

Course Organizer Routine

A clear road map for the journey

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road map that
helps ensure that
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well as the
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together.

When you undertake a lengthy journey to an unfamiliar place, a good road map is essential to your success. In many respects, a course taught over a period of four to nine months can be likened to a journey.

During a road trip, you expect to see unfamiliar sites and may learn about the culture, food, and history of the places you visit. You may expect to drive hundreds of miles.

During a U.S. history course, in comparison, students expect to learn about the creation and growth of the United States. The course may cover a lot of ground, conceptually.

Travelers on a road trip and students in a history course both must beware of obstacles to reaching their goals. Too many detours on insignificant routes and byways can derail the whole trip, preventing you from reaching your ultimate destination. Likewise, during a course, too much emphasis on insignificant details or side trips through information unrelated to the main thrust of the course can prevent students from mastering the information that is most crucial.

In both cases, quality tools can help alleviate these problems. For travelers, that tool is a good road map and the forethought to plot the journey, including any side trips or stops along the way that will enhance the experience. For teachers and students, CRL has developed the Course Organizer to encourage collaboration and communication while maintaining a focus on the important goals of the course.

The Course Organizer is a visual device depicting a summary of the course;

the critical questions that will be answered during the course; the principles and learning rituals to which students and teachers will be expected to adhere throughout the journey; and other expectations and standards associated with the course. It also includes a map of the units that will be studied during the course.

Teachers use the *Course Organizer Routine* to prepare the Course Organizer device and present it to students. The routine helps teachers focus on how the course will be organized and how course ideas will be launched at the beginning of the year, maintained throughout the year, and pulled together at the end of the year.

At this level of planning, teachers work through issues related to professional and state standards, overall outcomes, the type of learning community they want to create, the type of systems and routines that will be implemented throughout the year, and the types of skills and strategies that will be emphasized as the vehicles to learning content.

Teachers' beliefs and mindset about diversity, individualization, and educational responsibilities related to shaping instruction in ways that meet student needs also influence course planning.

Course-level planning provides opportunities to address the overall purpose of the course, the scope and sequence of units and lessons, the amount of time to be devoted to each unit, ways to evaluate students' performance, what concepts will appear throughout the course, and the specific teaching techniques that will be used consistently to facilitate student

In Focus

mastery. The *Course Organizer Routine* helps teachers make the most of these opportunities.

Ultimately, the Course Organizer is a road map that helps ensure that all students—as well as the teacher—are on the journey together.

Sections of the Course Organizer

The Course Organizer is a two-page visual device used to share course plans with students and then revisit those plans throughout the course. (See Figure 1 below and Figure 2 on page 3.) The type of information contained in the Course Organizer and its purpose are listed below.

Section 1: This Course

Section 1 contains several types of information, including the title of the course. The

title is usually the same as that listed in the school curriculum, but it may be the name of the textbook on which the course is based or another name given to the course by the teacher. In Figure 1, the name of the course is “United States History to 1900.” The section also contains the time period in which the class meets, the name of the teacher, and the student’s name. The course title and student’s name also are listed on page 2 of the Course Organizer (Figure 2). In the oval below the name of the course on page 1, the teacher lists the Course Paraphrase, a summary of what the course is about using words that the students can easily understand or that reveal the central meaning of the course title. The Course Paraphrase usually focuses on how this course is different in

comparison to courses that students have taken, are taking, or will take.

Section 2: Course Questions

In Section 2, the teacher lists the Critical Course Questions that every student will be able to answer by the end of the year. The Critical Course Questions are the most important part of the Course Organizer. Here, the teacher’s goal is to translate state standards and benchmarks into a usable framework. The Critical Course Questions—usually a set of about 10—are broad in scope and stimulate classroom conversations throughout the course. In Figure 1, questions related to such overarching themes as geography, art and literature, and technology will guide discussions in the United States history course throughout

