Ways to Teach About Informational Text

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The basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic are necessary, but not sufficient for participation in a world that demands independent and cooperative problem solving of its citizens.[1] Young children come to school with an interest in the community and the world outside their own. Social studies curricula can affirm the child's immediate experience of self, home, and family—and then expand beyond it.[2] To provide such instruction, teachers need to locate, evaluate, and use appropriate resources to supplement textbooks. The ever-growing collection of informational trade books is an important source of supplemental resources for elementary teachers.

Using informational text across the content areas is well supported by research in reading and social studies. Practice in reading informational text can help prepare students for the rigorous reading demands of secondary school.[3] Many recent studies suggest that both the amount of informational text available to elementary readers and the number of minutes spent reading informational material is far less than needed in a balanced, comprehensive primary program.[4]

Reader's Choice

In a recent study, first graders overwhelmingly chose nonfiction books over fiction.[5] Students from ten different schools were invited to visit a book display range of genres featuring protagonists of different ethnicities and gender. Students were invited to browse and select a book that would be theirs to keep. Approximately 85 percent of the children chose non-fiction over fiction. Another study revealed that kindergarteners preferred informational text over fiction.[6] Children in this study were just as successful in reenacting material from the informational books as they were from the fictional stories. This result challenged the "narrative as elementary" notion that young children relate best to narrative fiction. Rather, exclusive emphasis on reading "story" in the early grades limits children's experiences with other text forms and may create a barrier to full to literacy.

Evidence that reading informational text bolsters reading achievement can be found in data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).[7] Trends in results from NAEP from 1990 to the present indicate that reading achievement in fifth graders increases as the diversity of their reading experiences increases. In other words, fourth graders who reported reading a wide variety of texts (narrative, information, magazines, etc.) had higher reading achievement than did students who reported reading only one type of text. Exposing young children to informational text prepares them to handle the literacy demands of their later schooling.[8]

Elements of Informational Text

Children can learn about the five elements of a narrative story: *characters, setting, problem, events,* and *solution* at an early age. Similarly, there are five elements that occur in most nonfiction texts: the *author's purpose, major ideas, supporting aids,*

Table 1. **Elements of Informational Text**

Element	Definition	Guiding Questions
Author's Purpose	The intent of the author	*Did the author write the text to entertain, inform and/or persuade the audience regarding the selected topic?* *Why did the author write this book?* *What information did the author want to convey?*
Major Ideas	Key points the author wants readers to understand	*What are the major ideas of the book/selection?* *How are the major ideas presented?*
Supporting Details	Information supporting and clarifying the major ideas	*What are the supporting details for each major idea?* *How are the supporting details presented?*
Aids	Pictures, photographs, graphs, tables, charts, time lines	*What aids does the author use to convey meaning?* *What information is included in the aids (major ideas, supporting detail, vocabulary)?*
Vocabulary	Technical words needed for full understanding of the text	*What key vocabulary words are used to convey major ideas?* *What vocabulary words are used in the supporting details?* *What words should you understand to discuss or write about this book/selection?*

and *vocabulary*. **TABLE 1** provides an instructional framework to help students recognize these five elements.[9]

It also provides definitions and guiding questions that teachers can use when modeling how to identify the five informational text elements. A version of **TABLE 1** could also be posted in the classroom.

Structures of Informational Text

A passage of elementary informational text often follows one of five structures: *enumeration (list), time order, compare and contrast, cause and effect,* and *question and answer.* A structure reflects the manner in which major ideas and supporting details are organized, displayed, or argued by the writer. The organization can often be identified by signal words that are specific to each structure. **TABLE 2** contains a definition and examples of signal words for each of the five text structures. This information can be posted for reference during classroom

Table 2. **Structures of Informational Text**

Structure	Definition	Signal Words
Enumeration	A major idea is supported by a list of details and examples.	for instance, for example, such as, to illustrate, another,
Time Order	A major idea is supported by details. Both major ideas and supporting details must be in a particular sequence.	at, first, next, last, before, after, finally, following
Compare and Contrast	The supporting details of two or more major ideas indicate how those concepts are similar or different.	but, different from, same as, similar to, as opposed to, instead of, however, compared with, as well as, both, while,
Cause and Effect	The supporting details give the causes of a major idea or the supporting details are the results produced by the major idea.	because of, as a result of, in order to, may be due to, effects of, therefore, consequently, for this reason, if...then, causing, allow
Question and Answer	The major idea is posed as a question. Supporting details answer the question.	who? what? when? where? why? how?

discussion and copied and placed in students' folders for them to use during independent practice or research.

Enumeration, the least complex text structure, is a listing of major ideas, events, or details. There is no specified order to this listing. An instructional analogy to use when teaching enumeration is that of a shopping list: the order that you put things into the cart does not matter as long as you collect them all before checkout. In other words, in an enumerative text structure, the major ideas and corresponding supporting details do not have to be read or retold in a prescribed order.

More complex relationships exist within the major ideas and supporting details in the three remaining text structures. A *time order* structure sequences the major ideas and supporting details according to the passage of time.

The *compare and contrast* structure describes how concepts are similar or different.

