

## Concept Circles

The *concept circle* (Allen, 2007; Vacca & Vacca, 2002) is a strategy that supports students as they learn new vocabulary typically found in informational and nonfiction text. The idea behind concept circles is that information is organized around concepts, topics, and facts. However, understanding specific vocabulary is essential for understanding concepts and topics.

The example graphic organizer in the following strategy table helps students see relationships and categories among words related to a single topic or concept. For primary students, the strategy can be teacher led, with students adding to the discussion about words and their relationships. From about grade 4 and beyond, concept circles can be used in a variety of ways outlined in the following strategy.

Keep in mind that while concept circles provide a reference to the content and the relationship between words, the discussion surrounding this strategy is equally important. Students hearing and using words in context deepens their nuanced understanding of terms, as the following strategy demonstrates.

The concept circle strategy is a simple and effective way for students to talk about and see relationships between words related to a single concept or topic. This strategy also helps students organize their thinking about a topic and expand and develop their vocabulary. Used as a whole-group, small-group, or paired activity, it is an effective strategy for supporting new content learning or for review purposes.

### Strategy: Concept Circles

#### Pillar: Vocabulary

##### Grade Level:

- ☒ K
- ☒ 1
- ☒ 2
- ☒ 3
- ☒ 4
- ☒ 5
- ☒ 6

##### Instructional Grouping:

- ☒ Whole Group
- ☒ Small Group
- ☐ Individual

##### Consider This:

- Determine target content-area vocabulary in advance as a guide to providing examples for students.
- Use a simple circle template or draw the circle on a whiteboard or SMART Board.
- Use the following double-ring circle template with intermediate students.
- Depending on your students, create an anchor chart for reference.

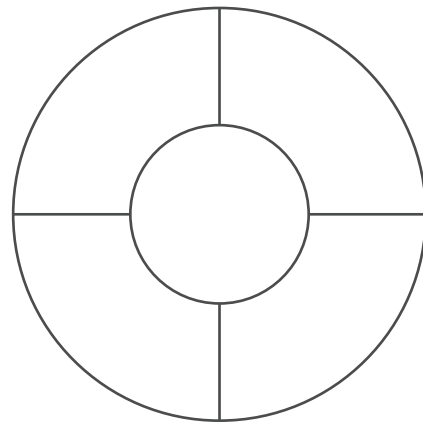
**What is it?** A *concept circle* is a vocabulary strategy that uses a visual structure to support learning, talking about, and seeing relationships among words and topics often found in nonfiction and informational text.

**Why is it important?** The visual organization of the concept circle helps students see and talk about relationships among words, concepts, and topics, thus deepening their understanding of the terms and connections between the terms.

##### What works in the classroom?

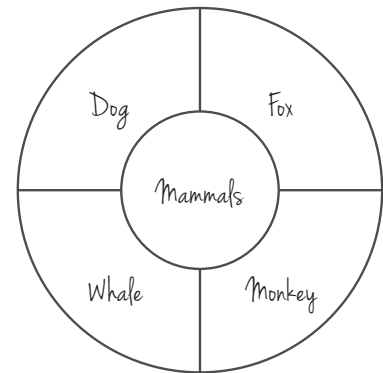
Think about key concepts or topics within a unit of study where students must understand key vocabulary related to those concepts or topics. Those concepts and topics are perfect for concept circles.

The following image is an example of a basic concept circle.



