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Mary C. McMackin
Lesley College

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Using narrative picture books to build awareness of expository text structure

Mary C. McMackin

Lesley College

ABSTRACT

For many students, reading in the content areas presents quite a challenge. The transition from an emphasis on narrative texts in the lower grades to expository texts in the upper grades is not always easy. This article describes a system I use for introducing expository text structure through the use of narrative picture books. My goal is to develop an understanding of expository text structure with simple texts so that students will be able to transfer these understandings to more cognitively dense content area materials.

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time... Young children become aware of how stories are structured through home and school experiences. It is not uncommon for children as young as first grade to have an adequately developed sense of story structure as part of their mental repertoire (Dreher and Singer 1980). This knowledge of narrative story grammar (i.e. setting, character, problem, solution) helps readers comprehend and recall story information. While stories tend to function as the main genre for instruction in the early elementary years, expository texts serve as a major source for written social studies materials in the upper elementary and middle schools. In order to access the growing wealth of information that is available through books, magazines, reference sources, CD ROMs, and the Internet, students need to develop an understanding of expository structure. When readers are aware that writers structure relationships among concepts through text patterns and use cue words to connect their thoughts, comprehension improves (Taylor, 1992).

In a study with eighth grade readers, Seidenberg (1989) reported that lack of text structure knowledge inhibited the students from constructing accurate representations of informational texts, from identifying important ideas and from summarizing the text. Similarly, a deficit in text structure awareness in students with learning

disabilities had an adverse effect on their ability to predict forthcoming information, to identify important details, and to monitor their own comprehension (Englert and Thomas 1987).

Myer (1985) coined the term "structure strategy" to refer to the process that readers use to seek out and apply the author's organization while constructing representations of expository texts. Generally, expository texts are constructed around five text patterns: description/enumeration, sequence, compare/contrast, cause/effect, problem/solution (Myer and Freedle 1984). Figure 1 contains a definition for each of these text patterns and cue words that signal predominant patterns. Seidenberg (1989) noted that the ability to comprehend and to compose expository prose is essential for school success. It appears that many elementary and middle school students would benefit from a formal introduction to expository text structure.

NARRATIVE PICTURE BOOKS

Realizing the importance of teaching students to recognize expository text patterns, I designed a system for teaching students this comprehension skill, using methods and materials that built upon their prior knowledge and experiences. My goal was to have students develop proficiency in this skill with simple texts so that they would be able to transfer it to more cognitively dense social studies materials.

Since most upper elementary and middle school students have a well developed sense of narrative story structure (Dreher and Singer 1980), it seemed logical to use narrative picture books to introduce expository text structure. Picture books, which no longer seem to be relegated to young readers, allow teachers to introduce the concept of text patterns in a unique, interesting, and straightforward way. Without the sophisticated content of grade-level texts, students are able to focus their attention directly on the patterns that authors use to organize ideas.

Despite the fact that simple picture books are generally written around a narrative story grammar, in which there are characters, a setting, a problem and a resolution, careful examination revealed that many picture books contain an underlying "expository" text pattern. For example, *Nettie's Trip South* (Turner 1987) represents a description/ enumeration pattern. Written in a letter format, this picture book describes Nettie's reaction to the harsh treatment of slaves during her pre-Civil War trip from the north to Richmond, VA. In *Island Boy*, Cooney (1988) sequenced the events of the major character's life on Tibbetts Island. The reader meets Matthais in his youth and follows him until he is laid to rest under a red astrakhan tree. Figure 2 contains a list of several picture books that may be used to introduce students to expository text structures. The brevity of these books makes them ideal to use in 45-minute instructional periods. The following

sample lesson illustrates how picture books can be used to build text structure awareness.

GETTING STARTED

Expository Text Structure and Comprehension

It is best to begin by introducing one text structure at a time, starting with the most easily recognized organizational pattern (sequence) and gradually introducing more complex patterns (compare/contrast and cause/effect). Before class, select one text structure on which to focus. The following lesson will illustrate the sequence expository pattern.

