Graphic Organizers — An Overview

What are Graphic Organizers?	Graphic organizers are visual thinking tools that help learners organize information. Graphic organizers help learners make connection between concepts and information they are learning and can increase student comprehension and increasing student independence (Finnegan & Mazin, 2016). Graphic organizers can be useful tools to promote communication because they help students retain the most important ideas, plan what to write or say when asked to respond expressively, sequence critical points, practice using academic vocabulary, and can aid in retrieval when sharing thinking with a classmate, group, or teacher.
Evidence-Based Practice Link	Graphic organizers are a type of **visual support.** A visual support is an evidence-based practice for autistic students that is "a concrete cue that provides information about an activity, routine, or expectation and/or support skill demonstration." (Steinbrenner et al., 2020, p. 139). Visual supports are found to be effective in teaching school academic skills for autistic children ages 3 to young adult, and communication skills for autistic children ages 3 to 14.
When to Use Graphic Organizers?	Ideal activities with which to use graphic organizers with autistic students or other students with or without disabilities could include (but are not limited to): • reading comprehension activities, • writing activities, • organizing thinking to participate in class discussions, • activities around science and social studies concepts, • long-term project planning, and • note-taking.
Why Use Graphic Organizers?	• Promotes student communication with peers and adults about academic content • Increases student retention of critical concepts and connections between concepts and ideas • Aids written expression by helping students organize thoughts • Clarifies complex information in a visual format

Critical Components of Graphic Organizers	Graphic organizers for autistic students should: 1. be modeled by teachers to show appropriate completion, 2. be taught using a gradual release of responsibility model, where teachers provide prompts and fade them when students show success, 3. be referenced during partner or class discussions to enhance communicative outputs, 4. be adapted to meet students' output capabilities (e.g., using sentence frames, fill in the blank, highlighting, underlining, or other methods to ensure students can complete the graphic organizer), and 5. be used in conjunction with other evidence-based practices like modeling, prompting, peer mediated instruction and intervention, and task analyses.
Implementation Tips to Promote Communication	• Consider the lesson target when choosing a graphic organizer. Try to use the same graphic organizer for the same type of learning target. • Plan for graphic organizers to be used across subject areas. Seeing and using a graphic organizer in multiple classes (e.g., English language arts, science, and intervention) can promote student skill generalization. • Model using graphic organizers for a variety of purposes: reading comprehension, written expression, planning for and participating in class or partner discussions, and note-taking. Provide students with guided practice to use graphic organizers for the same types of activities. • Adapt graphic organizers to be appropriate for students' current needs. Graphic organizers can be provided blank, or teachers can add sentence stems, word banks, fill-in-the-blank, or premade answers that can be taped or glued to the graphic organizer. Fine motor challenges do not have to hinder students' ability to use these visual supports to organize their thinking.

Considerations for Students with Extensive Support Needs	Students with extensive support needs can benefit from using graphic organizers during instruction, even if they can't always complete the graphic organizer fully in the same manner as their peers. Providing students with extensive communication needs modeling, prompting, and visuals they can use to demonstrate their thinking, remember key points of a text or lesson, or take notes can increase the likelihood they will engage with and communicate about academic content meaningfully. Even providing students with a fully completed graphic organizer can increase student understanding, concept retention, and comprehension of what is happening in class. For more suggestions about how to appropriately adjust graphic organizers for students with extensive support needs, see the instruction series referenced below.
TRIAD Resources to Learn More	• Learn more about upcoming TRIAD training opportunities: https://vkc.vumc.org/vkc/triad/live-training/ • A series about making instructional adjustments is available here. *Must create a free account to access

Finnegan, & Mazin, A. L. (2016). Strategies for Increasing Reading Comprehension Skills in Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Review of the Literature. *Education & Treatment of Children*, *39*(2), 187–219.

Steinbrenner, J. R., Hume, K., Odom, S. L., Morin, K. L., Nowell, S. W., Tomaszewski, B., Szendrey, S., McIntyre, N. S., Yücesoy-Özkan, S., & Savage, M. N. (2020). Evidence-based practices for children, youth, and young adults with Autism. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice Review Team.

https://ncaep.fpg.unc.edu/sites/ncaep.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/documents/EBP%20Report%202020.pdf

Graphic Organizer Resources:

Title	Web Address
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	https://www.hmhco.com/blog/free-graphic-organizer-templates
Florida Center for Reading Research	https://fcrr.org/student-center-activities • Click grade level • Scroll to "Comprehension"
Iris Center	https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf_activities/independent/IA_Graphic_Organizers.pdf
Reading Rockets	https://www.readingrockets.org/article/graphic-organizers-help-kids-writing
Science Graphic Organizers	https://www.actedu.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Science-Graphic-Organizers.pdf