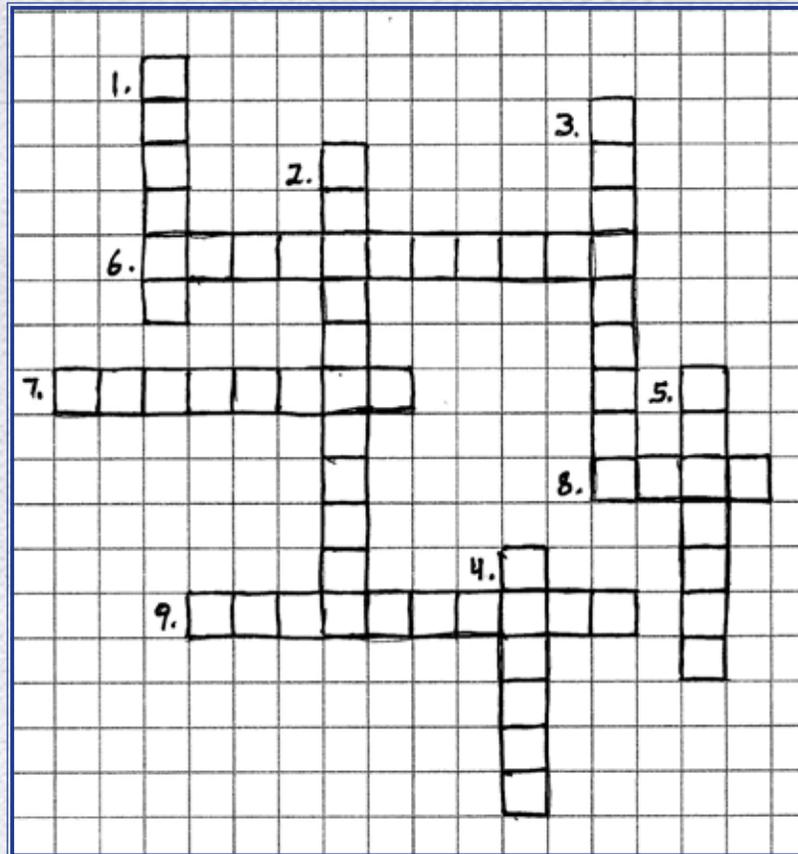


Thoughtful Puzzles: Creative Word Games



Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

Many people enjoy completing crossword puzzles or word searches in their spare time. These games have been shown to help support maintenance of brain health and improve our intellectual skills as we age. Individuals also can use these crosswords or word searches as ways to express their own ideas and thoughts. This activity will focus on spreading holiday cheer, important life memories, and/or individual beliefs through cognitive puzzles. It will consist of individuals creating their own word searches or crossword puzzles to share with friends, family, or new acquaintances. These efforts will help strengthen cognitive fluency and mental flexibility skills, create stronger friendships, improve families' understanding of and connection to loved ones, and help open new doors to conversation and commonalities with other people.

The word searches and crossword puzzles will be based on a variety of different topics. Such topics can include holidays, hunting, fishing, baking, traditional stories, folk art, memories, and many other themes. This activity has a creative planning component, as the participants must first choose their topics and then the words they would like to use. Planning is then needed to determine the layout.

The word search is slightly easier to create and less complex in comparison to the crossword puzzle. A word search can be produced to begin with, and then the same words can be used to create a crossword puzzle. The art of defining the words chosen will

rely on cognitive supports and complete thought processes, so that others can determine the desired word. The word search can be made slightly more complex by providing a definition bank instead of a word bank. The size of the puzzles also can be variable, based on the topic, the words chosen, and the time allotted to work on them. The puzzles created can be made on plain paper or made into cards for the holidays to give to friends and families. An artist, recreational therapist, activities coordinator, writer, teacher, or volunteer can direct this activity.

TIME:

One to two hours over one session. (The amount of time spent on this activity will vary based on the person, the amount of detail provided in the puzzle descriptions, and the size of the puzzle that is generated. The total amount of time used for each activity within this plan will vary based on the individual participants' abilities, effort, recollections, and efficiency. The decoration of the puzzle could be held as a second session, if so desired.)