Sample Introductory Lesson:

Purpose: To introduce students to sequencing.

Materials: One (or more) narrative picture book(s) which represent sequencing (see Figure 2 for suggested picture books); overhead transparency of graphic organizer for sequencing (see Figure 3 for sample graphic organizers); a grade-appropriate social studies passage that follows the sequence pattern (on overhead or copies to distribute).

Time: One 45-minute period

Procedure:

- (1) Set purpose for listening.
 - Elicit from the students what they know about sequencing.
 - Have students listen to *Island Boy* (Cooney, 1988) for the purpose of recalling the sequence of events in the story.
- (2) Read picture book aloud.
- (3) Discuss the predominant text structure (sequencing), noting how this structure is used to connect ideas. In these books, the pictures, too, will extend the ideas of the author and support the text arrangement, so information from the pictures should be identified as well.
- (4) Use an overhead transparency to record the information on an appropriate graphic organizer (see Figure 3 for samples). The graphic organizer enables students to visually see the relationships between superordinate ideas (main) and subordinate ideas (details).
- (5) Call students' attention to the cue words that Cooney uses to signal sequence of time: "at first"; "Time passed. Now..."; "soon"; "As Matthais grew older..."; "After fifteen years"; "In May"; "For a long time..."; "In September." By drawing attention to these words and phrases, teachers can help students understand how the author connects one idea to the next and sequences events in a logical order of succession.
- (6) After introducing (modeling) sequencing with a picture book and graphic organizer, select a passage from social studies materials that follows this same pattern. Repeat steps

1-5, thinking aloud as you read, analyze, and record the information onto the graphic organizer (overhead transparency). Providing direct instruction with social studies materials enables students to realize how this comprehension strategy can be applied in an authentic way to their own construction of meaning with grade-appropriate expository materials. As noted above, pictures add to the available information in picture books. A parallel can be drawn to the use of graphic aids (charts, graphs, maps) that authors of social studies books include to connect and extend ideas. Information from the graphic aids should be included on the graphic organizer if appropriate.

Over the next several days, repeat these same procedures while introducing the remaining expository text structures.

More sophisticated instruction and practice in identifying the text structures of informational materials may be necessary for some students before they can apply this comprehension skill directly to social studies texts. Figure 4 contains an annotated bibliography of popular preteen magazine articles that may be used to provide guided practice during this stage of instruction. These articles furnish students with opportunities to apply their understanding of text structure to materials that are a bit more challenging than picture books, yet not as cognitively dense as most social studies materials. Once students begin to understand how each expository text structure is used to organize and connect ideas, it is necessary to introduce texts that contain multiple structures.

It would be nice if all informational writing followed one easily identified text structure; however, many times, the passages that students encounter while reading social studies texts contain a combination of patterns rather than one specific pattern. I use the book *Teammates* (Golenbock, 1990) to illustrate this point. Golenbock uses several text structures to tell the story of Jackie Robinson's first season as a Brooklyn Dodger. The book begins with a compare/contrast structure, as the professional lifestyles of Negro League players are contrasted with those of Major League players. Next, Golenbock presents a problem. Brooklyn Dodger General Manager, Branch Rickey, tries to find ways to desegregate his team. He resolves this problem when he hires Jackie Robinson. The reader then travels through a sequence of events as Jackie meets with Mr. Rickey and attends spring training. Cause and effect text structure is also used. Because Jackie Robinson is the first Black player in the Major Leagues (cause), he is humiliated; he must live by himself when the team is on the road; and his job is threatened when other players draft a petition to have him thrown off the team (effects). Finally, the hateful screams from the crowd caused Pee Wee Reese to walk across the field and put his arm around Jackie's shoulder, displaying support for his fellow teammate (effect).

