

# **Creating Engaging Thematic Units for Summer Programs**

**Wake County Agriculture Building  
Raleigh, NC**

**March 27, 2007**



**CENTER FOR SUMMER LEARNING**

**JOHNS HOPKINS  
UNIVERSITY**

**School of Education**

# **The mission of the Center for Summer Learning is to create opportunities for high-quality summer learning for all young people.**

The Center works to:

- **Improve program quality and availability** through training and management assistance
- **Build public support** through outreach and communication
- **Influence public policy and funding** through informing policymakers and engaging stakeholders



CENTER FOR SUMMER LEARNING

JOHNS HOPKINS  
UNIVERSITY

School of Education



# What did your summers look like as a kid?

- **What is your best summer memory?**
- **What should kids experience in the summer?**
- **What does your program do well in the summer?**

# Understandings to gain today

- There is a need for high-quality summer programs.
- High-quality summer programs demonstrate a particular set of characteristics.
- Themes provide a framework to offer engaging, effective summer learning experiences.

## Skills to gain today

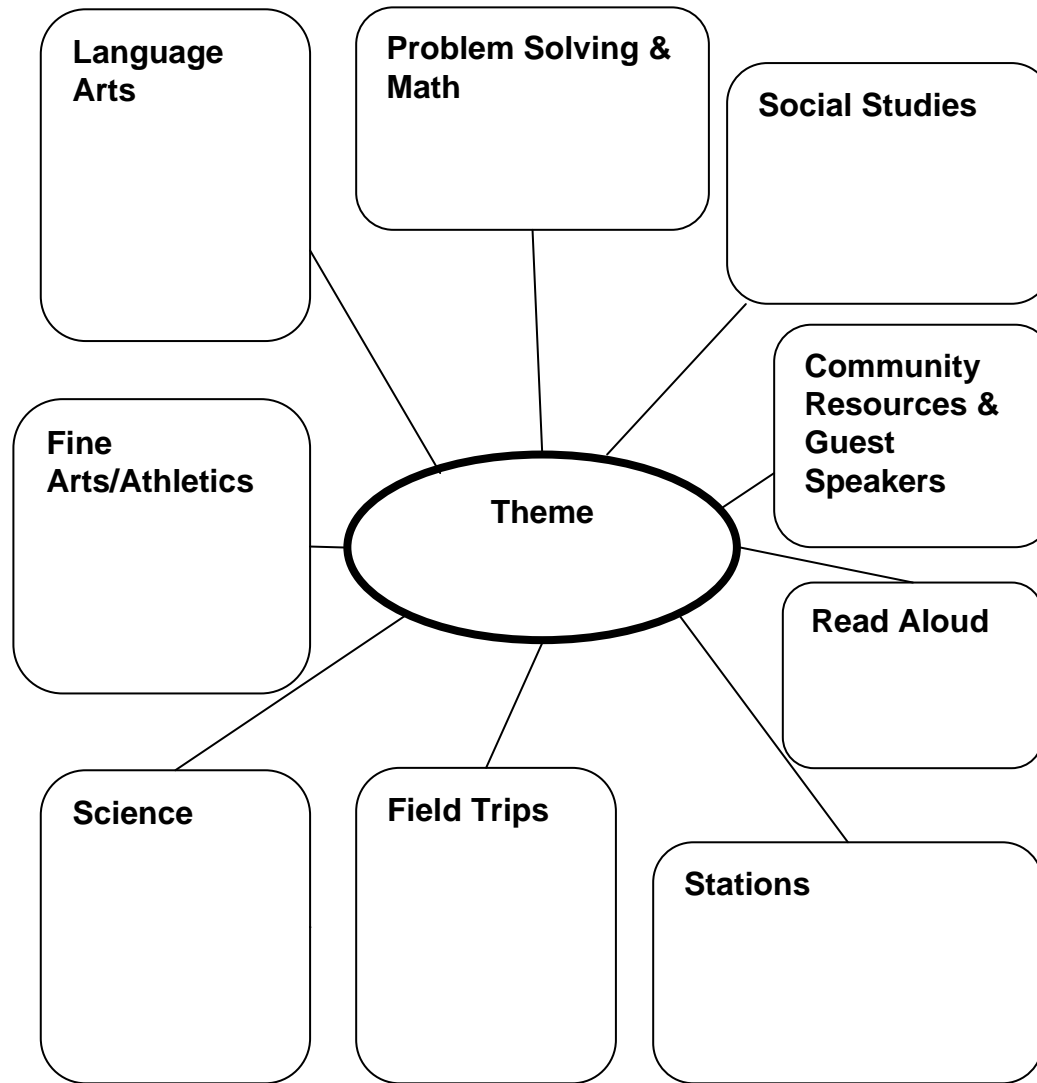
- How to plan an engaging thematic unit for your summer program.

