

# Concept Mapping

## General

Concept mapping is a [cognitivist instructional design model](#) developed by [Joseph Novak](#) and his colleagues in 1972 as they worked on understanding how children's knowledge of science changes<sup>1)</sup>. Some of the first concept maps were, however, proposed by some other authors as well<sup>2)</sup>, but concept maps in their fullest form were introduced by Novak in 1981<sup>3)</sup>. In Novak's words, concept map is a

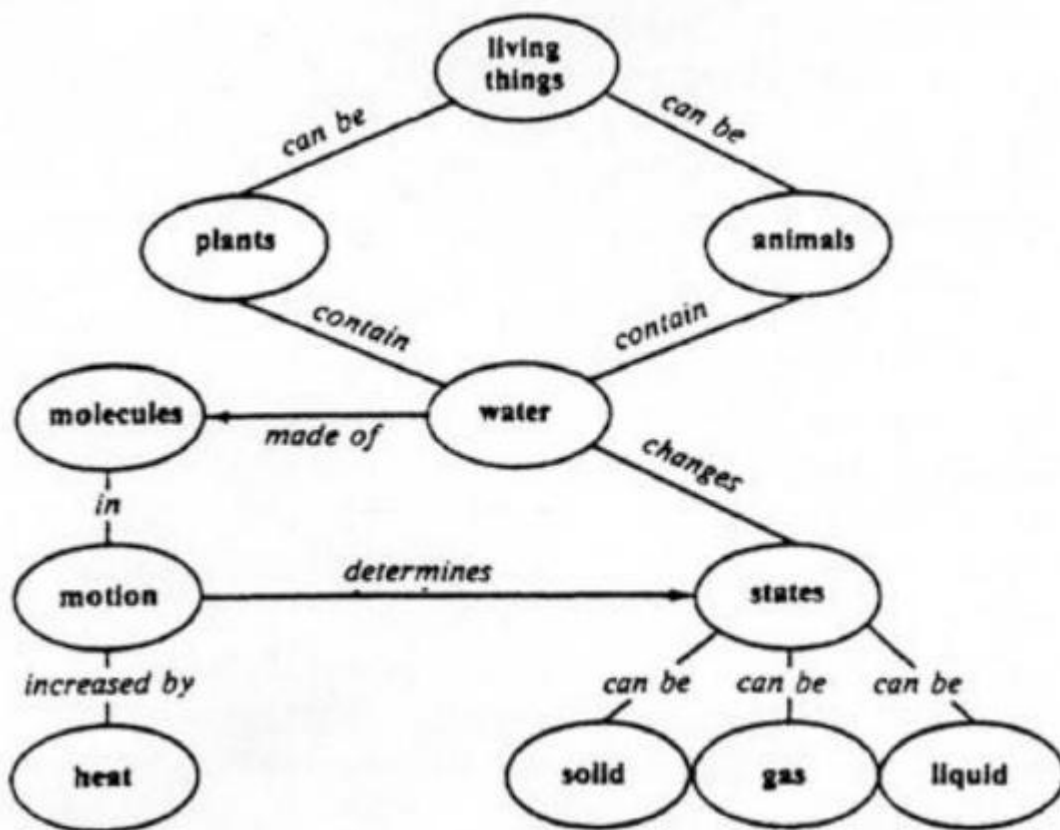
- ***“visual representation of the relationships between concepts held by an individual, materials of a lecture, textbook, or laboratory exercise. By concept mapping even old and familiar material, we often recognize new relationships and meaning.”***<sup>4)</sup>

Novak's ideas were influenced by [David Ausubel's assimilation theory](#) and his hierarchical knowledge structure suggestions<sup>5)</sup>.

## What is concept mapping?

Concept mapping is the process of creating concept maps,

- *“graphical tools for organizing and representing knowledge. They include concepts, usually enclosed in circles or boxes of some type, and relationships between concepts indicated by a connecting line linking two concepts. Words on the line, referred to as linking words or linking phrases, specify the relationship between the two concepts. We define concept as a perceived regularity in events or objects, or records of events or objects, designated by a label.”*<sup>6)</sup>



As explained, on the visual level, a concept map is a hierarchical (general to specific) diagram containing nodes and links, both labeled with words or symbols. The most important concept is usually placed in the center of the map or at its top. Novak describes the concept map building process in following steps<sup>7)</sup>:

1.	<b>Identify key concepts of the material</b> and list them or write them on pieces of paper to make them movable.
2.	<b>Rank the concepts</b> by placing most general ones at the top of the map with respect to the context of the material.
3.	<b>Add other more specific concepts</b> under the more inclusive ones.
4.	<b>Connect concepts by labeled lines.</b> Labels should add meaning by defining relationships between connected concepts.
5.	If desired, <b>specific examples of concepts can also be added</b> below concept labels.
6.	If desired, change or reorganize the map in accordance with the newly noted relations between the concepts. Concept maps for the same topic can be organized in more possible ways.

Concepts maps can be useful to both teachers and students. A teacher can use them to<sup>8)</sup>:

- **identify and organize concepts** he is about to teach,
- gain **insight to what the students already know** or how they view the topic from concept maps drawn by the students, so he knows what should be taught next,
- teach terms, facts, and concepts of given topic,
- organize information into meaningful categories and relate those categories on a more general level,
- synthesize and integrate learned information thereby strengthening long-term retention, and
- develop creativity and higher-level thinking skills, strategies, and habit.



the case in Novak's earlier works

- there are **no limits on the length of the labels** since longer labels are sometimes required to offer accurate explanation
- connections should have **arrowheads** in order to point the direction of the connection
- **pictures, videos or sounds** may also be connected in a concept map
- concept mapping is a **general method for knowledge representation** and does not have to be associated exclusively with Ausubel's assimilation theory
- concept maps do **not** have to be **hierarchical** (for example cyclic concept maps<sup>14)</sup>)
- a good concept map should have only **one instance of each concept**, which was not the rule in some Novak's works, sometimes due to a too large number of links connecting a certain concept
- sometimes it is useful to suggest a way of reading a concept map (for example top to bottom or bottom to top)

Concept maps were earlier drawn by hand, but today a number of computer applications like the free [IHMC CmapTools](#) can be used to enhance this process.

## Criticisms

Concept mapping is a very well accepted and widely used method, but it:

- was designed mostly to represent declarative and **not procedural knowledge** or algorithms,
- is a rather **difficult** and sometimes **time-consuming cognitive task** which requires training, and
- there is no standardized way of scoring/comparing concept maps<sup>15)</sup>.

## Keywords and most important names

- **Concept mapping, concept maps, concept, object, meaningful learning**
- [Joseph Novak](#)

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