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## Spotlight On....Organizing Writing: Using Text Structures

One of the most essential abilities to teach students is how to organize their writing in ways that allow readers to make sense of their messages. Well-organized writing makes it easy for readers to identify the focus of the piece and to follow the line of reasoning, while poorly organized writing can lead to confusion and frustration. Well-organized writing includes both a logical progression as well as completeness of ideas (Cali, 2003). Instruction in the organization of writing focuses on two areas—text structures and use of cohesive elements that tie ideas together. This edition of *Literacy Links* examines text structures. In the next edition, cohesive elements will be the focus.

The Vermont Writing Collaborative states, “Ideas cannot exist without shared language. By the same token, connected ideas cannot exist without shared structures and patterns” (2008, p. 94). Brain research conducted over the past 20 years has revealed a great deal about how the human brain organizes information by using schemata (mental structures) to construct meaning (National Research Council, 2000). By teaching students typically occurring text structures that are encountered as they read, they can learn how to apply these same structures as they write, enabling them to convey clear messages.

Text structures are frameworks that organize ideas. Different structures exist to support narrative and expository genres, but all text structures include a beginning, middle and end. Beginnings, often referred to as leads, help to orient the reader to the purpose, topic, thesis or argument of the writing. Strong beginnings hook readers and set up expectations for the piece. Organization in the middle of a text hinges on the genre, but six basic organizational structures have been consistently identified: sequence, description, cause and effect, compare and contrast, question and answer, and problem and solution. Endings enable writers to wrap up their messages and are highly connected to the purpose of the writing, such as to entertain, to inform or to persuade. To learn more about text structure, check out Kathleen Cali’s article, [The Five Features of Effective Writing \(2003\)](#).

I love writing. I love the swirl and swing of words as they tangle with human emotions.

~James Michener



Be obscure clearly.

~E.B. White

The teaching of text structures as part of writing instruction has not been without opposition. Concerns center on two issues. First, some believe text structures may restrict student writing. Second, some believe that teaching text structures may result in formulaic writing. The Vermont Writing Collaborative (2008) points out that while these concerns may be valid as students advance in their later development, instruction should rest on a foundation in which students are able to internalize text structures so that they can later adapt them in new and varied ways. The Collaborative likens the learning of text structures to support writing development to jazz musicians. Jazz musicians embellish existing forms of music and create forms from foundations of recognizable forms, forms they have internalized over years of music study. If students are able to internalize text structures for writing, they can progress to adapting them as they become more proficient. The Collaborative also notes that concerns about students writing rote pieces is more closely related to not having a deep enough understanding of the content than to following a structure. Writing rests on thinking...if thinking is shallow; the structure may appear to be restrictive. If thinking is deep and critical, the structure of the text will provide a vehicle for conveying that thinking in creative ways.

Teaching text structures to students insures that they have a foundation from which to grow as writers. Use of models (such as mentor texts) and graphic organizers (for organizing thinking and making it visible) are a couple of instructional strategies that can bolster student writing when used judiciously. Additional resources to support educators with teaching text structure for writing can be found in the Online Resources and Professional Text sections below.

## **Online Resources**

The following online resources provide tools for helping students use writing as a tool for building understanding.

### **All About Adolescent Literacy**

All About Adolescent Literacy, often referred to as AdLit.org, is a national multimedia project offering information and resources to the parents and educators of struggling adolescent readers and writers. The link included this month connects to an AdLit.org resource that details text structures commonly used for writing.

### **Nonfiction Text Structures**

In this video by Jen Johnson, students can learn about how authors use text structures to organize nonfiction writing. The video explicitly describes six key structures and shows how graphic organizers can be used to capture the information communicated through the structures. It is appropriate for upper elementary



## **Upcoming Professional Development from the Maine DOE**

To explore potential training sessions that may be of interest, be sure to check our extensive list of professional development offerings at

[www.maine.gov/doe/calendar/](http://www.maine.gov/doe/calendar/)



through secondary level students. The video is lengthy (23 minutes) but could be shared in parts.

## Professional Texts

Here are two professional texts that provide ideas for teaching text structures to organize writing.

### **Finding the Heart of Nonfiction: Teaching 7 Essential Craft Tools with Mentor Texts** **Georgia Heard, 2013**

In *Finding the Heart of Nonfiction*, Georgia Heard shows how mentor texts can help students read for seven essential craft tools and then use them to create inviting nonfiction that keeps readers' interest. Lyrical and practical, *Finding the Heart of Nonfiction* describes how to choose mentor texts, use them and mine them for exemplary instruction. Between these suggestions and the instructional ideas, Heard shows how students can write nonfiction that informs and inspires (Heinemann Review).

### **Reviving the Essay: How to Teach Structure Without Formula (Grades 4-12)** **Gretchen Bernabei, 2005**

Although it is now a decade old, *Reviving the Essay* is a natural companion to the *Writing for Understanding* approach. In the book, Bernabei challenges us to think about what we really want students to learn as a result of writing. Then she suggests creating the structure to suit the purpose. Loaded with student examples and reproducible forms, the 30 lessons in *Reviving the Essay* will "supercharge" your students' minds with patterns and ideas that will transform their essays from lockstep, generic assignments to well-considered opinions offered in authentic, creative voices.

## Children's Literature

This month, rather than featuring particular pieces of children's literature, two resources for selecting mentor texts that can support the teaching of text structures are featured.

### **The Writing Fix**

This website, produced by Scott Harrison and the Northern Nevada Writing Project, contains a number of resources that support writing instruction. The link included this month features literary mentor texts that model use of text structures for teaching organization.



When something can be read without effort, great effort has gone into its writing.

~Enrique Jardiel Poncela



## [Informational Mentor Texts](#)

This link connects to the work of Kristi Orcutt, a reading and writing consultant who has compiled instructional strategies and a listing of mentor texts that feature text structures commonly used in informational texts. To locate the list of mentor texts, scroll down the page past the instructional strategies.

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