

Sociograms

Use this Strategy:

Before Reading
During Reading
After Reading

Targeted Reading Skills:

- Analyze and interpret elements of character development and plot development
- Make, confirm, and/or revise predictions

What is it?

A sociogram is a visual representation of the relationships among characters in a literary text. Students can make use of pictures, symbols, shapes, colors, and line styles to illustrate these relationships. Sociograms can be used at first to help students understand the relationships among characters. As the story develops, students can add to or revise their sociograms to graphically illustrate the changing relationships, the traits of each character, and the emerging primary and secondary conflicts. It can be especially useful to have students create a sociogram based on having read the introductory chapters of a novel or first act of a play and then to create another sociogram in response to later chapters or acts to consider how characters and conflicts have changed.

What does it look like?

In a sociogram, the central character(s) is placed at the center of the page, and the other characters are placed around him/her. The spatial relationship on the page should in some way represent each of the character's relationship with the main character, as well as with each other. Lines/arrows are used to show the "direction and nature" of the relationship (e.g., strength/weakness, friend/foe, dominance/submissiveness, etc.). Students can begin by manipulating small pieces of paper that represent each of the characters; once they have arranged them in the best way to reflect their understanding of the text, the names can then be placed on a larger piece of paper/poster and the rest of the sociogram can be constructed. A number of conventions may be useful in developing sociograms:

- Place the central character(s) at the center of the diagram
- Let the physical distance between characters reflect the perceived psychological distance between the characters

- Let the size/shape/symbol of a character metaphorically represent each personality, importance, one's power or lack of, etc.
- Show the direction of a relationship by an arrow/line, and its nature by a brief label (the lines can be creatively applied: What might the following types of lines indicate? A jagged line? A wavy line? The thickness of the line? etc.)
- Represent substantiated relationships with a solid line and inferred relationships by a broken line.
- Circle active characters with a solid line; circle significantly absent characters with a broken line.
- Place the characters that support the main character on one side of a dividing line, and antagonistic characters on the other side.
- Illustrate the tone and or theme of a piece by the use of color or visual symbols.
- Explore creative ways to represent a character's motivation. For example, inside each "character's circle" might be one or more words that seem to capture the essence of that character. Immediately outside the circle could be a series of arrows that represent the forces that influence that character.

Students need to have models to examine before they can construct one of their own, but Johnson and Louis (1987) caution against trying to create a sociogram based on the combined reflections of the whole class. It may be more effective for teachers to use information from the class to develop a demonstration sociogram; it could be based on a previously studied text.

How could I use, adapt or differentiate it?

- Younger students can use pictures of characters and word cards to construct their sociograms.
- Software such as Inspiration can be used to help students
- Students can work independently and then share their sociograms or small groups of students can work collaboratively.
- Sociograms can be used to help explore power relationships implied in nonfiction texts such as newspaper reports and feature articles, aiding in the development of critical literacy skills.
- Listening carefully to students' explanations of their sociograms can provide insight into their comprehension and their ability to make inferences from texts.