



# Expository Text in the Classroom

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Evidence-based strategies to facilitate students'  
understanding of informational texts

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# Introduction

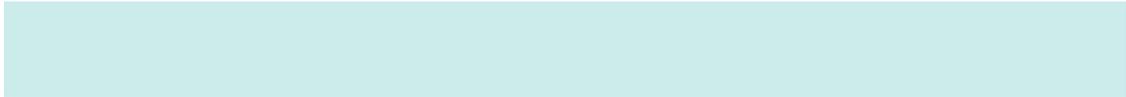
## What is an expository text?

Expository texts, or informational texts, are non-fiction texts that give facts and information about a topic. These academic texts are common in subjects such as science, history and social sciences.



## Why is it important to teach expository text comprehension strategies?

Expository texts use different text structures and more complex grammar to get information across than narratives. Proficiency with narratives and basic level reading skills do not ensure success with academic text comprehension. In fact, drops in reading performance around grade 4, when expository texts are introduced, are frequently noted. These higher level reading skills are vital to academic success, as new information is often taught using expository texts.



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# Teaching Expository Text Structure

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# What the research tells us...

**Explicitly teaching text structure beforehand improves students' understanding when reading—it helps them better locate and organize information and results in improved identification and recalling of the text's main ideas. (Akhondi et al., 2011)**

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**Teaching text structure has proved to be beneficial at both the **whole class level** and in guided reading with **small groups**, and can be implemented successfully as early as grade 2. (Hall et al., 2005; Williams et al, 2005)**

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**Using **graphic organizers** (diagrams) enables students to “see” the text structure, understand and remember it better. (Dymock, 2005)**

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**Teaching one structure has been shown to generalize to new texts of the same structure, but **not** to other types of text structures—all text structures must be explicitly taught. (Williams et al., 2005)**

# Teaching Text Structure: Tips

There are five types of expository text structures:

1. Description
2. Sequence
3. Compare-Contrast
4. Problem-Solution
5. Cause-Effect

- ◆ Informational texts often contain more than one type of text structure.
- ◆ Teach a new text structure with **familiar** academic material.
- ◆ Always **model** use of graphic organizers to analyze a text initially, then scaffold as needed until students can do this

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- ◆ **Clue words** are words commonly used in a particular text structure — they help students determine the type of text structure and understand key logical relationships between ideas
  - ◆ It's suggested that clue words be introduced before reading the text — give examples of sentences using these words and have students generate their own examples.
  - ◆ Encourage students to circle these words as they read

# 1. Description

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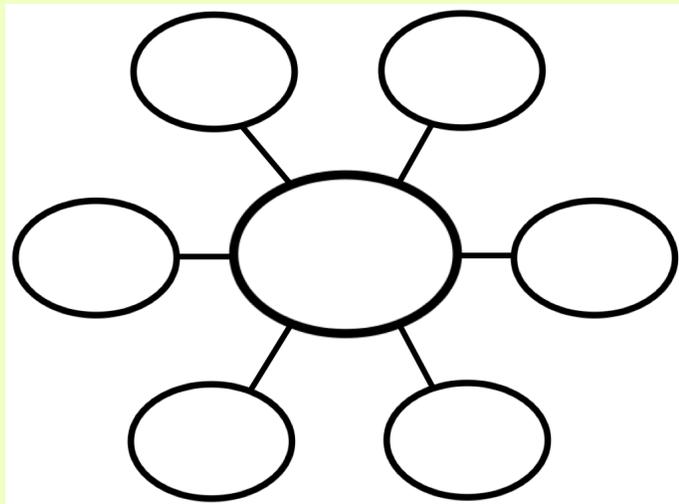
The author describes a topic, person, place or thing by listing a collection of its features or examples — gives additional information about what a person, place or thing is like

## Structure

- 1) **Identification**— of phenomenon to be described
- 2) **Description**— of parts, qualities, features or examples

## Graphic Organizer

**Clue Words**  
for example  
characteristics  
for instance  
such as  
is like  
including  
to illustrate



# 2. Sequence

The author uses numerical or chronological order to list items or events, or explains the steps one must follow to do/make something—typically the easiest structure for students to comprehend

