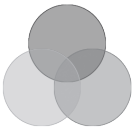
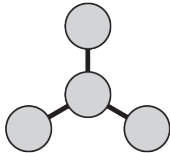
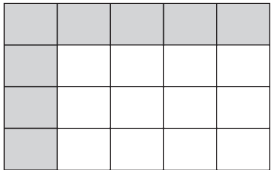


## Facilitating Communication with Graphic Organizers

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In many corners of the world, English language textbook tasks are dull, difficult, or demotivating. Even when books are appropriate and attractive, teachers must adjust them to address individual student needs, interests, and goals. Sooner or later, most language teachers begin to design their own instructional materials to supplement or replace their course textbooks. I have found that graphic organizers provide a quick and easy way to develop engaging, student-centered supplemental materials.

A graphic organizer is a visual display of information used to show the relationship between ideas. Three common graphic organizers that are available in word processing programs are shown here. Many more are freely available online.

Venn diagram	Bubble chart	Table, chart, or grid
		

Graphic organizers come in many forms and are referred to with many names including, but not limited to chains, charts, clouds, clusters, diagrams, graphs, grids, semantic maps, and tables. They are common in textbooks and other learning materials across the curriculum in math, science, and social studies, for example, but they are also authentic—used in “the real world,” in print, on television, and online to show chronology, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, stages in a process, classification, parts of a whole, and so forth. They communicate these relationships directly, with visual cues rather than with wordy text, and this is why they are such valuable tools for language classrooms.

Graphic organizers help language learners. When an English activity includes a graphic organizer, students can readily see the target concept, along with

key vocabulary and structures that they need to perform the task. The graphic information is an attention-getter which leads them to think, “I can do this,” and they can jump into the activity after a brief introduction and directions. The graphic organizer helps them sort information, connect ideas, and apply elements of critical thinking such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference but without needing to read or listen to difficult words of explanation from a textbook or teacher.

Graphic organizers also help teachers. Teachers cannot merely tell students to “talk about” the prompt in their textbooks if they lack the vocabulary or fluency to begin or sustain the conversation. Similarly, teachers may wish to introduce a new activity, procedure, or game to foster language practice, but detailed directions or procedures are unlikely to be understood well. Bilingual teachers often resort to repeating directions in the students’ first language. Unfortunately, this does not ensure that students will understand the concept or how to do the task. To make matters worse, they lose credibility if they ask or expect students to speak English when they themselves have found it too difficult to give effective instructions using English. Finally in programs with high expectations and little time for communicative practice, using and reusing familiar graphic organizers can save valuable instructional time.

Once teachers begin to make use of graphic organizers, they will be surprised by how easy it is to engage students in the oral or written use of English. They will also begin to find more and more applications for each particular organizer that they try.

#### An Example—Using a Graphic Organizer to Talk About the Future

Years ago, I designed the simple grid that appears in the Appendix. Over the years, I have adapted it for use with many different student groups. Activities using this grid are always successful thanks to the simplicity and utility of the graphic organizer. It asks students to imagine what their lives might be like in the near and distant future as well as what they imagine life in their own country and in the world at large might be like in those same periods. The grid can be adapted or adjusted in many ways.

1. First and foremost, the language focus of the grid is flexible. The fortune teller example in the Appendix focuses on the future. I might begin with *will* and *be going to*, but depending on the group or the lesson, I can also use

- future continuous tense as in *In 20 years I'll be working in China.*
- future conditional: *If climate change continues, lifestyles will be greatly changed.*
- future perfect tense: *In 50 years, the population of Japan will have dropped to about 90 million.*

The grid works not only for verb forms but for nearly any other target expression or structure that students need to practice or review.

2. The grid can be adapted for different kinds of interaction. The example in the Appendix can be used to prepare students for face-to-face classroom interaction or for individual writing tasks. With guiding questions down the left and space for classmates' names across the top, it becomes a survey. With a target expression such as *Suppose you need...* as the title, needs down the left, and people (e.g. friend, parents, and loan officer) across the top, it becomes a discussion strategies activity in which students examine register and politeness.

3. The grid can be used for classes from junior high school to university and adults at almost any level of English language proficiency. Students at lower levels can begin with personal or concrete topics and write in words, phrases, and sentences at home to help them speak with their classmates the next day. For mature students or those at higher levels of proficiency, teachers can give prompts requiring higher order thinking skills on more controversial topics such as international relations, the environment, or science and technology. A few words in each box can function as brief notes for talking with classmates or extemporaneous speaking. Empty boxes help students listen carefully and take notes on what their classmates say.

4. The size and shape of the grid can be adjusted for different classroom settings, forms of technology, and degrees of complexity. Boxes can be enlarged to add more space for writing or reduced to make room for only a few words. The grid can be copied for individual use, drawn on the board for students to copy, or projected onto a screen. The number of columns and rows can be increased or reduced as desired.

5. Finally, by giving a point or two for each completed box in the grid, teachers can use the graphic organizer as a form of informal assessment.

### **Conclusion**

No one knew design better than Steve Jobs did. His genius was integrating simplicity, utility, and elegance in wondrous devices designed to delight and benefit users. He can inspire teachers, too, in our development and production of instructional materials for our students to use. The simple and effective use of tools like graphic organizers can delight our students and help them engage in using English for communicative purposes. Now, if you look closely into the crystal ball in the Appendix, I am sure you too will see clearly what I can see: “For you, in a future lesson, if you try this device, you will have great success with your class!”


### **About the Author**

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## Appendix

### Example of a Graphic Organizer

Directions: Look into your crystal ball. What do you see in the future? Write a few words to use when you talk to your classmates.

	Life in 5 years [2017]	Life in 20 years [2032]	Life in 50 years [2062]
For me			
In Japan			
In the world			