

Sirpa Grierson, Jacqueline S. Thursby, Deborah Dean, and Chris Crowe

Semantic Feature Analysis Activity to Use with Chris Crowe's *Mississippi Trial, 1955*

Editor's note: In the January 2007 issue of *English Journal*, Sirpa Grierson, Jacqueline S. Thursby, Deborah Dean, and Chris Crowe provided practical critical-reading strategies for teaching *Mississippi Trial, 1955* to increase students' background knowledge of historical eras, as well as vocabulary and comprehension. They used nonfiction, a PBS documentary, the Web, folklore, and picture books among their approaches for inciting thoughtful discussion and writing. In this extension, the authors describe a categorization strategy called Semantic Feature Analysis, which helps students see how words are related through comparison-and-contrast activities. The authors break the strategy down into steps that can be utilized for all grades. While this example accompanies a specific novel, the Semantic Feature Analysis strategy can be used any time teachers want to develop conceptual vocabulary knowledge.

Semantic Feature Analysis

Purpose of the Strategy

This strategy is a categorization strategy derived from the theoretical construct of cognitive structure described by Frank Smith (1975). It is based on the manner in which human beings organize knowledge. As new information is processed,

1. Mental categories are established for the information;
2. Rules are formulated to allocate objects into these categories; and
3. Interrelationships are established between the categories to show both the similarities and unique characteristics of the objects.

Semantic Feature Analysis is a systematic strategy for comparing and contrasting characteristics that enables students to see how words are related and that can be used in all grades. Begin with concrete categories within the experiential background of students before moving to categories of a more abstract nature. This is an easy strategy to use but the key is to move slowly.

Directions:

Step 1. Select: Select a category name to begin the lesson. The category should be something that is familiar to students, particularly when introducing this procedure.

Step 2. List Words: Once the category is selected, have the students suggest as many words as possible for the objects or concepts that belong to the category.

Step 3. List Features: Decide which features (such as size, shape, number) will be explored in this category. Start with a few features and gradually increase this number as the students become more familiar with the strategy.

Step 4. Indicate Feature Possession: Guide the students through the matrix (chart) to determine whether or not the categories share or have the features that have been listed. A simple =/– system can be used.

Step 5. Discuss and Add Words and Features: Conduct a class discussion about the concepts. At this point the students have indicated feature possession, and they should be asked to generate new words to be added to the matrix and then to suggest new features to be analyzed.

Step 6. Complete and Explore the Matrix: Students proceed now to complete the matrix by using the same feature-possession system as before, along with the new words and features.

Assessment

The exploration of the complete matrix allows students to see relationships among categories. The Semantic Feature Analysis actively involves students in categorization, conceptualization, and vocabulary expansion. Assessment occurs as teachers examine student understandings and responses.