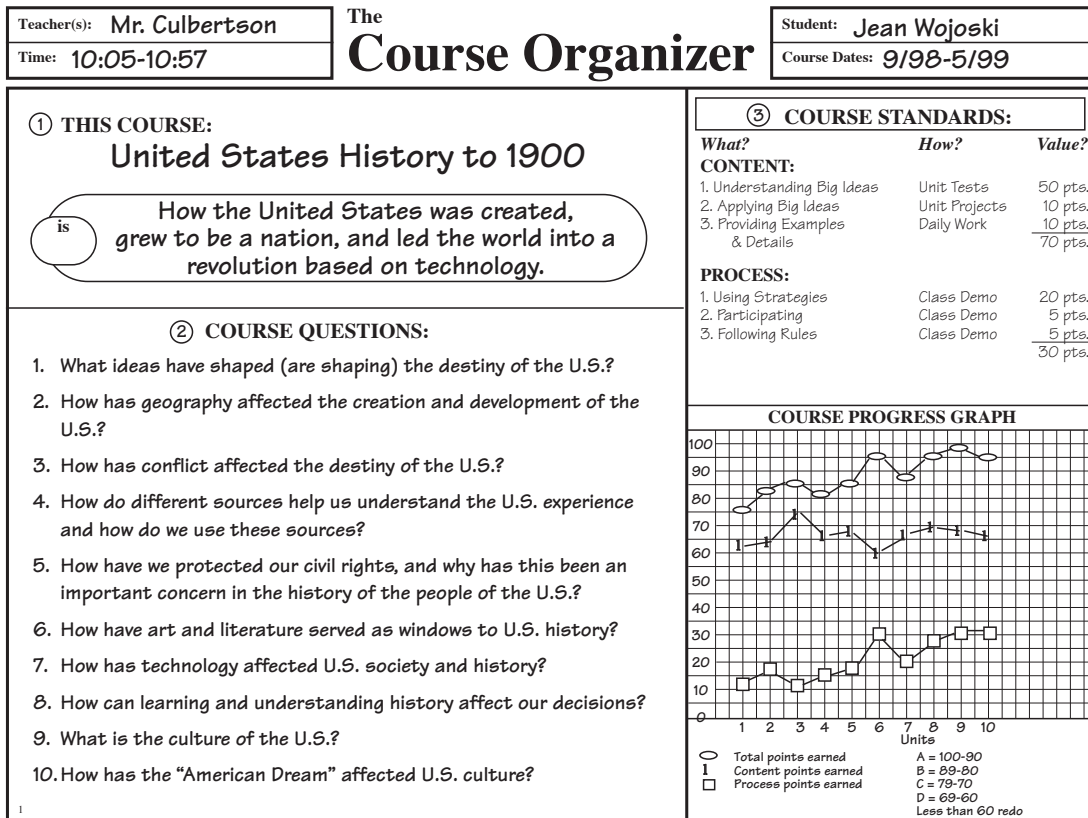


Figure 1

In Focus

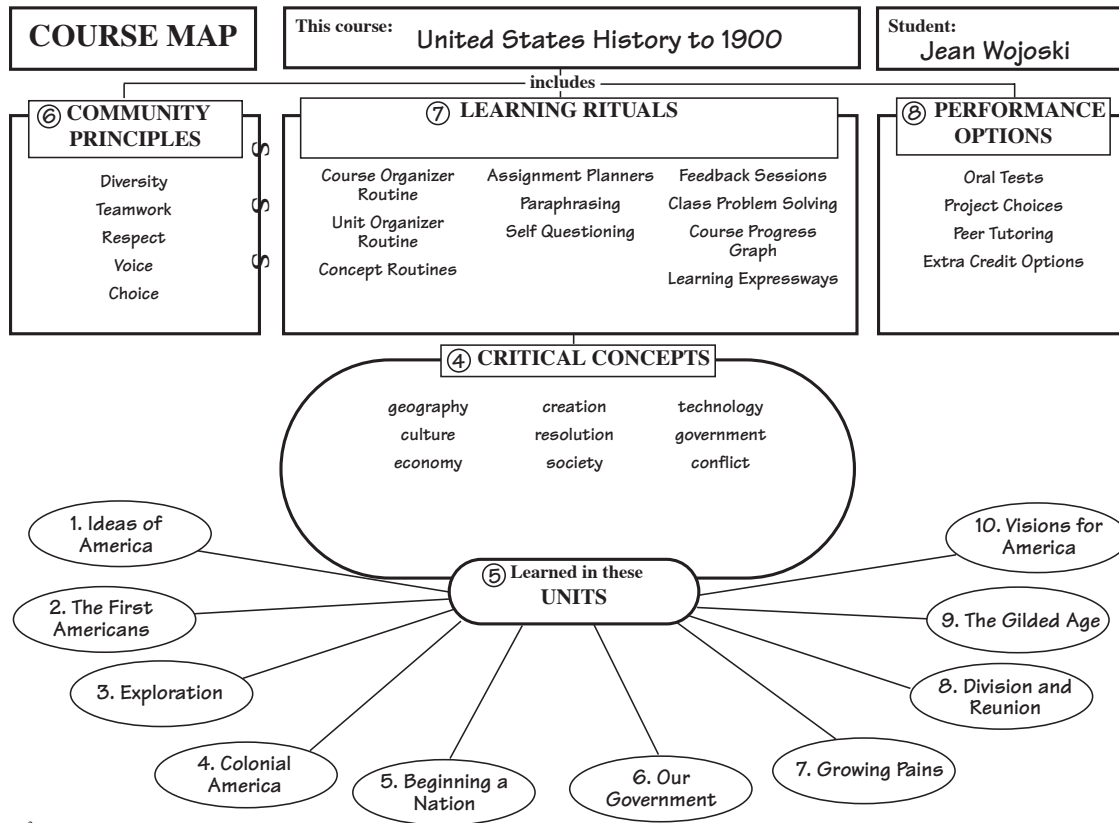


Figure 2

the year.

Teachers introduce the Critical Course Questions to students at the beginning of the year and elicit from students what they think they know about the questions and their answers. At the end of each unit, the teacher and class return to the questions and discuss which questions they have answered, which questions remain unanswered, and which questions now have better answers. As the year progresses, a written record of the answers to each question is maintained and used as the basis for discussion and keeping the critical ideas of the course alive.

Section 3: Course Standards

Section 3 defines the standards that will be used for judging course progress and how these standards will be

evaluated and weighted. Figure 1 shows one way to represent course standards for students. Three types of information are provided:

1. The types (standards) of performance the teacher values.
2. How each standard of performance will be evaluated.
3. The importance of each standard.

In Figure 1, for example, the teacher has indicated that she will base grades, in part, on whether students learn the “big ideas” (type of performance) through questions on tests (how it will be evaluated). The teacher assigns a point value of 50 to this standard (importance).

In all, the teacher lists six Course Standards, which then become the basis for developing grading criteria for the course and for recording course prog-

ress.

Course Standards communicate to students the factors that will be emphasized as the teacher evaluates whether they have learned the critical content of the course, learned the processes for learning the critical content (such as using appropriate strategies), followed the rules of behavior established for the classroom, and contributed to the development of a learning community.

Section 3 of the Course Organizer also provides a graph for students to monitor their individual progress based on the Course Standards. At the end of each unit, the teacher provides feedback that will allow each student to plot his or her scores on the graph. Based on these graphs, the teacher can launch discussions regarding the