# Brainstorm Meaningful Activities

- Choose a theme.
- Brainstorm meaningful activities that correspond to your theme and lead kids to understand your selected learning goals.
- Write the activities in the appropriate spot on your Planning Web.



# Develop Meaningful Activities



# Reflect

- What was easy or difficult about this process?
- What did you consider when completing this exercise?

**Meaningful activities make the difference**

# What makes an activity meaningful?



# What makes an activity meaningful?

## *Activity Set A*

- Read the textbook chapter about exciting careers in science.
- Complete the quiz at the end of the chapter.

## *Activity Set B*

- Skim the chapter about science careers.
- Choose 2 careers that look interesting to you.
- Develop 3 interview questions you want to ask someone who has that job.
- Interview a real scientist at the career fair.



# Meaningful activities make the difference

- Connect to multiple disciplines
- Build skills (academic and youth development)
- Clarify learning goals for young people
- Connect to community resources
- Include opportunities for assessment



# Meaningful activities make the difference

Activities must:

- 1) Lead kids to understand the selected learning goals.
- 2) Balance academic and youth development learning standards.



Scenario:

**“Why do kids  
need  
meaningful  
learning  
experiences in  
the summer?”**



# What makes summer learning unique?

*Goals*

*Structure*

*Time*

*Data*

*Expertise*

*Funding*

*Accountability*

Summer learning

# What makes summer learning unique?

- What resources do your young people access during the school year?
- What resources do your young people access during the summer?

# Summer Needs Public Investment

## School year resources

- Academic classes
- Teachers / Caring adults
- Free & reduced lunch
- Health services
- Tutoring
- Physical education
- Arts
- Afterschool activities / clubs
- Safe place to be

## Summer resources

- Summer school?
- Camp?
- Summer meals?
- Caring adults?
- Safe places?

*Not a guarantee...*



# The Need for High-Quality Summer Learning Programs

**All young people** experience learning losses when they do not engage in educational activities during the summer.



# The Need for High-Quality Summer Learning Programs

Elementary students lose most in **spelling** and **math** skills.

Average **loss in math** over the summer is about **2.6 months** of grade level equivalency.

