

The Possible Lives exercise is a great way to help students identify possible careers they might pursue. Too often, students have vague ideas of the types of jobs they might like to have, but they are jumbled in their minds and seemingly unrelated and vague. Many job seekers don't have just one career goal in mind—they have several. They are open to various possibilities. While this is good, it can also make the job search harder, because they might have trouble settling on one option. The Possible Lives exercise helps them clarify their plans and move in a clear direction.

By completing a Possible Lives exercise, the students will have identified some key career fields or areas of interest, created a diagram that illustrates their career ideas, analyzed the diagram for commonalities and threads, and determined which paths they are going to pursue—at least for the moment.

Approximate time to complete: 20-30 minutes.

To do the Possible Lives Exercise:

1. You can give the students a blank piece of paper or you can create a cluster diagram for them ahead of time using Microsoft Word's Smart Art feature and the diagram they call: "Cycle- Basic Radial." I recommend you create 10 possible lives (10 circles) around the central circle if you use this feature.
2. Otherwise, just give the students a blank piece of paper and let them draw the center circle and start placing their "possible lives" around the main circle. It doesn't have to be neat or symmetrical. They can be as creative as they want in their placement.
3. Tell them to start by drawing a circle in the center and place your current situation in it. For instance, they might want to write "Mary Smith. English Major" or something else that identifies them.
4. Ask them to write down the careers they've considered over the years including those "fantasy" careers they would like to have. Tell them not to worry about how much money they would earn or whether they have the education. Focus on careers that sound appealing - either now or at one time.
5. Once they've written down their "possible lives," have them draw lines connecting themselves (the center circle) to each of the careers.
6. Take a look at the careers they've selected. Help them find the commonalities.
 - Ask them to analyze them for commonalities, themes, etc.
 - Note if in the careers they've selected they are working independently, for example - or are they part of a team?
 - Do their chosen careers tend to require special training or certifications, or a bachelor's or graduate degree?
 - Are they creative in nature?
 - Are they more tech oriented?
 - If some careers don't "fit," note what the differences are—do they reflect a hidden wish? For example, someone might have a lot of tech careers, but then have "Rock Star" as a career. Find out if this is purely fantasy or whether they actually have musical talent. Maybe this is a real dream that has been pushed aside by more "practical" plans (or parents...).

7. Encourage the students to write down a step or two they could do to move forward on each of these careers using the line they drew connecting the career to the center circle. As they do this, they will discover which careers remain interesting and which ones don't. They will also learn which careers they need to learn more about before they can move forward.

8. Encourage them to continue developing the steps towards the one(s) that are most interesting to them. Try not to censor them with what is practical or not. Often those "impractical" careers can be pursued in the evenings or weekends as a hobby. Also look for careers that can be combined—teaching for nine months and then doing something else over the summer, for example.

9. Finally, have them identify the careers they are most interested in continuing to pursue. For some people it will be just one—but it's not unusual at all for students to select 2-3-or even 4. Encourage them to find ways to pursue each one through research, internships, etc., until they start to narrow their preferences.

Brooks, K. S. (2010-2011). Connecting Students to Careers: Training and Instruction Guide. Sacramento, CA: California Community College Chancellor's Office.