quality of learning and how to improve learning with groups of students or with an individual student. Teachers can decide whether they will use graphs or other devices to help students see their progress.

Section 4: Critical Concepts

Section 4 lists the Critical Concepts that serve as a foundation for the course. The concepts will be emphasized either in individual units or throughout the course. Frequently, Critical Concepts relate to key words used to construct the Course Questions. In Figure 2, for example, the Critical Concept “geography” relates to Question 2 in the Course Questions section in Figure 1: “How has geography affected the creation and development of the U.S.?”

Section 4 cues students that the concepts in the list must be mastered and that a significant amount of instructional time will be devoted to exploring and understanding them.

Section 5: Content Map

In Section 5, the teacher constructs a visual map showing how the information in the course has been organized. The teacher places an oval on the far left listing the first unit he or she plans to introduce. The second unit is placed in an oval to the immediate right and so on, until the last unit to be learned in the course is placed in an oval on the far right of the graphic.

The linear listing of units helps students keep track of course progress and organize information as course content is mastered. Figure 2 shows 10 units that will be included in the history course. Other courses may have fewer units or may group units by overarching themes.

Section 6: Community Principles

The words in this section represent the values, ideas, or tone to which students will be expected to adhere in the quest to create a “connected” learning community within the classroom. The words should create a picture or feeling within students that help them understand the classroom conditions that can lead to learning and respect for and among all students. Figure 2 shows that the history teacher wants to discuss diver-

sity, teamwork, respect, voice, and choice, principles she has chosen because she values the expression of learning through both individual and group projects. The discussion of Community Principles can serve as the rationale for discussing other course expectations included on the Course Organizer.