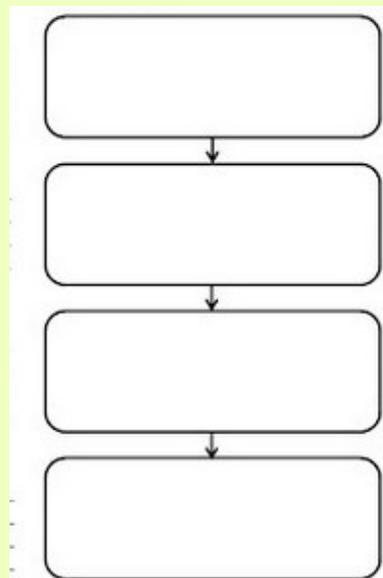
## Structure

- 1) **Listing**—the order of steps/actions in a process or event from first to last (in a sequential order)

### Clue Words

first, second, third  
then  
before, previously  
finally, last  
next  
after  
to start  
now

### Graphic Organizer



# 3. Compare-Contrast

The author shows how two or more events, topics or objects are the same and how they are different

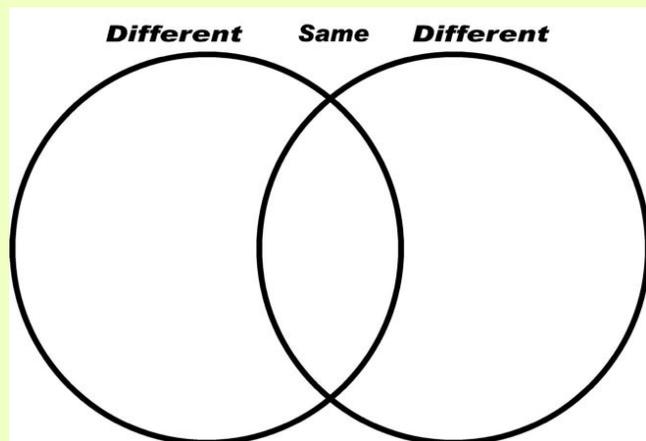
## Structure

- 1) **Introduction**— of topics to be compared/contrasted
- 2) **Comparison**— list similarities the topics share
- 3) **Contrast**— list differences that distinguish the topics

## Clue Words

however  
alike, same  
similarly, just as  
in contrast  
different  
and, also  
both

## Graphic Organizer



# 4. Problem-Solution

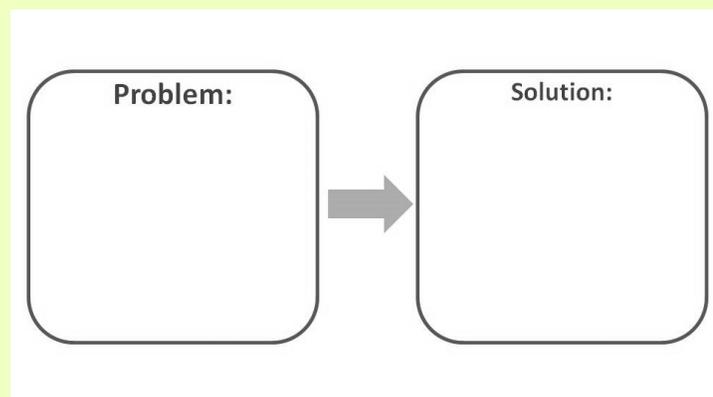
The author describes a problem and then gives one or more valid solutions

## Structure

- 1) **Outline**— of problem to be addressed in the text
- 2) **Identification**— of potential solution(s)
- 3) **Explanation**—of why potential solution is valid

## Graphic Organizer

**Clue Words**  
because  
problem is  
so that  
as a result  
therefore  
solved, answer  
question



# 5. Cause-Effect

The author describes the relationship between one or more causes (event) the ensuing effects (what happened because of the event) - explanation of how one event leads to another