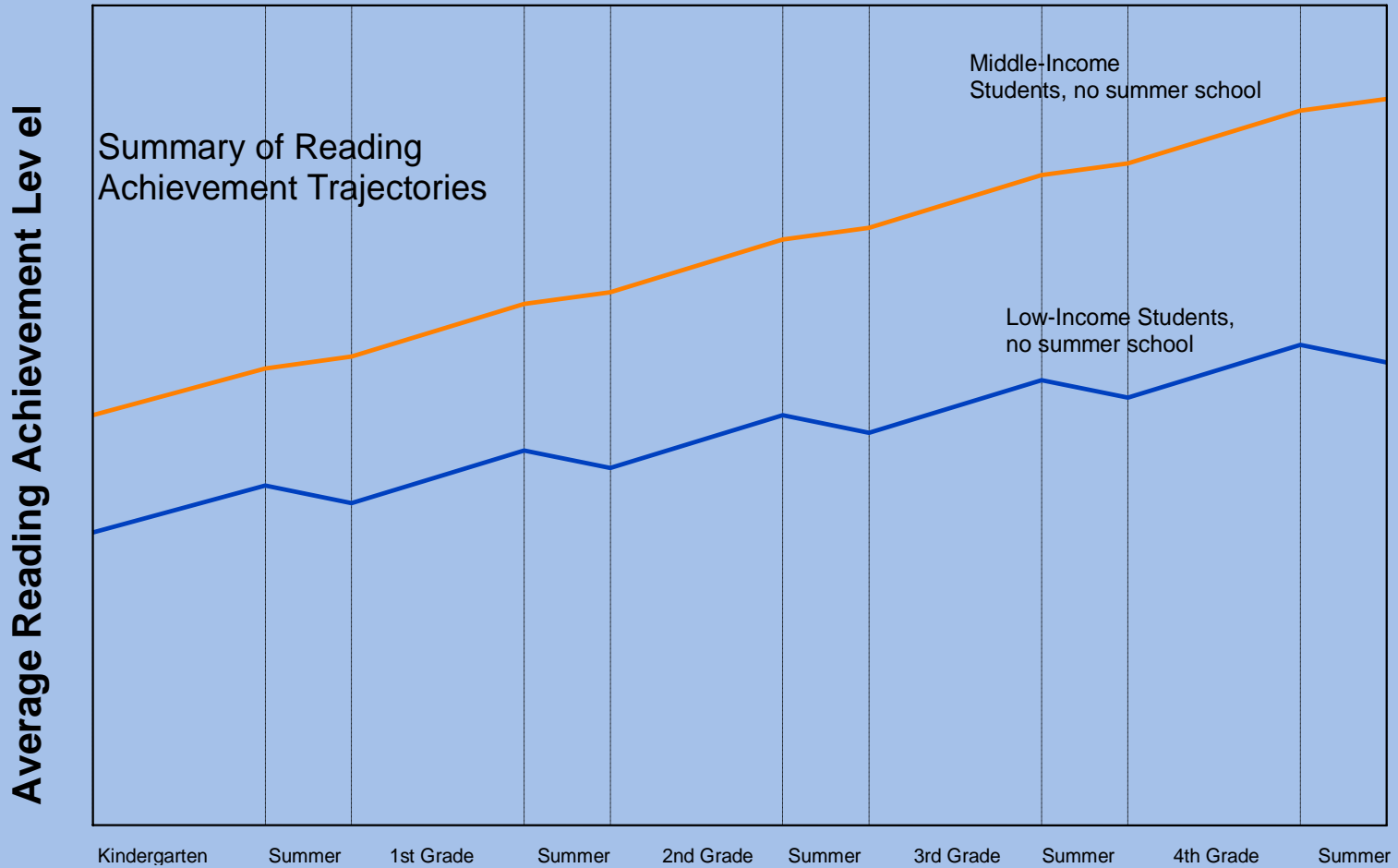


# The Need for High-Quality Summer Learning Programs

- **Low-income youth** are **disproportionately impacted** by losses in **reading** (2-3 months loss).
- Cumulative summer learning losses may explain as much as **50%-67%** of the widening of the **achievement gap**.



# Summer Learning & the Achievement Gap



# The Need for High-Quality Summer Learning Programs

- **1 in 5** children who qualify for federally subsidized meals receive them during the summer.
- About **10%** of U.S. children attend public schools in summer.
- Summer-related expenditures total **less than 2%** of total school costs.
- **Over 60% of parents** say that summers are the most difficult time for them to find constructive things for their children to do.



# **The Need for High-Quality Summer Learning Programs**

## **Access to summer jobs for teens has steadily declined since 2000**

- In 2006, only 37% of 16-19 year olds were employed over the summer, compared to 45% in 2000
- Higher income and white teens had the highest summer employment rates (56%)



# High-Quality Summer Programs Make a Difference

- Participating in a summer learning program can help close the achievement gap.



# What Do Effective, High-Quality Summer Experiences Look Like?

## Resource Gap:

- Academic classes
- Teachers / Caring adults
- Free & reduced lunch
- Health services
- Tutoring
- Physical education
- Arts
- Afterschool activities / clubs
- Safe place to be

## Program Solution:



**What qualities must  
summer programs  
possess in order to stem  
summer learning loss and  
bridge the resource gap?**



# Small Group Activity

---

In your small group of 3 or 4, brainstorm 5 characteristics that effective or high-quality summer programs demonstrate.

# Characteristics of Effective Programs

## Approach to Learning

1. Intentional focus on accelerating learning
2. Firm commitment to youth development
3. Proactive approach to summer learning

## Program Infrastructure

4. Strong, empowering leadership
5. Advanced, collaborative planning
6. Extensive opportunities for staff development
7. Strategic partnerships
8. Rigorous approach to evaluation and commitment to program improvement
9. Clear focus on sustainability and cost effectiveness



# Effective Programs: Case Studies

## How do programs effectively advance learning over the summer months?

- Video from Partnership for After School Education (PASE)



# Effective Programs: Case Studies

- What characteristics of effective programs did you see?
- What connections to your program did you see?