Section 7: Learning Rituals

Section 7 lists the rituals—teaching routines, learning and social skill strategies, or communication systems—that will

Course planning research

The *Course Organizer Routine* was developed in collaboration with secondary-level teachers. Teachers reported that before using the routine, they often lost sight of the “big ideas” and frequently became bogged down in trying to cover masses of information. As a result, their students had difficulty understanding the relationships among clusters of information being presented. Using the routine, however, helped teachers focus their instruction and assessment activities and helped students understand important relationships. They also noted that having the freedom to modify the routine to suit their own needs helped them use the routine successfully. Research indicates the following:

- Teacher “mindset” regarding course outcomes and how a teacher approaches a course significantly influences the range and longevity of methods selected to deliver course content.
- Course planning promotes the development of broad and inclusive teaching routines that are more likely to respond to academic diversity in a classroom.
- Veteran teachers report that how the first few weeks of a course are organized is critical in creating a learning community in terms of establishing tone and course expectations. However, few school staff development programs help teachers learn about course planning and launching, and few beginning teachers discuss course planning in teacher education programs and rarely have an opportunity to work with veteran teachers in planning or launching a course during preservice teaching experiences.
- Course planning activities that focus on implementing coursewide routines and learning strategies significantly affect how prepared teachers are in their ability to respond to the academic diversity in their classes and create “learning communities.”

be important to enhance learning throughout the course. The teacher usually introduces these rituals at the beginning of the course and then reinforces their regular use as students learn the course content.

In Figure 2, the Course Organizer is listed as a ritual because the teacher will introduce it at the beginning of the year and will use it to keep the course together throughout the year. The instructor will teach students each of the other rituals listed in Figure 2 and then use these rituals throughout the course.

Section 8: Performance Options

Section 8 lists the options for learning and remembering course content and for demonstrating mastery of the material the teacher will make available to accommodate the diversity of learners in a classroom. For example, in Figure 2, the history teacher has listed oral tests and peer tutoring among the options available to all students in the class.

Implementing the Course Organizer Routine

Preparing to introduce the Course Organizer

Before the course begins, the teacher prepares a draft of the Course Organizer device, which serves as a planning tool for the teacher. The teacher then prepares a version of the Course Organizer—completed, partially completed, or blank—to distribute to students. This serves as the basis for discussion and interaction for each of the following Linking Steps.

The Linking Steps

During the initial presentation of the Course Organizer, the teacher follows a set of proce-

The Cue-Do-Review Sequence

Teachers use the Cue-Do-Review Sequence to introduce the *Course Organizer Routine*, implement the Linking Steps, and check students' understanding of the information presented. The Cue-Do-Review Sequence provides a framework for turning the elements of the Course Organizer into a powerful teaching routine. The following are the teaching methods involved in each phase of the sequence:

Cue

The teacher draws students' attention to the use of the *Course Organizer Routine* and what they need to do by:

- Naming the *Course Organizer Routine* or the Course Organizer
- Explaining how it will help them learn
- Specifying what they need to do to participate in the routine

Do

Teachers implement the Linking Steps in an interactive way with the students. The teacher and students construct the Course Organizer or parts of it as they proceed through the Linking Steps.

Review

The teacher checks students' understanding of the information represented in the Course Organizer by

- Asking questions related to the organization of the course, the course's relationship to specific units, and concepts
- Clarifying any misunderstandings about the critical ideas embedded in the course
- Describing how students are to use the Course Organizer to promote their learning and how unit information can be used to understand the Course Questions
- Discussing why the Course Organizer is an important course ritual and how it helps promote learning.

dures called Linking Steps that helps the teacher guide students to understand what the course is about.

Step 1: Cue Course Questions. In introducing the course, the teacher announces the course title, introduces the course paragraph, and presents the course questions. The class discusses this information as students take notes in Sections 1 and 2 of their Course Organizers.

Step 2: Outline Critical Concepts and Units. The teacher leads students in a brainstorming activity to generate a list of key words related to the Course Questions. The teacher and students transfer the list to the Critical Concepts section of the Course Organizer. After they have generated this list, the teacher presents a map of the units he or she has planned for the course.

Step 3: Uncover Community Principles. The teacher identifies and explores the types of values and ideas that will be important in the course, leading students in a discussion of the principles that should be in place to help foster the development of a learning community.

Step 4: Reveal Learning Rituals. The teacher identifies the rituals he or she thinks are important for learning and working together, briefly describing the ritual and providing rationales for its importance in the course.

Step 5: Share Performance Options. The teacher presents each performance option and explains how it will be incorporated into course activities. Students record the options in Section 8 of the Course Organizer.

Step 6: Explain Course Standards. In this step, the teacher helps students understand the standards they will need to meet in the course and introduces them to the course progress graph that will be used throughout the course.

To remember the Linking Steps, teachers can use the acronym created by the first letters of the steps, COURSE.

Throughout the course

Once the Course Organizer is presented and explained to students, students should be shown

(Continued on page 7)

Course Organizer Checklist

Course Title

- The Course Title captures the nature of the course.