MATERIALS:

- Pencils, pens, colored pencils, crayons, markers, stickers, paints
- Paper, construction paper, card stock
- Ruler, grid paper
- Computer, printer, photocopier, scanner
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

This activity can be done independently or in groups. A group setting is beneficial in helping to ease the sense of loneliness. Even if individuals are working independently, being with others can help to increase one’s sense of morale and companionship. Working in a group will also help facilitate resourcefulness and teamwork, thus decreasing the feeling of helplessness. Individuals will be able to help think of items to add or ways to critique generated information for clarity and ease of completion. This will help facilitate more interactions and connections with the participants’ peers. The cognitive activity and thought processes required to generate these puzzles will help address and decrease an individual’s sense of boredom. If individuals send out the puzzles as cards or inserts in cards and request answers back, feelings of loneliness could also be alleviated.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

The cognitive load of this activity will address the participants’ executive function skills and help encourage further expansion of cognitive-linguistic skills. Research has proven that taking steps to maintain cognitive skills will help increase cognitive reserve and prevent loss when traumatic events may occur. Some steps that individuals can take to support cognitive reserve include engaging in cognitively stimulating activities and using cognitive training tasks to support new learning and the expansion of skills.

--Vance, D.E., and M.C. Crowe. “A Proposed Model of Neuroplasticity and Cognitive Reserve in Older Adults.” Activities, Adaptations, and Aging 30 (September 2008): 61-79.

Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (1 TO 2 HOURS OVER 1 SESSION):

1. The person directing the activity should lead the participants in brainstorming and discussing potential topics based on subjects and readings presented in the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. During Halloween, for example, one could reference folk item “51. The Boy Who Fell into a Grave” (page 21, Chapter 1). For the holiday season, specific recipes and traditions can be used as topics for the puzzles with excerpts presented from Chapter 8, Hot Dogs and *Lutefisk* on Christmas Eve. This book should be readily available for individuals to peruse throughout the puzzle-creation process.

If the puzzles are going to be sent to family members, the participants could and should be encouraged to make their puzzles personal and reflective of the traditions and experiences within their own families. Family-specific cues could be used, such as, “Grandpa Joe’s favorite Christmas drink” (answer: “Tom and Jerry’s”), or “Who dropped the deviled eggs on Christmas?” (answer: “Aunt Judy”). Such crossword puzzles could be used to generate family reminiscences and help preserve family traditions. In this instance, folklore from *Sundogs and Sunflowers* still can be used to help foster ideas.

2. Specific words associated with the chosen topic should be generated. Individuals can create a list of “must have” words and a list of “possible” words with which to work into the puzzle. Participants also can determine a title for the puzzle based on their

choice of words or the topic.

3. The person directing the activity should distribute grid paper with large squares. The participants can then choose if they would like to create a crossword puzzle or a word search. Once that decision has been made, the participants can design the layout of their puzzles by determining where each word would fit in relation to every word that is added. If grid paper is unavailable, use a ruler to draw a grid on a blank sheet of paper. Using grid paper is strongly recommended, however, as some participants will have difficulty drawing a grid.

It is recommended that the participant begin with the longest word in his or her list and build the puzzle from there, adding and intersecting words as appropriate. It is also recommended that the puzzles created use a fairly short list of words and remain fairly simple. After the puzzle is drawn, list the words for an answer key (if creating a word search) or list the definitions or descriptions (if creating a crossword). When creating a crossword puzzle, write definitions or descriptions that will make the person completing the puzzle think of the desired word. When creating a word search, simply fill all the empty squares with random letters to obscure the chosen words in the search list.

The participants should then draw a blank puzzle, so that it can be completed or “worked” by other people.

4. Individuals may now decorate their puzzle or add a creative edge to it. Additional markers, stickers, and paper should be provided.

5. Individuals may also put their puzzles on card stock to be mailed as cards. Another option is to use them as card inserts, give them to friends and family members when they come to visit, or have the peers they worked with try to complete their puzzles. (Volunteers, staff, or activities coordinators could print multiple photocopies or scans of each participant's puzzle for wider distribution and sharing.)

For Example: The following scenario illustrates a puzzle that is inspired by the topic of Christmas.

- Selections from pages 211-219 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers* (Christmas traditions) are read aloud to the participants.
- After these selections are read, individuals are asked to recall their past holiday celebrations and think of words that remind them of those times. These words are then written down on a sheet of paper.
- Individuals then use grid paper to plan out or organize how their words will fit in relation to one another.
- Participants can make either a word search or crossword puzzle using the grid paper.
- After the puzzle's framework is created, the individual should generate clues that loved ones can use to find or fill in the designated words.
- Each participant should then title his or her puzzle with a creative name.