# What does your program do well? A Self-Assessment

## Approach to Learning

1. Intentional focus on accelerating learning
2. Firm commitment to youth development
3. Proactive approach to summer learning

## Program Infrastructure

4. Strong, empowering leadership
5. Advanced, collaborative planning
6. Extensive opportunities for staff development
7. Strategic partnerships
8. Rigorous approach to evaluation and commitment to program improvement
9. Clear focus on sustainability and cost effectiveness

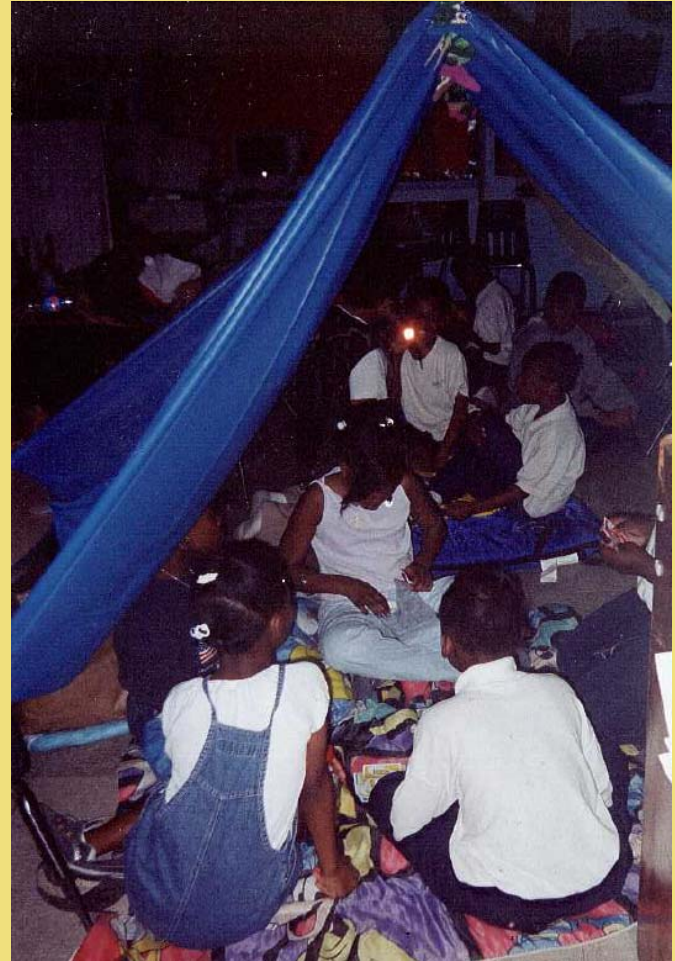


**Effective summer programs  
blend academic learning and  
youth development to  
complement, not repeat,  
school-year learning.**



# What is Thematic Learning?

A thematic approach uses one idea to frame and connect activities from multiple subject areas or disciplines.



# Why Use Thematic Learning in Summer Programs?

- Keep young people interested
- Encourage deeper learning
- Collaboration between schools and youth development organizations
- Parent and family involvement



# **What is the Process for Designing an Engaging Thematic Unit?**

***1. Select Meaningful Themes and Learning Goals***

***2. Plan and Develop High-Quality Activities***

***3. Create an Efficient and Engaging Schedule***

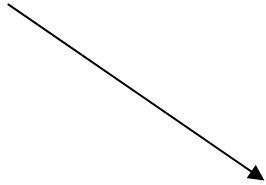
# Consider what you need to design & deliver an engaging thematic unit

- Needs of your young people
- Program structure
- Program staff
- Community partners and resources

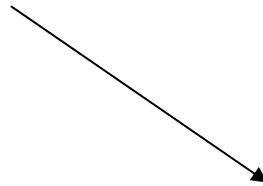


# Backward Design

1. Identify desired results



2. Determine acceptable evidence for success



3. Plan learning activities to successfully achieve results

# Focus on outcomes

- What outcomes are appropriate?
- Should we consider other outcomes?
  - Educational Achievement & Cognitive Attainment
  - Health & Safety
  - Social & Emotional Development
  - Self-Sufficiency (older youth)

# Select outcomes

- Increased writing skills
- Increased regard for the environment
- Increased ability for appropriate self-expression through writing and the arts

