Minnesota Humanities Center

Mind Maps

About

Mind maps are visual thinking tools that help students organize, categorize, and reason through sources. Unlike worksheets that ask students to hunt for discrete facts, mind maps encourage students to engage with the full argument or concept in a source and construct meaning for themselves. This approach supports disciplinary thinking by prompting students to gather evidence, notice patterns, and make interpretations.

Mind maps require minimal preparation, needing only a source and a blank sheet of paper. The routine remains familiar and predictable while keeping the focus on the source, which provides new and engaging content. When used consistently across units and grade levels, mind maps help students build agency and strengthen habits of disciplinary thinking.

Repeatable Routines

Routine 1: Bubble Map (Single Concept)

Approximate Time: 10–15 minutes

Students use a single source to explore one concept. They record observations, examples, and explanations around a central concept, building understanding before attaching academic vocabulary.

Best Used When:

- Introducing a new concept
- Helping students identify a source's argument and supporting evidence, especially in video or documentary formats

Set Up: Have students write the key concept (e.g., bureaucracy) in the center of a blank sheet of paper and draw a circle around it.

Teacher establishes norms:

- "We're listening/reading for argument and evidence, not just facts."
- "Write down anything you hear that describes the concept or explains why it exists."
- "Write for the entire time. Don't worry about whether something is important enough. The more you write down the better."

Activity: Students engage with the source and jot down ideas around their circle.

Afterwards, students share their observations with the class. As students share, the teacher names the disciplinary skills being practiced, such as argumentation, identifying evidence, and causation.

Extension: Students use colored pencils to sort the ideas they wrote down.

- Circle in red: Descriptions and definitions
- Circle in green: Evidence and examples
- Circle in blue: Explanations of why

Routine 2: Double Bubble Map (Comparison)

Approximate Time: 15–20 minutes

Students compare two concepts, perspectives, or topics, placing unique ideas on each side and shared ideas in the center. This routine pushes students toward analysis rather than simple feature listing and offers more space for developing shared ideas than a Venn diagram.

Best Used When:

- Comparing two concepts, perspectives, or sources
- Moving beyond listing features to analyzing similarities and differences
- Practicing perspective-taking and corroboration

Set Up: Have students write one concept, topic, or perspective on the left side of a blank sheet of paper and another on the right, drawing a circle around each.

- In elementary, this might be two community helpers, landforms, or figures from a read-aloud.
- In high school, it might be two primary source documents presenting competing arguments about the same event or policy.

If using multiple sources, have students sort them before reading.

Teacher establishes norms:

- "Focus on what each source actually says, not what you think you know."
- "Similarities are only meaningful if you can explain why they exist."

Activity: Students engage with the source(s) and record ideas on the appropriate side of the map, placing shared ideas in the center. They draw lines connecting each idea to the concept or concepts it applies to.

After completing the map, students select one idea from the center and use the sentence stem *"Both ___ and ___ share this because ___"* to explain why the idea applies to both concepts, citing evidence from the source(s).

Students then share one comparison or shared idea with the class, using evidence to support their thinking. As students share, the teacher names the disciplinary skills being practiced, such as perspective-taking, corroboration, and analyzing similarity and difference.

Extension: Students explain what their comparisons reveal by responding to the prompt: *"What does this similarity or difference tell us about perspective, power, or the decisions of historical or contemporary actors?"*

Routine 3: Tree Map (Categorization)

Approximate Time: 20–30 minutes

Students organize a set of sources into meaningful categories, building conceptual understanding before attaching academic vocabulary. When students describe and group ideas in their own words first, academic vocabulary attaches to concepts they already understand and are more likely to stick.

Best Used When:

- Making meaning of a set of sources
- Identifying and explaining patterns and relationships using evidence
- Building conceptual understanding before introducing academic vocabulary

Set Up: Provide students with a set of cards containing images, source excerpts, key definitions, or concepts from the unit. Do not provide categories in advance.

- In elementary, cards may include images only.
- In middle and high school, cards may include primary source excerpts, data, and political cartoons.

Teacher establishes norms:

- " Sort first, label later. Trust what you notice."
- " You need to be able to explain why everything in a category belongs together."

Activity: Students sort the cards into columns based on patterns they notice. After sorting, students create a label for each column that explains what brings the items together and why. In upper grades, students also explain what their categories reveal about power, systems, or historical change.

The teacher then introduces academic vocabulary, and students match the terms to the categories they created.

When complete, groups share one of their categories with the class, explaining the category's name, what it includes, and why those items belong together. In upper grades, students also share what the category reveals about power, systems, or historical change. As students share, the teacher names the disciplinary skills being practiced, such as categorization, causation, and building an argument from evidence.

Extension: Throughout the unit, students collect their own excerpts, images, and definitions to build a tree map over time. The completed tree map is used as a prewriting and organizational tool for the summative task.

Tips for Implementation

Mind maps should be used as tools for disciplinary reasoning in social studies, not as generic comprehension checks. These practices keep them grounded in the discipline:

- **Anchor every idea to a source.** Students should be able to point to where each idea on their map came from. This ensures that thinking stays evidence-based rather than relying on memory or prior knowledge alone.
- **Push comparison toward analysis.** When students create mind maps, the goal is not to list features but to explain what similarities and differences mean.
- **Require students to explain their thinking.** Students should be able to justify why ideas belong in a category, are connected, or are shared across concepts. This develops analytical and reasoning skills.
- **Name disciplinary skills out loud.** Make disciplinary thinking explicit by naming it as students work. Naming skills helps students and apply them across contexts.
- **Build in time to reflect.** After completing a mind map, ask students what patterns, relationships, or connections they notice and how these help answer a supporting question or deepen understanding.