

Navigating Nonfiction Text Structures

Children seem to be on a continual quest for answers. Are elephants smart? Why don't penguins live in Chicago—it gets really cold there, right? How did the oceans get so salty? Could there be an undiscovered galaxy? The questions are as diverse as the learners who ask them. How fortunate we are as teachers and librarians to have a bounty of carefully researched nonfiction books to aid in answering those queries.

Helping readers access information to answer their questions will require teaching and modeling, however. Nonfiction text is typically organized differently from fictional stories. Gone are familiar plots with their rising action and main characters that grow and change throughout a story. In their place are common organizational patterns or text structures that frame authors' writing, including description, sequence, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and problem and solution or question and answer. To facilitate the comprehension of nonfiction text, primary- and intermediate-grade students need to understand how these patterns work. In this column, we will focus on ideas for teaching three text structures and highlight a sampling of motivating science-related books to illustrate each structure. For a complete listing of the books mentioned here, turn to "Comprehensive Bibliography" on p.62.

Describing with Details

A sensible starting point is to learn about the descriptive text structure. It builds on students' prior knowledge of

this pattern from experiences in reading fictional text. When learning to identify this pattern, readers will be examining how an author points out important characteristics or features, highlights details, and then offers examples to clarify information. If you work with primary-grade students and you haven't already discovered Jim Arnosky's fact-filled *All About* series, look for the titles written about students' favorite animals, such as *All about Frogs*, *All about Lizards*, and *All about Sharks*. As is typical of many descriptive books about animals, Arnosky informs readers about their characteristics, habitats, diets, and other tidbits.

To guide young science sleuths in noticing description on their own, divide students into pairs or triads. Provide each fact-finding team with a large sheet of paper. Fold the paper in fourths and mark each square with the headings "Looks Like," "Lives," "Eats," and "Other Fascinating Facts." With your support, teams work together to record information they discover in the book that fits under each heading. Once their research concludes, invite each team to share what they've learned about their animal. If time allows, animal experts can create a fact-filled poster to display.

As you select animal books with descriptive text structure across grade levels, also look for those written in engaging ways, such as *One Tiny Turtle*, where Nicola Davies includes alliteration and imagery in her descriptive narrative about the loggerhead turtle. Sneed B. Collard's lyrical text teaches readers about

the platypus in *A Platypus, Probably*. Then read and pore over the stunning photographs found in *Our Three Bears* by Ron Hirschi.

Intermediate-grade readers find Seymour Simon's books fascinating. Titles like *Sharks*, *Snakes*, or *Penguins* offer an opportunity to see an expert nonfiction writer at work. While it doesn't address the query posed earlier about salt in ocean water, there is much of interest in his book *Oceans*. In addition, curious readers can sample excerpts from Simon's *Our Solar System* or *Destination: Mars*.

As you read Simon's books aloud, point out some common key phrases that readers should watch for: "a number of," "characteristics are," "types of," "for example," "features include," and "by observing." Such key



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phrases signal readers to attend to the details that follow, strengthening their ability to remember the important information in the text. Words like these can be posted for easy access.

To connect the reading and writing for intermediate-grade learners, divide students into groups of four to research a topic. As a group, students determine which aspect of the topic they will study. Teach readers how to use a web to gather notes about their chosen aspect. Using descriptive books such as *John Muir* by Kathryn Lasky or *Marvels in the Muck* by Doug Wechsler, researchers record their learning on as many spokes of the web as needed. Once research ends, each student can write a detailed, descriptive paragraph beginning with an inviting topic sentence. Finally, as a group, writers pen an introductory and concluding paragraph to complete their own descriptive text.

Sequencing Events

This pattern, too, should be easy to introduce, as it relates to readers' past experiences in putting a story in order from beginning to end. Sequenced text presents facts, events, or concepts in numerical or chronological order. Some basic cue words that signal this type of structure include "first," "second," "third," "then," "to begin with," "next," "following," "since," "later," and "finally."

Post these words and others you discover together when reading aloud books. Try *The Snow Show* by Carolyn Fisher, where Chef Kelvin and Jack Frost cook up a fresh batch of snow. This clever book, written like a recipe, describes the steps in making snow and includes cue words. Once students understand sequencing, provide opportunities for them to apply their learning as they engage in science experiments. Intermediate-grade students can create their own reference charts using the key words noted above. As they read, they record the order of events in the text, matching them to appropriate key words. They might practice using the beautifully illustrated *Everglades* by Jean Craighead George, *Emi and the Rhino Scientist* by Mary Kay Carson, or *Sneeze!* by Alexandra Siy.


As primary-grade learners are studying the life cycles of such animals as caterpillars, frogs, chicks, or mealworms, share the book *A Frog's Life* by Patricia J. Murphy. The author demonstrates how to create a time line of observed events. For the youngest writers, provide a large sheet of paper where they can record their observations in a time line format using pictures and words. Using a pictorial time line, demonstrate how students can write a sentence about each event. Then use transition words to show the passage of time. Additional books that are organized sequentially include *From Caterpillar*

to *Butterfly* by Deborah Heiligman, about the Painted Lady butterfly, and *Dazzling Dragonflies* by Linda Glaser. Because it results in a clearly understood visual representation of sequencing, this idea could be readily adapted for students in the intermediate grades, especially those for whom reading is difficult.

Answering the Question

Question-filled readers can easily identify, learn from, and replicate the question-answer or problem-solution text structure. For primary-grade readers, books such as *What Do You Do with a Tail like This?* by Steve Jenkins and Robin Page provide an engaging example of this format. Their approach is more explicit than an author who weaves the questions and answers into the text, as in the book *Earthquakes* by Ellen J. Prager. To explore this pattern in the primary grades, begin by reading a number of question-format books such as *Guess What Is Growing inside This Egg* by Mia Posada. Once students are familiar with this text structure, use a shared writing format to create a class question-answer book about a science topic in your curriculum. For instance, if students are studying the human body, you could begin a page with, "Why is the brain the most important organ?" or "How do you keep your heart healthy?"

In the intermediate grades, this format is helpful for struggling readers who have difficulty determining the important information in the text. In Carolyn Franklin's *World of Wonder* series, which includes *Ocean Life* and *Rainforest Animals*, each page begins with a question, which helps readers recognize what information to look for as they read. If intermediate-grade students are studying rocks and minerals, try Melissa Stewart's *Extreme Rocks and Minerals!*, which showcases eye-catching photographs. Using this book as a model, readers can pen their own question-answer paragraph, a perfect reading-writing connection.

There is an irresistible draw to books that answer questions and satisfy endless curiosities about the world around us. Children across grade levels never weary of sleuthing for information about increasingly complex topics. Understanding how that information is presented gives all readers the tools to quest on their own. When the process stumps them, no doubt they will only need a gentle redirecting from us before sailing ahead. 

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