**What type of theme will help us focus on these outcomes?**

- **Topics**
- **Events**
- **Abstract Concepts**
- **Problems**

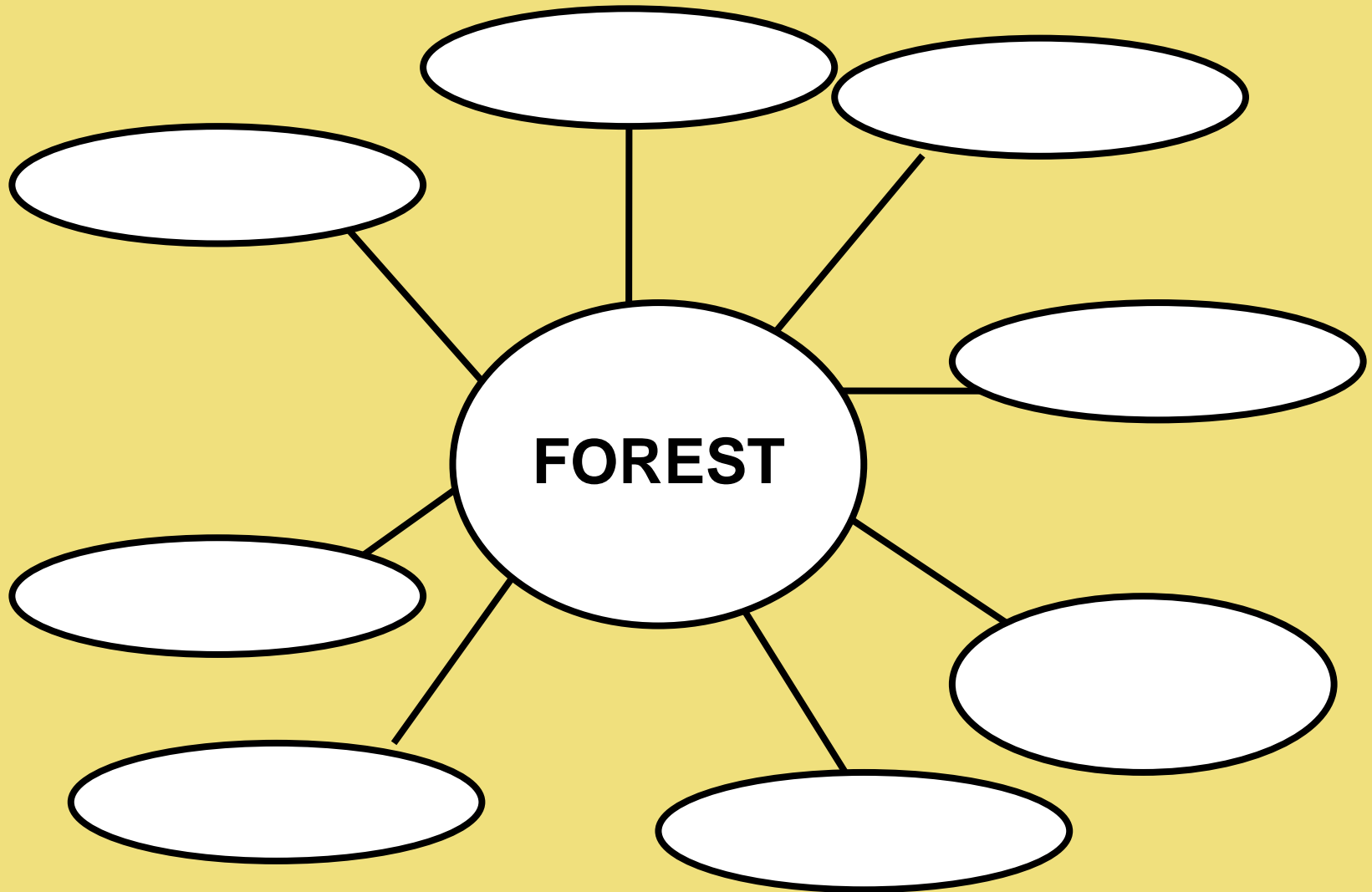