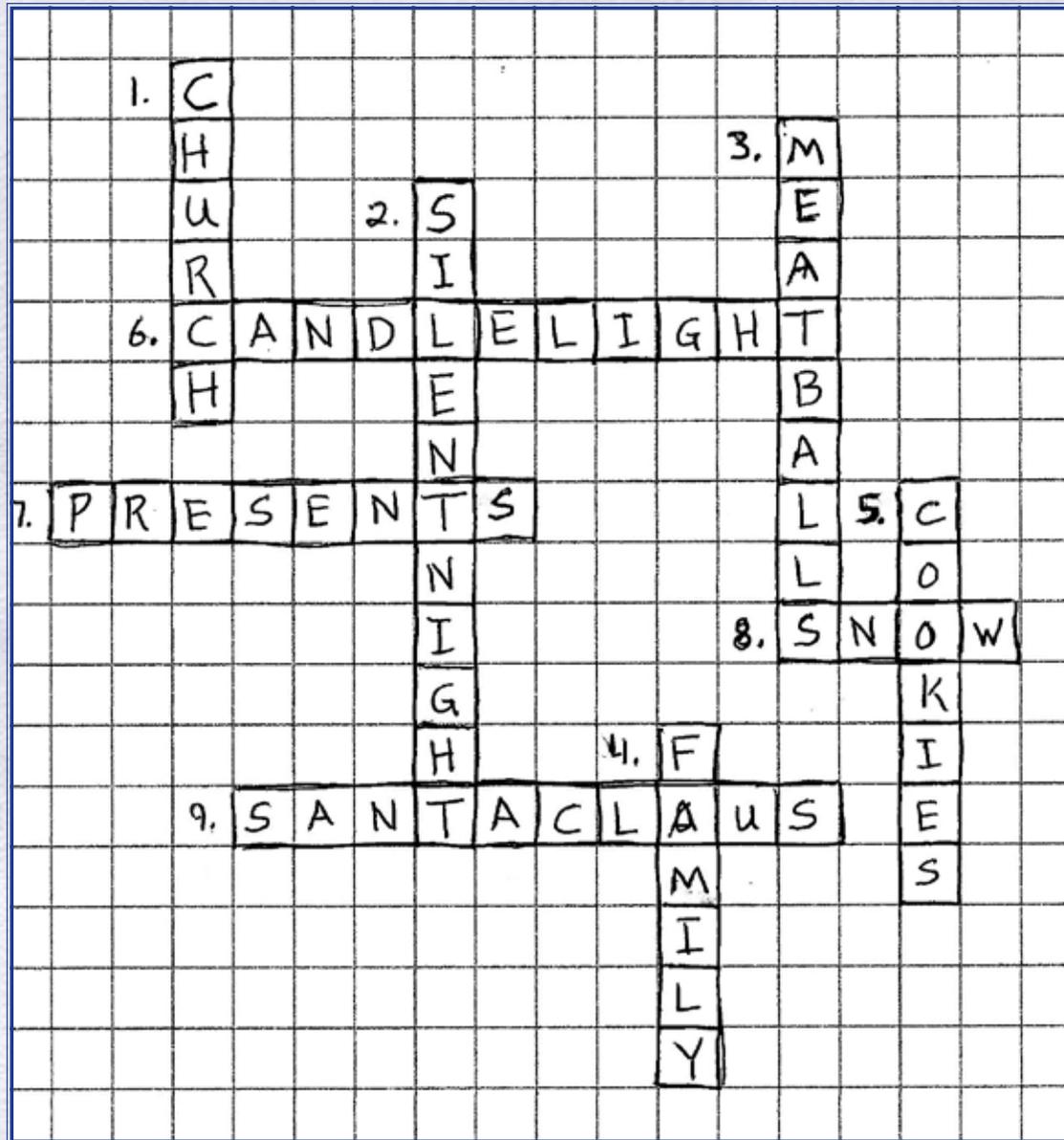
- For further illustration, refer to the following steps:

Word generation:

Church
Silent Night
Meatballs
Cookies
Santa Claus
Presents
Candlelight
Snow
Family

Puzzle Formation:

For this example, the framework of a crossword puzzle was created with the words included and numbered.