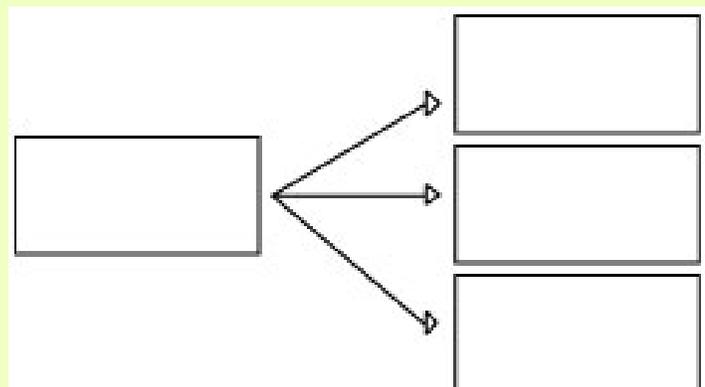
## Structure

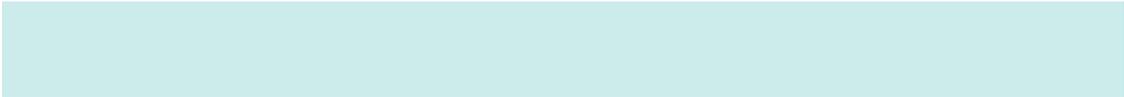
- 1) **Introduction**— of initial event that triggers subsequent events
  - 2) **Description**— of what/how consequences occurred as a result
- \*Note: effects may appear before the cause in texts

### Clue Words

if — then  
reasons why  
as a result  
because of  
due to, led to  
consequently  
since

### Graphic Organizer





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# Teaching Expository Text Grammar

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# What the research tells us...

**Approaches that combine direct, focused grammar lessons and context-based strategies across a variety of curriculum subjects have been shown to be most effective. (Balthazar & Scott, 2007)**

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**Teaching and practicing complex grammar in all modalities available (listening, reading and writing) leads to more robust and longer-lasting improvements. (Scott & Balthazar, 2010)**

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**20 to 60 minutes of focused grammar lessons a week have been shown to lead to improvements in producing and understanding more complex grammar. (Balthazar & Scott, 2007)**

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**Teaching sentence-combining is more effective than traditional grammar lessons at developing reading comprehension skills. (Wilkinson & Patty, 1993)**

# Teaching Grammar: Tips

Common complex grammatical structures in expository texts:

1. Long Noun Phrases
2. Subordinate Clauses
3. Adverbial Clauses  
(placed before the main clause)

- ◆ Expository texts contain many **complex** grammatical structures that can impede students' understanding of the material
- ◆ Explicit grammar lessons are typically easier to complete in **writing**—requires less mental processing resources because they can see the structures
- ◆ Use the text as a **unifying theme** for teaching the various structures
- ◆ 'Mini-lessons' on sentence structure can be incorporated into the creation of a written product assignment about the text
- ◆ Using complex grammatical structures in your own answers and descriptions when discussing the text helps '**prime**' students, so they are more likely to use these forms in their own answers

# 1. Complex Noun Phrases

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The subjects of expository texts are often events, processes, phenomena or historical periods. These subjects are then expanded on to give students additional information, resulting in long, complex noun phrases.

## Simple Noun Phrase

[The **fossil**] was found on the beach.

## Complex Noun Phrase

[The oldest known fossil **skeleton** of a human ancestor—a female *Ardipithecus Ramidus* specimen nicknamed “Ardi”] has been found, scientists revealed.

## Challenges to Understanding

- ◆ Several words separating subject noun (in bold) from verb
- ◆ Increased processing demands
- ◆ Difficult to identify subject noun and boundaries of noun phrase
- ◆ Harder to interpret meaning

## 2. Clausal Subordination

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Expository texts draw on a larger set of conjunctions, and sentences typically contain several clauses, which relate to each other in an intricate hierarchical manner.

### Simple Linear Clause

[Jay likes chocolate ice cream] but [Erin prefers vanilla].

### Subordinate Clause

**The blood** [returning from the body through the right side of the heart and the lungs] **contains cellular waste.**

### Challenges to Understanding

- ◆ Long-distance dependency relationships—e.g. of subject noun and verb of main clause (in bold)
- ◆ Increased processing demands
- ◆ Harder to interpret meaning

# 3. Adverbial Clauses

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Expository texts use a technique called “end-focus”, where new, more important information is placed at the end of the sentence. To accomplish this, adverbial clauses often precede the main clause/idea in the sentence.

## Normal Sentence Construction

An elephant sucks as much as 2 gallons of water into its trunk at a time [when it drinks].

## ‘End-Focus’ Sentence Construction

[When an elephant drinks], it sucks as much as 2 gallons of water into its trunk at a time.

## Challenges to Understanding

- ◆ Less typical structure—less exposure and practice
- ◆ Increased processing demands
- ◆ Harder to interpret meaning
- ◆ Need to “wait” for important information to make sense of the sentence—may need to backtrack after it’s presented

# Working Memory & Sentence Processing

To understand complicated sentences, children must hold information presented at the beginning of the sentence in their memory, and integrate it with details presented later. This working memory system has a **limited capacity**, and can become taxed by the increased processing load of complex sentences.