# Key Sources for Meaningful Themes

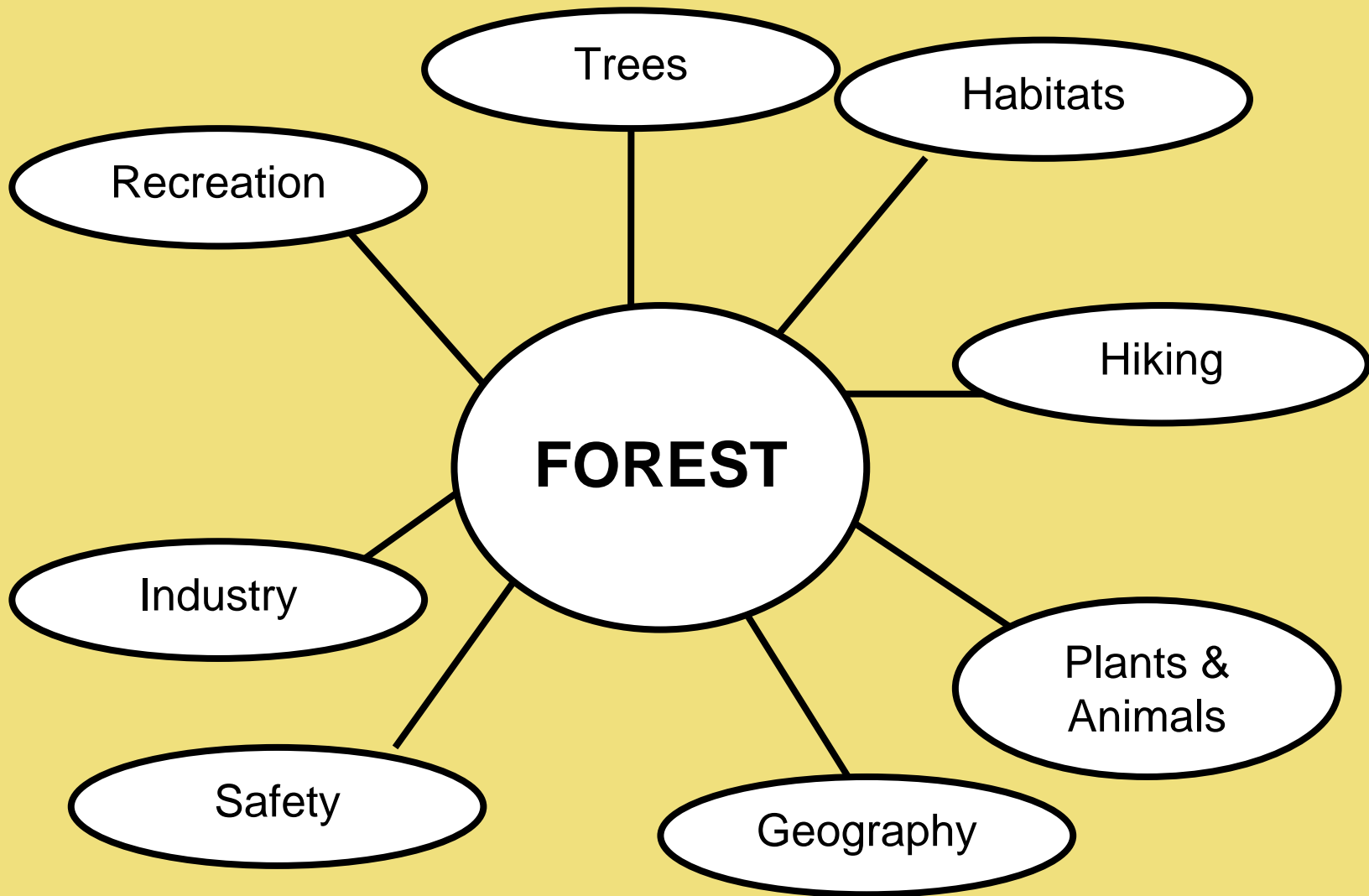
- **Age-Appropriate Skills & Topics**
- **Community Resources**
- **Current Events**
- **Young People**
- **Parents**
- **Staff**