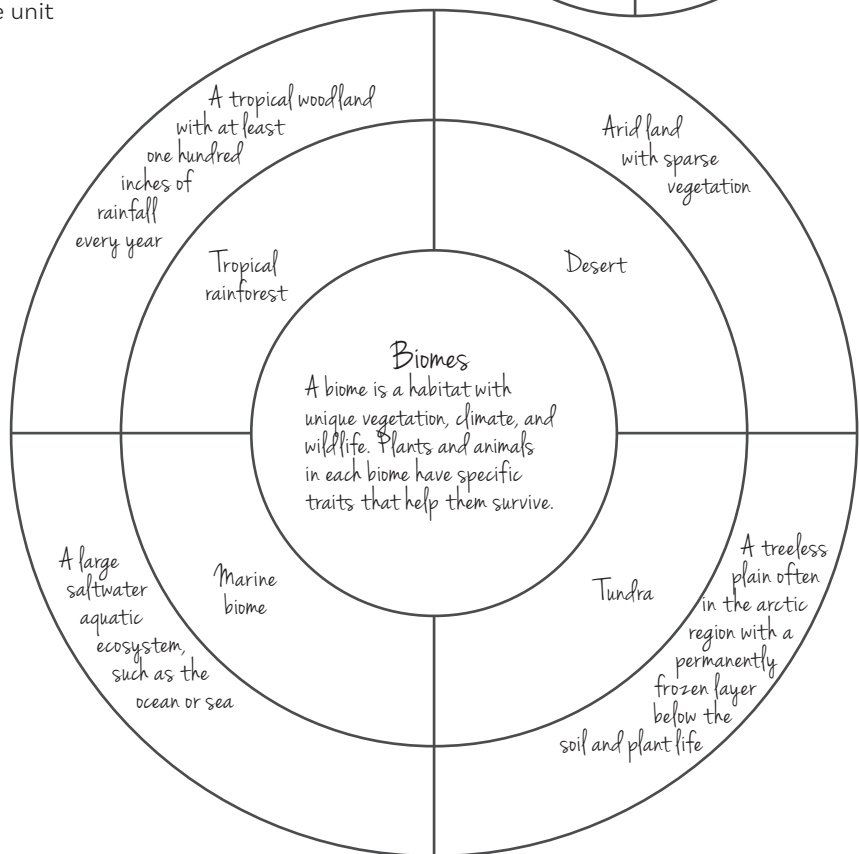
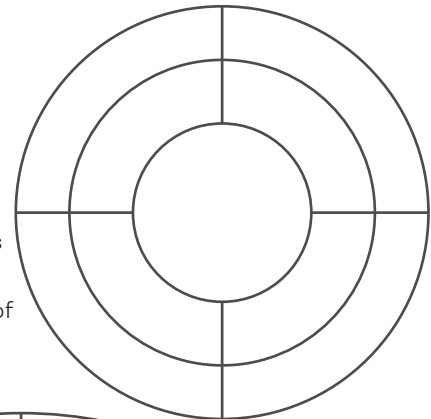
### Primary Students

- **Example:** Select a target topic, such as mammals, and write the word in the center of the circle. Talk about the characteristics of different types of mammals with students and write an example in each of the quadrants surrounding the circle.
- Do another example with students. Have students work with a partner to add the terms for the outer circle.
- Finally, write another target topic or concept in the center of the circle, such as forces and motion. Discuss as a group and add one example, such as friction, in one of the four quadrants. Now have students pair off and discuss additional examples. Reconvene and complete the concept circle, adding the terms *pendulum*, *motion*, and *pattern of motion* in the remaining open quadrants around the concept circle.



### Intermediate Students

- At the intermediate level, use concept circles to support clustered word learning and discussion about vocabulary related to a specific topic. This expanded discussion uses the following double-ring concept circle.
- Begin with the topic or concept, written in the central circle. Through class discussion, have students add key terms related to the topic to the quadrants in the inner circle.
- In the quadrants of the outer circle, students write an abbreviated definition of each term.
- The following completed concept circle shows an example from a fourth-grade science unit on biomes.
- **Try this variation:** Begin the lesson with the four supporting terms already in the quadrants surrounding the central circle. Students add the concept or topic in the central circle and definitions in the outer circle based on class discussion and reading.
- **Students can create concept circles to quiz one another.** Have them try this strategy to prepare for a quiz or exam: Each student writes four terms and classmates determine the topic. As a variation, have one student select the central topic and classmates add terms that support the topic.
- **Use concept circles as a quick check for understanding.** For continued use, project a concept circle or two to elicit quick checks of understanding from the previous day's lesson. As students get situated, they complete each of the concept circles with appropriate terms using their notes and textbook.



**References**

Allen, J. (2007). *Inside words: Tools for teaching vocabulary, grades 4–12*. Stenhouse.

Vacca, R. T., & Vacca, J. A. L. (2002). *Content area reading: Literacy and learning across the curriculum* (7th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.