Cause and effect is a structure in which the supporting details give the possible causes of an event or the results produced by an event.

And in a *question and answer* structure, major ideas are posed as questions with supporting details embedded in the answers.

Sentence Strips

Theories of child development suggest that the social environment can provide learners with the opportunity to observe higher levels of cognitive processing.[10] Modeling by the teacher provides opportunities for students to observe how meaning is derived from informational text. It is especially important in the elementary grades that teachers model how to identify the five elements of informational text. In particular, modeling engages students in learning the language of informational text.

In one classroom that we observed, the teacher used an interactive read-aloud activity to model the elements of informational text. The book *If You Traveled West in a Covered Wagon* invites young children to study how people view themselves over time. During the student-teacher exchange, the teacher used a chart that contained a series of sentence strips matched with the five elements of informational text.

Informational Element Sort

Another activity that can be used to model the five elements is the Informational Element Sort.[11] This activity is designed to help children become familiar with the elements of informational text and learn some vocabulary from a specific book. Word sort activities enhance vocabulary development and comprehension by actively involving students in the categorization process.[12]

During an Informational Element Sort, the teacher guides students in grouping or sorting words into the five categories: *author's purpose, major ideas, supporting details, aids and vocabulary.* Before reading, the teacher shares selected words from the text, emphasizing that each word will be sorted into one of the five informational element categories.

Fighting Fires describes the tools of an important community institution: the fire company. We observed a teacher who had selected twelve words from this photo-documentary (such as "bucket," "rescue," "collapsed," "off-road," etc.) for an Informational Element Sort activity. After the teacher read the story aloud, students sorted the words into each of the element categories.

Depending on the words selected, interesting discussions might take place as children talk about the best category for each word. In this book, "bucket" is a supporting detail that describes a piece of equipment on a pumper truck, but

"buckets" is an important vocabulary word explaining how fires were fought before fire trucks were invented. Words with multiple meanings can prompt lively discussions. Using carefully selected words from the text, teachers can engage students in a word sort that helps them internalize the five elements informational text.

Mapping Structure

Modeling the five text structures can be facilitated with the use of informational text maps. The teacher, working with the students, can illustrate text structure by carefully arranging the major ideas and supporting details in a text map. Creating such a map can be easily modeled using an exemplar: a book or portions of a book that is an unambiguous example of one of the five structures.

Rosie, A Visiting Dog's Story, a photo-documentary about the civic ideal of volunteerism, can be used as an exemplar of *time order*. It contains a readily identifiable text structure in which the appropriate words are used to "signal" the passage of time. The book describes the early life of Rosie, a Tibetan terrier being trained as a therapy dog.

We observed elementary students creating a time-order text map during a discussion of *Rosie*. In this activity, the teacher provided the three sequential major ideas on the text map: puppyhood, training, and visiting clients. After discussing the major ideas, students went back into the text to find and record several related supporting details. For example, as part of her training, Rosie joined a visiting dog program at the ASPCA.

Compare and Contrast

Bridges Are to Cross can be used to discuss the similarities and differences between bridges from different locations and historical periods. Even though the book does not directly compare and contrast bridges (it simply enumerates and describes several of them), the author looks at the same attributes in each case (shape, construction materials, country, century when built, and purpose).

For example, the author describes similar attributes for the Ponte Sant'Angelo in Rome and the Ponte Di Rialto in Venice. Students can use this information to compare and contrast these two bridges. We observed elementary students completing a text map during a discussion of this interesting book.

Concluding Thoughts

Many teachers would agree that young students are far more familiar and comfortable with narrative text than they are with informational text. Research indicates that many students have difficulty comprehending informational text,[13] although they crave fascinating facts. While there may be many reasons for this difficulty, one explanation is that students often do not recognize the basic underlying structure of informational text.[14]

Research indicates that a student's comprehension improves with explicit instruction about informational text structure.[15] Consequently, it is important that students receive explicit instruction in both the elements and structures of informational text. Such instruction can help students become comfortable and familiar with the "academic language" needed for understanding informational text and talking about it with others.

Supporting students in developing the language, strategies, and skills needed to read informational materials is a critical step in preparing them to comprehend within and across all types of text. Proficiency in comprehending informational text will help our students build the enduring skills they need to "read the world" and be successful in school, work, community, and everyday life.[16] 🖼

Notes

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Children's Books

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An Award for *Social Studies and the Young Learner*

In July, the Association of Educational Publishers (AEP) announced that the special 20th anniversary issue (September/October 2008) of *Social Studies and the Young Learner* was judged the best anniversary or commemorative issue of any educational journal for adults (i.e., teachers rather than students) to have been published in 2008.

This is a very distinguished award to receive, and all authors should be congratulated, including all three former editors of *SSYL* who contributed short essays for the anniversary issue: Huber M. Walsh, Gloria T. Alter, and Sherry L. Field.

Turning to the NCSS flagship journal *Social Education*, Walter Parker's Research and Practice column was judged the best column or department in an educational periodical for adults in 2008. This marks the first time that NCSS publications have received two number 1 awards from AEP in the same year.