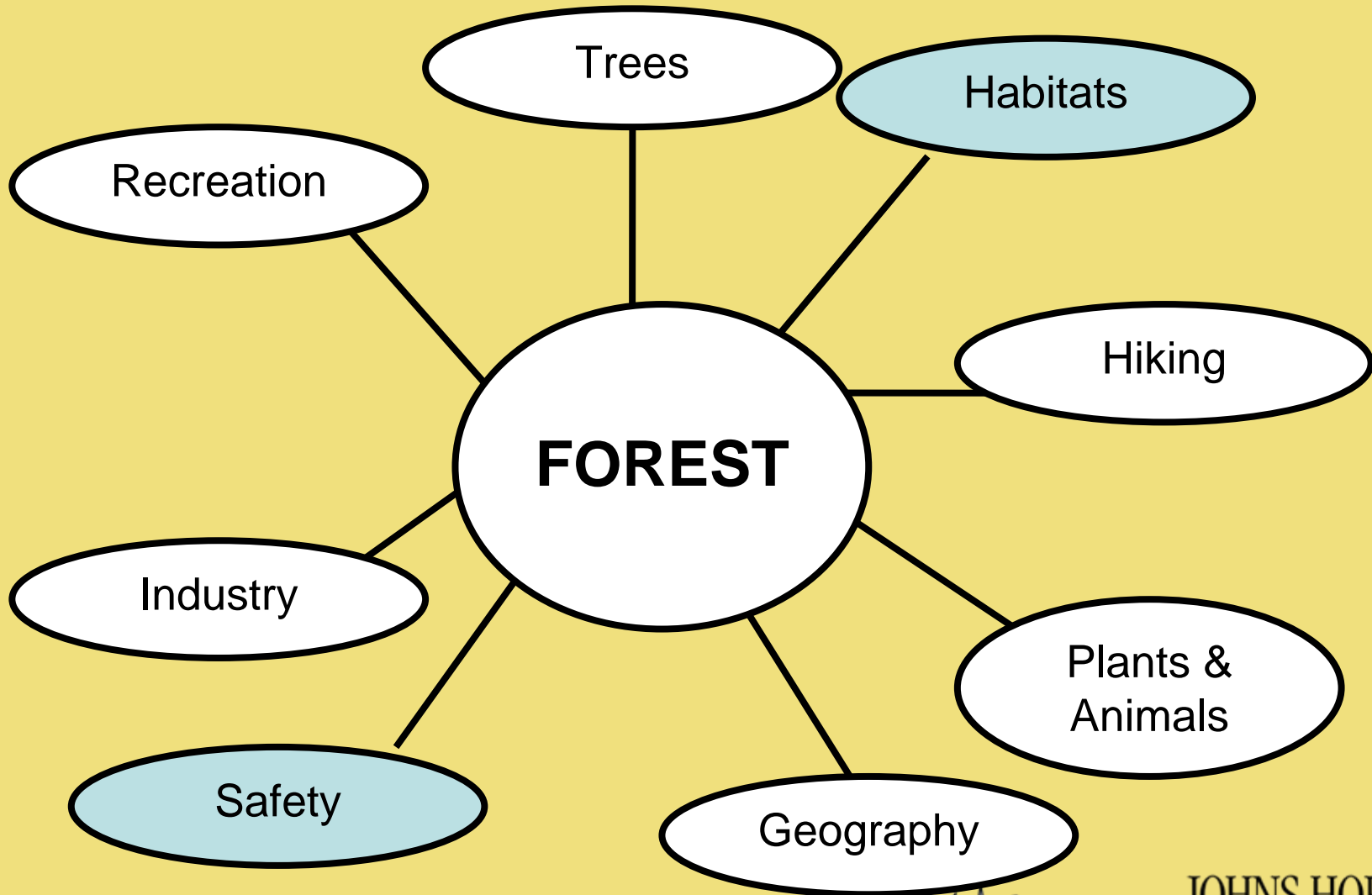
# Choose a Theme



# Brainstorm Big Ideas



# Brainstorm Big Ideas



# At the end of the program, what will young people understand about these topics?

Habitats

1. Forests provide an interdependent habitat for a variety of animals.

Safety

2. Proper safety is necessary in the forest.

# How will you know they know?

- Projects
- Presentations
- Observation
- Quizzes
- Tests



# How will you know they know?

**Big Idea Statement:** Forests provide an interdependent habitat for a variety of animals.

**Evidence they know:** Mural showing 3 different animals in their appropriate forest habitat.



# How will you know they know?

*Theme:* Tensions

*Assessment:* Write a song about tension



“Tension means lots of things like stretch...frustration...anger”

“I feel tension in my mind when I do homework...”



