Open and Closed Word Sorts

The two types of word sorts are open-ended and closed-ended, the difference being that the property in common between words is stated up front in closed word sorts, whereas in open word sorts, students must determine the relationships between words while completing the sorting activity.

Closed Word Sorts – Students are provided the categories and specific attributes of each and then try to match words to the correct categories.

Open Word Sorts – Students must discern the common attributes while sorting words, describing the categories into which they sort words and the features they have in common.

Conducting Word Sort Activities in the Classroom

Used as a strategy to introduce and reinforce vocabulary, word sorts help students learn to recognize common relationships between words, increase reading comprehension and retention, teach them to think critically about terms and concepts, and develop their ability to make deep, meaningful connections between words and concepts.

Word sort activities help teach conceptual thinking beyond reading literacy, helping develop students’ critical thinking and reasoning abilities and understanding of content in math, science, social studies and other subjects.

Basic Classroom Word Sort Activities

• Pick words that encourage a greater understanding of the core objective in your lesson plan; key ideas, people, places, events, etc.
  • Write these concepts or vocabulary on index cards.
• Working either together in small groups or individually, have your students sort words into specific themes, categories or topics.

How to Judge the Success of Word Sort Activities

• Students should demonstrate they understand the specific characteristics of the words they are sorting and their conceptual relationships.
• Students should demonstrate ability to recognize the common relationships between words and a holistic understanding of their content.
**Things to Consider When Conducting Word Sort Activities**

- It is critical for teachers to model the activity so that students achieve greater success through the word sort activity.
- Closed word sorts help provide a ‘framework’ for students when engaging in word sort activities.
- Variations and enhancements to basic word sort activities can include:
  - Let students manipulate the words into other categories. For example, apples and pears are both ‘types of fruit’ and ‘things that grow on trees’.
  - Ask your students to explain the reasoning for their word classifications; often this can give you clues where students need additional help and support in conceptualizing the relationships between words.
  - Using ‘pre-identified sentence structures’, have your students form sentences using the words they have sorted to demonstrate they understand the correct usage of the words.

**Creating a Simple Classroom Word Sort Activity**

1. On a white board or index cards, list 10 to 20 vocabulary words from a specific reading selection.
2. You can either provide the categories to be used (closed word sort) or let them choose their own (more advanced, open word sort activity).
3. Break the class into small groups of 4 to 5 students each and have them work together on the word sort activity, giving them 10 to 15 minutes to categorize the words.
4. Conclude the activity by having each group present to the entire class their word list for one category. This enables each group to present the reasoning behind their categorization and enables you to summarize the concepts and relationships of each category.