Definitions or clues should then be generated for each word as follows:

Down:

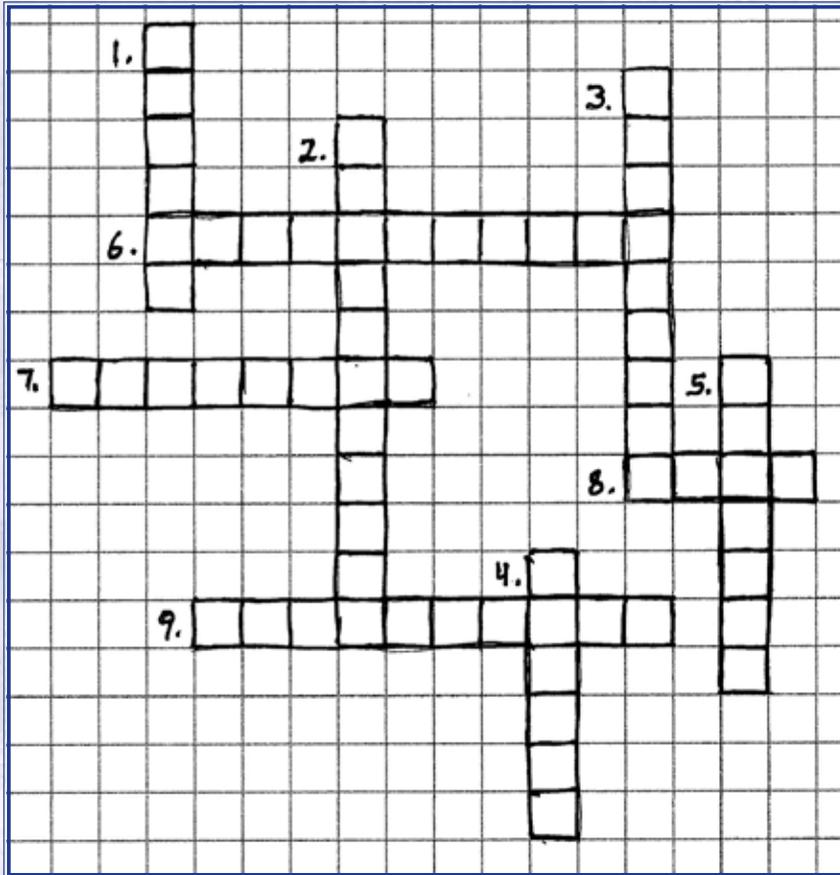
1. The place where the entire family gathers to celebrate the birth of baby Jesus
2. A favorite song the family sings
3. The traditional Swedish family meal
4. These people all gather from far and near to celebrate together
5. What is prepared weeks in advance to have out for snacks and the big man in the red suit to enjoy during his late-night ride

Across:

6. This is the lighting chosen for the Christmas Eve meal
7. What awaits us all under the tree
8. What all the little kids hope for, so they can build a snowman or snow fort
9. The jolly man who comes at night for all those who believe

The framework for a new puzzle should now be generated by leaving all the spaces blank. The easiest way to do this is to trace the previously generated puzzle. The definitions or clues should be added below the framework. A title should then be chosen and all the components compiled for the finished puzzle.

Christmas Memories



Down:

1. The place where the entire family gathers to celebrate the birth of baby Jesus
2. A favorite song the family sings
3. The traditional Swedish family meal
4. These people all gather from far and near to celebrate together
5. What is prepared weeks in advance to have out for snacks and the big man in the red suit to enjoy during his late-night ride

Across:

6. This is the lighting chosen for the Christmas Eve meal
7. What awaits us all under the tree
8. What all the little kids hope for, so they can build a snowman or snow fort
9. The jolly man who comes at night for all those who believe

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Heidi received her Master of Science degree in Speech-Language Pathology from Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM), as well as a Bachelor's degree in Spanish. Heidi has experience working in public schools, the private practice setting, and the hospital. She is employed full-time at Sanford Health in Fargo, North Dakota, as an adult in-patient therapist for the rehabilitation unit and works part-time with children for the private practice Beyond Boundaries. She is experienced in facilitating therapy programs that address speech and language deficits, cognitive-linguistic difficulties, memory problems, and communication difficulties that result from strokes, brain injuries, and other medical problems. Heidi spends her spare time with her husband, family, and friends, as well as traveling, scrapbooking, quilting, and doing numerous outdoor activities.

(Puzzle created and provided by Heidi Fiskness.)

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