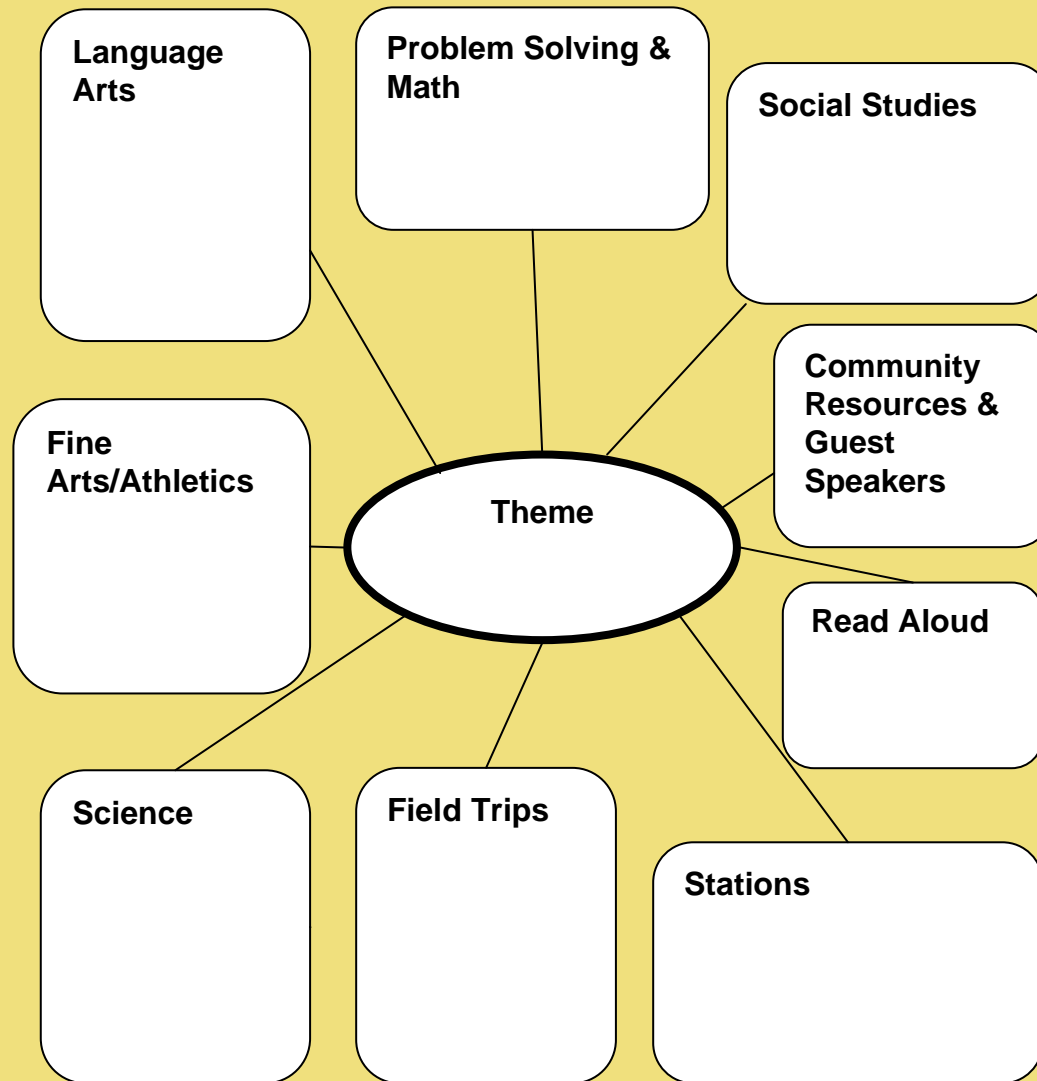
# How will you know they know?

*Theme: Forest*

*Assessment: Create a postcard*



# Develop Meaningful Activities



# Develop meaningful activities

- Write a postcard about what you saw when you visited the forest
- Research on the internet the kinds of trees you could find in our forest
- Work with a local artist to design a mural
- Choose 3 forest animals and find out what habitat they live in



# Small Group Activity

- Select 2 or 3 outcomes for the summer.
- Choose a theme. Write it in the center bubble on **Tool 4.5**.
- Brainstorm the topics you associate with that theme. Write them in the surrounding bubbles.

# Small Group Activity

---

- Choose 2 big ideas that work best for your program.
- Turn each big idea into a statement that shows what you want young people to know at the end of the summer program.

# Small Group Activity

- Determine how you will know that kids get it.
- Generate meaningful activities that:
  - Lead kids to understand the big ideas and demonstrate the outcomes.
  - Balance academic and youth development learning standards.

# Next Steps for Program Planning

- Connect with staff and community partners and share what you learned today.
- Use the web planning tools provided to plan how you'll engage young people this summer.



# Take Action

Join the national movement—host a  
**Summer Learning Day** event!

- Thursday, July 12, 2007
- Summer Learning Day tool kit online

[www.summerlearning.org](http://www.summerlearning.org)



JOHNS HOPKINS  
UNIVERSITY

School of Education

# Take Action : Join Us in Atlanta!



**April 19-20, 2007**

**Atlanta, Georgia**

**Pre-conference Institutes:  
April 18**

**[www.summerlearning.org](http://www.summerlearning.org)**

# Topics Covered in the Handbook



- **The Importance of Summer Learning**
- **Characteristics of Effective Summer Learning Programs**
- **Defining Thematic Learning**
- **Designing Thematic Units**
- **Planning Summer Staff Development**
- **Evaluating the Success of Your Program**
- **Planning for Sustainability**



# Key Points to Remember:

- **All children are at-risk of experiencing learning loss over the summer months.**
- **High-quality, effective summer programs can help stem summer learning loss and bridge the resource gap.**



## Key Points to Remember:

- **Effective summer programs blend academic learning and youth development learning to complement school year learning.**
- **Themes provide a framework to offer engaging, effective summer learning experiences.**



# Wrap-Up

- Please complete an evaluation of this session.
- Please make sure your name is on the sign-in sheet.



# Contact Information

Jennifer Eden Brady  
Center for Summer Learning  
Johns Hopkins University  
410.516.6228

[jbrady19@jhu.edu](mailto:jbrady19@jhu.edu)  
[www.summerlearning.org](http://www.summerlearning.org)



JOHNS HOPKINS  
UNIVERSITY

School of Education