Research by Vos et al. (2001) showed that people with smaller working memory spans were **slower** and **less accurate** at processing sentences with complex grammar when reading. Limited understanding at the sentence level poses challenges to comprehension of the text as a whole and learning.

# Working Memory Strategies

- ◆ Introduce new vocabulary **before** reading a text using short, simple sentences
- ◆ Stop to **summarize** parts of the text more frequently to help students 'chunk' information together
- ◆ If reading to the class, have a printed copy of the text for students to follow along
- ◆ Reduce other distractions in the classroom
- ◆ Repeated **practice** of text structure and dissecting complex sentences makes these skills more automatic, and frees up processing resources
- ◆ Use **visuals** to show how elements of the sentence or text map onto each other
- ◆ Encourage students to ask themselves if they've understood what they've read, and to stop and **reread** sentences they experienced difficulty with

# Sentence Combining

## What is sentence combining?

Sentence combining encourages students to take two or more short, choppy sentences and combine them into one effective sentence



- ◆ Introduce subordinating conjunctions and model how these conjunctions can be used to combine two simpler sentences
  - ◇ Guided practice: provide students with a sentence template (subordinating conjunction in correct location) and have them generate the main and subordinate clause
- ◆ Sentence completion and sentence deconstruction (breaking down sentences into its smaller parts) are also effective approaches when teaching complex sentences

Students with language delays may need additional one-on-one help to address sentence complexity—**Speech-Language Pathologists** can help with this!



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# Sample Lesson Plan

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# Lesson Plan

This lesson plan was adapted from the Williams et al. (2005) study. The researcher also replicated this format successfully with cause and effect text structures—students showed improved reading comprehension and sentence combining (Williams et al., 2014).

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## Teaching Compare-Contrast Text Structure

**Format:** two 45-minute sessions a week— for a total of 14 sessions

**Materials:** compare-contrast paragraphs on classification of vertebrates—each lesson looked at paragraphs comparing and contrasting the characteristics of two different animals

Each lesson has 8 sections:

### 1. Clue Words

- ◆ Review the purpose of the lesson
- ◆ Introduce compare-contrast clue words (see *page 9*) and have them displayed on the board
- ◆ Elicit sentences from the students using the clue words

# Lesson Plan

## 2. Encyclopedia Reading and Discussion

- ◆ Read the encyclopedia entries about the two target animals
- ◆ Discuss the animals as a class—ask students about their existing knowledge/personal experiences to increase motivation

## 3. Vocabulary Development

- ◆ Introduce vocabulary concepts related to the critical features of animal classification (e.g. warm-blooded, cold-blooded, oxygen, hair, scales, feathers)
- ◆ Discuss examples of animals with these features

## 4. Reading and Analysis of Target Paragraph

- ◆ Have students read the paragraph silently first
- ◆ Reread the paragraph out loud to the group
- ◆ Have students analyze the text with the specific goal of narrowing in on the differences and similarities—students underline sentences that compare/contrast the animals and circle clue words
- ◆ Class discussion—students generate sentences orally to describe how the animals in the paragraph were the same or different based on information found in the text

# Lesson Plan

## 5. Graphic Organizer

- ◆ Students organize the paragraph's content using the compare-contrast graphic organizer (see page 9)
- ◆ Graphic matrices using features to classify animals of the vertebrate class—students indicate with checkmarks the specific features each animal has (see example below)

Animal	What type of body covering does the animal have?			
	Hair	Scales	Smooth	Feathers
Lion	√			
Crocodile		√		

## 6. Compare-Contrast Questions

- ◆ Introduce compare-contrast questions to help students organize statements generated from the graphic organizers
  - ◇ What two things is this paragraph about?
  - ◇ How are they the same?
  - ◇ How are they different?
- ◆ Students generate written sentences about the differences and similarities they generated using the graphic organizers

# Lesson Plan

## 7. Summary

- ◆ Students use the sentences they generated earlier and organized information from the text to write a short summary
- ◆ Provide a frame to help students structure their thoughts
  - ◇ This paragraph is about \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. In some ways they are the same. \_\_\_\_\_.
  - In other ways they are different. \_\_\_\_\_.

## 8. Lesson Review

- ◆ Review clue words, vocabulary and strategies

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