At this point, I've found it worthwhile to have students analyze a variety of picture books in order to determine the ways in which authors embed multiple text structures within one piece of writing. Again, the picture books provide students with opportunities to use short, simple texts to grasp this complex concept. I recommend that teachers also analyze social studies materials with their students by modeling and using think alouds. Vacca and Vacca (1989) suggest the following guidelines for teachers to use when analyzing text patterns. First, identify the most important idea in the passage and note cue words that signal the text structure. Second, identify other important ideas and how these ideas are connected to the main idea. Third, outline or diagram the superordinate idea (main) and subordinate ideas (details) to sort out important from less important ideas. Vacca and Vacca (1989) state that in planning reading assignments, it is helpful for teachers to try to identify the overall text pattern "even though several types of thought relationships are probably embedded within the material" (p. 43).

TEXT STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION

As students are introduced to expository text patterns, they can be provided with opportunities to use these patterns to construct meaning in their own writing. A wide variety of discourse forms are available for students to use in authentic informational writing. These forms include brochures, presentation proposals, and reflections on assignments (see Figure 5 for additional suggestions).

Teachers may help middle school students gradually learn how to combine several expository text structures. *Using Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell 1993) or other picture books as models, teachers may move students into more complex forms of expository writing. For example, a teacher may suggest that a research paper on the initial stages of the American Revolution begin with a description/enumeration of events that led to the Boston Tea Party. Next, the paper may focus on the cause and effects of this one event. The paper may conclude with a section in which the causes for the Boston Tea Party are compared/contrasted with present-day issues of taxation. Three different graphic organizers may be used to record the ideas: description/enumeration, cause/effect, and compare/contrast. The same graphic organizers that were used to record information in the comprehension lessons may be used throughout the writing process. Graphic organizers help students identify and organize the key concepts they wish to communicate. When ideas are well organized and cohesively expressed, they are often easier for readers to understand. It should be noted that a graphic organizer should be used as a preliminary step within a larger process rather than as an end product in and of itself. A timeline, for instance, could be used to detail events of an ancient civilization. After completing the timeline, students could

analyze the information recorded on this graphic organizer and use it to write a piece of discourse, or to engage in a discussion, or perhaps to create a project that connects social studies with the arts. Finally, the writer may indicate expository patterns through topic sentences. For example, the author might signal the description/enumeration pattern used in the first section of the American Revolution report by leading off with the following sentence: There were several events that led a group of Boston citizens to empty 342 chests of tea into the Boston Harbor on the evening of December 16, 1773. Conscious attention to text structure assists the writer by providing a framework in which to compose. Likewise, it helps the reader see relationships and construct an accurate representation of the writer's intended meaning.

CONCLUSION

Finding ways to increase our students' comprehension of expository texts is a challenge for most social studies teachers (and teachers in general). Transitioning from narrative to expository reading and writing does not come naturally for all student. Moffett (1981) stated that "for many students, narrative is a kind of haven which they are reluctant to leave because chains of events have a ready-made organization, whereas exposition requires that the student create and assert a new order that is not a given of the material" (p. 122).

As students read and write informational texts in which text patterns are apparent, they build an awareness of the organizational arrangements and unique conventions that expository writers use to communicate information and to express ideas. This, in turn, prepares them for the task of independently comprehending and composing more complex exposition. Since sources of information continue to increase exponentially in today's world, the ability to use a "structure strategy" to enhance comprehension appears to be a required skill for successful lifelong learners. A systematic method for providing direct instruction and guided practice in expository text structure awareness can empower students by enhancing their reading and writing skills in all content areas.

Figure 1
Narrative Picture Books - Expository Text Structures

DESCRIPTION/ENUMERATION

- *Kroll, V. 1993. *Africa brothers and sisters.*, NY: Four Winds Press. A father and his son discuss characteristics of approximately 20 different African tribes.
- *Rylant, C. 1982. *When I was young in the mountains*, NY: E.P. Dutton. A young girl describes what it was like to grow up with her loving grandmother, grandfather, and brother in a mountain community.
- *Turner, A. 1987. *Nettie's trip south.*, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company. Nettie writes a letter to her friend, Addie, describing her reactions to the treatment of slaves, which she witnesses in a pre-Civil War trip to Richmond, VA.
- *Weller, F.W. 1992. *Matthew Wheelock's wall*. New York, NY: Macmillan. Matthew Wheelock builds a stone wall around his New England field. This wall and all it stands for is treasured for generations.

