

Using "KWL" in the Classroom

What Is It?

KWL charts assist teachers in activating students' prior knowledge of a subject or topic and encourage inquisition, active reading, and research. KWL charts are especially helpful as a prereading strategy when reading expository text and may also serve as an assessment of what students have learned during a unit of study. The K stands for what students know, the W stands for what students want to learn, and the L stands for what the students learn as they read or research.

Topic: Cheetahs

K	animal	Where do they live?	They live in Africa in grasslands/plains areas.
W	fast	How and what do they eat?	They hunt mammals using a "chase - trip - bite" method.
L	hunter	Are they more like dogs or lions?	Cheetahs evolved from cat-like mammals that lived more than four million years ago.

Why Is It Important?

Donna Ogle asserts that KWL helps students become better readers of expository text and helps teachers to be more interactive in their teaching (Ogle, 1987).

KWL charts help students to be active thinkers while they read (Carr & Ogle, 1987), giving them specific things to look for and having them reflect on what they learned when they are finished reading.

In learning, metacognition involves the active monitoring and conscious control and regulation of cognitive processes. It involves thinking about thinking, self-awareness, and self-regulation (Flavell, 1979).

The metacognitive strategy of self-questioning is used to ensure that students comprehend the text. When students set their own purposes for reading, they are more motivated and active as readers. Each student has a schema, or a framework for how they view the world. Accessing a student's prior knowledge is the first step in integrating new concepts into their existing schema. KWL charts help activate background knowledge and provide an opportunity for students to set their own learning objectives.

How Can You Make It Happen?

An ideal time to use KWL charts is before the class starts working with expository text. Begin by modeling the use of a KWL chart. Place a transparency of a blank KWL chart on an overhead projector, and write the topic of the expository text at the top of the chart (Cheetahs). Fill in the chart as you think out loud, describing your thought process. After completing the "Know" and "Want to Know" sections, read aloud a brief expository paragraph. Complete the "Learned" section of the KWL chart after reading the text, once again thinking out aloud and describing your thought process.

To guide students in completing a KWL chart, choose another topic, place a blank KWL transparency on the overhead, and distribute a copy to each student. Allow the students to independently complete

the "Know" section of the chart. As a class, share individual answers, brainstorm other ideas, and discuss responses. This allows students to benefit from their collective experiences, jog some prior knowledge, and reveal any misconceptions students may have. Students often believe they have factual information about a subject that is proven incorrect through reading, researching, and exploration. Be cautious about correcting students in the initial completion of the "Know" section of the chart as discovery of information often leads to long-term retention. Encourage students to correct their "misinformation" as they complete the "Learned" section of the chart, and model this strategy for them. Next, collect all information that is known, and fill in the "Know" section on the transparency based on student responses.

Allow the students to independently complete the "Want to Know" section. Then share and discuss responses as a class. This is an excellent opportunity to model and to show students the value of inquiry. Having students form their own questions often results in longer answers, and provides an opportunity for you to help students ask good questions. Fill in the "Want to Know" section on the transparency based on student responses.

Have students read the text independently, aloud, or in pairs, as appropriate. Then have students complete the "Learned" section independently. Ask students to share their findings, and have a discussion about the responses, encouraging students to elaborate on their answers. Be prepared to correct misinformation by referring to the text or by having students make a plan to find out if an idea is accurate. Discuss how their knowledge has changed as a result of reading or research, and encourage students to reflect on their learning. Fill in the "Learned" section on the transparency based on student responses.

Model the use of KWL charts and complete several as a class. Once you have provided guided practice opportunities for students, you may begin to encourage independence using shorter pieces of text. Save challenging, lengthy text for when students are quite comfortable with the use of the KWL strategy and can use it independently.

A KWL chart may be used as a short introduction to a lesson, to stimulate prior knowledge, or at the start of a research paper or project. This can help students push beyond their existing comfort zone to learn new and different material.

Another use for the KWL chart is to assess your instruction informally. Have students complete the "Know" and "Want to Know" sections of the chart prior to the lesson and the "Learned" section after the lesson is finished. Did the students successfully master the goals of the lesson?

How Can You Stretch Students' Thinking?

Consider adding an "H" column for "*How* to Find Out" the information in the "Want to Know" column. Discuss with the students appropriate resources for acquiring information in various subject areas, which may lead to a discussion of bias in text. Discuss matching needs with resources, keeping in mind that sometimes a face-to-face interview may glean more information on a particular issue than reading a text.

Another variation is to organize the information in the "Learned" column. Students can categorize the information, create names for their categories, and use the categories when writing about the topic and what they learned.

When Can You Use It?

Reading/English

KWL can be used before reading a novel or section of text. Select an author and have students complete the "Know" and "Want to Know" sections of the chart. Read a brief biography about the author and see if the students have all attained the information they wanted to learn. If not, make a plan for further investigation to answer their questions.

Writing

Students can use KWL charts to reflect on their learning after completing a written piece. After completing their writing, students can write an explanation of what they learned and examine whether they were incorrect about any information. This can be an opportunity for students to reflect on their learning and to articulate their thought processes.

Math

When beginning a new unit of study (e.g., fractions) complete a KWL chart as a class or individually. Encourage students to use mathematical terms and concepts. Throughout the unit, check the KWL chart and consider having students complete brief journal entries explaining what they have learned and what their reasoning was as they completed problems.

Social Studies

Use a KWL chart to begin a new chapter or unit or as a framework for a short project. Have students explore various cultures or regions. Groups of students can research various aspects of a culture and use KWL charts to organize their information. As a class, groups can share their learning and engage in a discussion about cultures.

Science

KWL charts can be useful when students are using the scientific process. Pose the experiment question (e.g., "Which brand of paper towel is stronger?") and ask students to complete the KWL chart as a starting point. Consider adding an "H" column for "*How to Find Out*" as students design an experiment.

Lesson Plans

What Do You Know About Bugs?

This is a primary lesson plan using a KWL chart to activate prior knowledge about bugs.