? Remember, relationships are key. Record these ideas and think about how you can develop them into comprehensive analyses or arguments. Do this for all the groupings you can find in your cluster. From this mapping, you should be able to find at least a few major ideas to help you get started on a larger project.

Reflect: The Physical Limits of a Map of Ideas

Poll
Clustering works best when the limits placed upon your creativity are kept to a minimum. This includes the physical restrictions of writing space and time. Think for a minute about the act of writing and what you use to complete it: pencils, paper, etc.

What do you think might be the best way to optimize your experience?
- Keep a few sharp pencils handy
- Use a larger sheet of paper
- Forego paper and pencil and use a whiteboard or chalkboard instead
- Use a word processing application on your computer

Expand: Clustering with Others

Overview: Talking Out a Cluster
So far, we’ve discussed clustering as an individual exercise to help with writing papers. This strategy can also be used if you are working with others on a larger project, or if you are all working on a similar subject. There are a couple of ways that the basic idea of clustering can be expanded to optimally cultivate collective idea sharing among a group. Simply talking through a cluster can be a fine way of accomplishing this, however, idea circles can help give a group a more structured way of building clusters.
Idea Circles

Rather than having everyone in a group shouting out ideas all at once, you can create an idea circle. With this variant on clustering, the group will collectively select one word to begin the cluster. Then, in a predetermined order, each member of the group will add one word at a time, connecting each word to a different one in the cluster.

This can go on for a while, but it works best if there is a time limit involved – 10 to 15 minutes, usually – or a set number of words each member of the group can contribute. You can use different colored pens or pencils if you would like, so that you can keep track of who has already contributed. It’s important to move quickly from each group member to the next, with everyone writing a word as soon as it is their turn. Remember, just as in the individual version of this exercise, there should be no restrictions on what is written. The key here is generating ideas, not critiquing them.

Once this is complete, each member can discuss the relationships that they noticed in the cluster and talk about the larger ideas that occurred to them. Each person doesn’t necessarily need to focus on ideas generated only from words they contributed. Any ideas from any source are helpful, so each person should be encouraged to discuss whatever ideas they have related to the cluster exercise and any of the words or relationships that it unveiled.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A general overview of clustering, as well as a good example of what a cluster will look like
- [http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/cluster.html](http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/cluster.html)
- Source: Writing Center at the University of Richmond

Lesson Glossary

clustering: a brainstorming activity that involves drawing an idea map using words and basic concepts

Check Your Knowledge

1. When building a cluster, it is best to only think of words or phrases that are directly related to the word you started with.
   A. True
   B. False

2. What should you do if you start to see that you are writing more words around a word that is different from the one you started with?
   A. keep going and see how many you can add to this cluster
   B. stop and start over with this new center word
   C. stop and start writing down the ideas that come to mind from these connections
   D. keep going, but start with a different word connected to the word you started with
3. Clustering is most useful for…
   A. only individuals.
   B. visualizing the connections between words and concepts.
   C. building an outline for a paper.
   D. reaching a different conclusion from one you started with.

Answer Key:

Citations

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