SEQUENCE

- *Caseley, J. 1991. *Dear Annie.*, NY: Greenwillow Books. Annie and her grandfather are pen pals. Over the years, Annie saved over 100 letters that her grandfather sent her.
- *Cooney, B. 1988. *Island boy*. NY: Viking Kestrel. The reader follows Matthais' life on Tibbetts Island from his youth until he is laid to rest under his favorite red astrakhan tree.
- *Silverstein, S. 1964. *The giving tree.*, NY: HarperCollins. A relationship that a boy establishes with a tree changes over time.
- *West, C. 1986. *"Pardon?" said the giraffe*. NY: Harper & Row, Publishers. Frog hops on the backs of taller and taller animals as he asks the giraffe, "What's it like up there?"

CAUSE/EFFECT

- *Barton, B. 1973. *Buzz buzz buzz*. NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. The bee stings the bull, which causes the bull to run and jump all around, which causes the cow to get nervous, which causes...
- *Brown, R. 1985. *The big sneeze*. NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books. The farmer's big sneeze causes a chaotic chain of events.
- *Numeroff, L.J. 1991. *If you give a moose a muffin*. NY: HarperCollins. Chaos erupts when a boy gives a moose a muffin and triggers a series of humorous events.

*Viorst, J. 1972. *Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day*. NY: Macmillan. Everything goes wrong for Alexander. One disaster leads to another throughout the entire day.

COMPARE/CONTRAST

*Buckley, H. E., and J. Ormerod 1994. *Grandfather and I*. NY: Lorthrop, Lee & Shepard Books. The warm relationship of a grandfather and grandson is built around the relaxing, peaceful times shared. The slow pace of grandfather and grandson is contrasted with the hurried lives of mother, father, brothers, and sisters.

*Delaney, M. 1989. *My sister*. NY: Atheneum. A young girl shares the pros and cons of having an older sister.

*Gray, N. 1988. *A country far away*. NY: Orchard. The illustrations in this book reveal the similarities and differences of everyday experiences of two boys: one in a small African village and the other in a modern suburban community.

*Hutchins, P. 1971. *Titch*, NY: Macmillan. Titch is compared to his older siblings, Mary and Pete.

PROBLEM/SOLUTION

*DePaola, T. 1983. *The legend of the Bluebonnet*. NY: Scholastic, Inc. A drought was killing The People called Comanche and their land. It was determined that in order to appease the Great Spirits, the People would sacrifice their most valued possession. She-Who-Is-Alone, a young girl who has lost her entire family in the famine, decides to offer the Great Spirits her warrior doll, her only possession.

*DePaola, T. 1984. *The mysterious giant of Barletta*. London: Anderson Press. Word reaches the quiet, Italian town of Barletta that it is going to be attacked by an arm of a thousand men. Zia Concetta, the oldest member of this community, and the mysterious giant come up with a very clever and humorous plan to frighten these soldiers away.

*Guback, G. 1994. *Luka's quilt*. NY: Greenwillow. Luka's grandmother, Tutu, sewed a traditional Hawaiian quilt for Luka. However, the quilt lacked the bright colors that Luka hoped it would have. Lei Day brings a solution to this problem.

*Young, E. 1992. *Seven blind mice*, NY: Philomel. Seven mice share their individual observations in order to determine what the object is that they have discovered. It turns out to be an elephant.

Figure 2
Expository Text Structures and Cue Words

DESCRIPTION/ENUMERATION

The author provides description, characteristics, or attributes of a topic. Often it is the summation of these details that is the main idea.

Cue words: for example, first, second, most importantly.

SEQUENCE

The author places facts, events, items, or concepts in a logical order.

Cue words: first, second, next, finally, then, before, after, when.

COMPARE/CONTRAST

The author points out similarities and differences in facts, events, items or concepts.

Cue words: but, however, although, yet, similarly, on the other hand, while, for instance.

