“Owls have feathers and fly.” “They live in trees.” “Do owls have families?” “What do owls eat?” “Oh, I see the babies and the mommy.” “They do have a family!” “That owl lives in a hole in the dirt and that owl lives in the tree.” “Can I have that book at center time?”

These are just a few quotes from a discussion I had with a group of preschoolers when I introduced a KWL chart before reading a nonfiction book about owls. KWL charts have three columns for recording What I Know, What I Wonder, and What I Learned. To get the discussion started, I told the children something I knew about owls and asked them, “What do you already know about owls?” As the children responded, I wrote their statements on the chart under the K.

I then asked, “What do you wonder about owls?” I modeled this process by thinking aloud: “I wonder how many eggs a mother owl lays.” After I wrote their responses in the W column, we explored the book to find the answers to our questions. When I introduced the table of contents, we quickly found the sections of the book we needed. Through reading and discussion, we were able to answer the questions listed under W. When we got to the L column, the children were eager to tell what they learned. I recorded the answers to their specific questions under the L.

Graphic organizers such as a KWL chart are tools commonly used with older children. However, when used for intentional and explicit instruction, graphic organizers can be an effective teaching strategy for preschoolers as well. Since preschoolers are not familiar with these tools, teacher modeling is crucial. When introducing graphic organizers, the teacher demonstrates her own thought process by thinking aloud as she walks the children through using the chart. To make a chart child-friendly, teachers can draw or tape pictures next to written responses so children can make sense of the print when revisiting the chart on their own. Adding pictures will also support dual language learners.
Types of graphic organizers

Graphic organizers are charts, diagrams, webs, or other visual representations of information. Teachers can use them to support and extend preschoolers' learning and understanding. All types of graphic organizers can help children learn

• that their words and ideas are important,
• that print has meaning,
• letter recognition and letter/sound association, and
• to organize information graphically and become visual learners.

While planning an activity, teachers can consider which type of graphic organizer will be most effective. Ask yourself, What is the purpose for using this graphic organizer? How will it engage children and support learning?

Here are examples of ways to use each type of graphic organizer after introducing a topic of interest.

KWL chart

What is it? A large three-column chart; the first column is labeled K for What I Know, the second W for What I Wonder, and the third L for What I Learned.

Why use it? KWL charts are useful before beginning an activity to activate children’s background knowledge and to learn their questions and interests. Use this feedback to adjust plans and tailor activities and projects around children’s interests. KWL charts are also useful at the end of an activity to help children remember what they learned. A KWL chart is one way to informally assess what children learned.

How to use it. Write the letters K, W, and L at the top of a large piece of chart paper. Introduce a topic, such as owls, then ask the children, “What do you know about owls?” Write their responses under the letter K. Next, ask, “What do you wonder about owls?” This time, write the responses under the letter W. After an activity such as reading Owls: Hunters of the Night, by Elaine Landau, the teacher asks the children what they learned and writes their answers under the letter L.

What can children learn?
• To use nonfiction texts to find answers to their questions
• That nonfiction texts are read differently than works of fiction
• Text features (table of contents, captions, headings, and so on)

Web

What is it? A large circle drawn on chart paper, with a topic in the center and lines branching out from the circle.

Why use it? Before introducing a new book or topic, use a web to activate children’s background knowledge. The web will help children brainstorm everything they know about the topic. You can then adjust the activity to build on their knowledge.

Webs are also a useful tool for summarizing what children have learned. For instance, after discussing and doing activities about the concept clothing, use a web to assess children’s understanding. Ask them to name winter clothes, and record their responses on the web. Then ask them to name summer clothes, and record those responses on a different web.

What can children learn?
• To generate ideas
• Categorization
• To recall information

Venn diagram

What is it? Two or more circles that partially overlap.

Why use it? A Venn diagram is a simple way to compare and contrast two books, such as The Little Red Hen Makes a Pizza, by Philemon Sturges, and Mañana, Iguana, by Ann Whitford Paul, or two topics, such as oceans and ponds. This is one way to check children’s understanding of alike and different. In addition, it is a way to informally assess what details children recall from a story or about a topic.
**How to use it.** Draw two large circles that overlap. Read two stories that have similar characters, illustrations, or plots. Ask the children “How are the two books alike?” Record their answers in the overlapping portion of the circles. Ask what is unique about the first story. Write those responses in one circle, in a section that does not overlap. Ask what is unique about the second story. Record those responses in the remaining section of the other circle.

**What can children learn?**
- To make comparisons
- To recall details or facts
- Similarities and differences
- To use new vocabulary

**Sequencing chart**

**What is it?** A sheet of paper folded in thirds horizontally.

**Why use it?** A sequencing chart helps children recall the order of events or the steps in a process. It is also a tool for helping children organize their thoughts to tell a story.

Some preschoolers are new to storytelling. They may have difficulty telling a story with a beginning, middle, and end. The sequencing chart helps them complete this process and feel confident about their accomplishment.

Most preschoolers are not ready to write words, but they can tell a story through pictures. Writing topics can be connected to things children are interested in or recent events such as a field trip or birthday party.

This strategy can foster children’s interest in writing their own books. After children complete their sequencing charts, they might like to cut them into three pieces, put the pieces in sequential order, and staple them together at the corner to create a short book.

**How to use it.** Fold a piece of paper in thirds horizontally. Starting at the top, explain that the first section is where to write or draw the beginning of a story, the second section is for the middle of the story, and the last is for the end of the story. Tell a simple story to the children while writing or drawing in the appropriate section. Then give children their own papers and model how to fold them into thirds. Invite the children to retell the story through words and pictures or make up a new story to tell, putting the words or pictures in the appropriate section.

**What can children learn?**
- To recall events in order
- That stories have a beginning, middle, and end
- That a story is about one main topic or idea
- To use letter/sound association when writing
- To organize their thoughts