Course Paraphrase

- The Course Paraphrase captures the main idea of the course.
- The Course Paraphrase distinguishes the course from other similar courses.
- The Course Paraphrase clearly and meaningfully communicates course content.
- The Course Paraphrase provides an umbrella for all learning.

Course Questions

- The Course Questions are broad enough to serve as the basis for many conversations with students.
- The Course Questions include expectations related to how to learn or demonstrate competence.
- The Course Questions identify ways in which students should think about the information to be learned.
- The Course Questions lead students to do well on outcome measures.
- The Course Questions enable students to monitor progress in learning.
- The Course Questions help students to identify the critical concepts or ideas to be learned.
- The Course Questions help students think about the content and how it fits into other contexts.
- The Course Questions help students organize information that supports the critical concepts or ideas to be learned.
- The Course Questions use words like “how” and “why” to form broad questions and are not objectives or commands.
- Approximately 10 Course Questions are formulated.

Course Standards

- Course Standards relate to the course questions, critical concepts, and course units.
- Course Standards relate to content and process standards.

Critical Concepts

- Critical Concepts that will be emphasized throughout the course are identified.
- Critical Concepts relate to the Course

Questions.

- Critical Concepts are foundational to the big ideas.
- Critical Concepts cut across more than one unit.
- Identified items are concepts and not examples of concepts.
- Approximately 10 Critical Concepts are identified.

Course Map

- The Course Map is simple enough for students to keep track of their learning.
- The Course Map shows how information is connected.
- The Course Map gives a linear, left-to-right representation of the order in which units will be presented.
- Unit names are simple words or phrases.
- Unit names can be expanded hierarchically.

Community Principles

- The Community Principles selected will promote a productive learning climate.
- Community Principles are worded in a way to help students get a clear picture of the learning conditions that will be developed.
- Community Principles include group principles, like teamwork, respect, etc.
- Community Principles include individual principles, like choice, accommodation, etc.

Learning Rituals

- Learning Rituals identify the important ways in which the business of the course will be conducted.
- The Learning Rituals stated are significant, routine procedures that need to be nurtured.

Performance Options

- Performance Options address different ways students can meet the academic demands of acquiring information, storing and retrieving information, and expressing and demonstrating competence.
- The needs of students with disabilities are addressed in the Performance Options.

how to keep it safe, such as by placing it in a course notebook.

The teacher and students return to the Course Organizer throughout the course and especially at the end of each unit. Each time they return to the Course Organizer, the teacher provides *explicit* guidance in helping the students use the Course Organizer to think about the “big ideas” of the course and prompts students to use the Course Organizer to examine how information between units and the course are connected and how course plans and learning are progressing.

Successful implementation

Experience with the *Course Organizer Routine* has indicated that several factors are important for successfully implementing the routine and for improving the performance of students in academically diverse classes:

- The routine is explicitly introduced to the whole class, so students can understand

More curriculum planning information

CRL researchers conducted a series of studies on core curriculum planning sensitive to the needs of diverse groups of students, including students with disabilities. The results of these studies led to development of the *Lesson Organizer Routine*, the *Unit Organizer Routine*, and the *Course Organizer Routine*. Together, these three routines address the complex connections among these three levels of planning.

The effectiveness of the *Course Organizer Routine* is enhanced when used in conjunction with the *Unit Organizer Routine* (a routine for introducing and teaching units of information), the *Lesson Organizer Routine* (a routine for highlighting key information and relationships among information within lessons), and other teaching routines and learning strategies that have been found to promote learning.

For more information...

- *Strategram* Vol. 6, No. 3 (March 1994) profiled the *Lesson Organizer Routine*.
- *Strategram* Vol. 7, No. 5 (May 1995) profiled the *Unit Organizer Routine*.
- *Strategram* Vol. 9, No. 5 (August 1997) examined all of the *Content Enhancement Routines*.

how the teacher’s use of the routine and their own participation in the routine can markedly improve their academic performance.

- The routine is used *regularly*, so both teacher and students have ample opportunity to become comfortable with it as a learning tool.
- The routine is adapted to meet the unique needs of students, the personality and teaching style of the teacher, and the content of the course.
- Use of the routine is varied occasionally to enhance student motivation.
- The routine is used throughout the entire course to integrate other routines in the Content Enhancement Series to create a powerful synergy.
- Students become actively involved in the routine as partners with the teacher for the purpose of improving learning for *all* students in the class.

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