CAUSE/EFFECT

The author shows how the facts, events, items, or concepts (i.e. the effects) result due to the facts, events, items, or concepts (i.e. the causes).

Cue words: because, since, therefore, if...then, as a result, thus, hence

PROBLEM/SOLUTION

The author identifies a problem and provides solution(s).

Cue words: the question is, the problem is, therefore, if...then.

Figure 3
Graphic Organizers for Expository Text Patterns

DESCRIPTION/ENUMERATION

Visual representation of ideas:

semantic web:

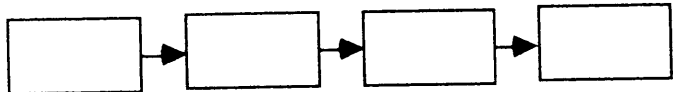
outline: I. _____
 A. _____
 B. _____
 C. _____

SEQUENCE

Visual representation of ideas:

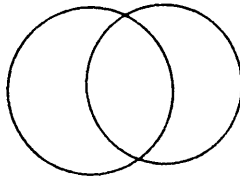
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

flowchart:



COMPARE/CONTRAST

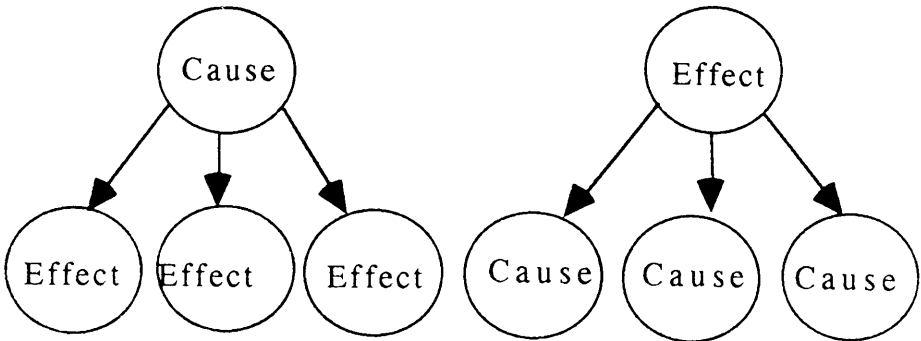
Visual representation of ideas:



Venn diagram

CAUSE/EFFECT

Visual representation of ideas:



PROBLEM/SOLUTION

Visual representation of ideas:

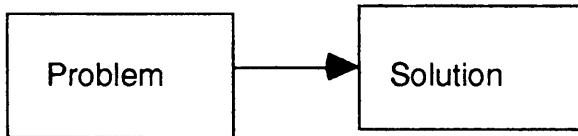


Figure 4
Nonfiction Magazine Articles

DESCRIPTION/ENUMERATION

Sunquist, F. 1995, November. The lizard kings: Komodo dragons. *National Geographic World*, p. 243. Facts about the Komodo dragon, the world's largest lizard, are provided.

CAUSE/EFFECT

_____ 1995, June/July. Endangered species. *Kids Discover*, p. 2. More and more animals and plants are becoming extinct. This article highlights causes for this dilemma.

SEQUENCE

McMane, F. 1995, November. Legends. *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, p. 66. Reece "Goose" Tatum was the top clown of the Harlem Globetrotters from 1942-1955. This article highlights his youth and professional career.

COMPARE/CONTRAST

Coffey, P. March, 1996. Who's better? Jeremy Roenick vs. Joe Sakic. *Hockey Digest*, pp. 78-81. The personalities and professional accomplishments of these two hockey stars are compared and contrasted.

PROBLEM/SOLUTION

_____ March, 1996. It's all in the cards. *Beckett Baseball*, p. 11. Doug Melvin, General Manager for the Texas Rangers, was interested in luring two Cuban pitchers to his team. They had both defected from their home countries and information about them could not be found. Fortunately, by securing a set of Cuban baseball cards, Melvin was able to get the stats he needed to make his decision about these pitchers.

Figure 5
Forms for Expository Discourse

advertisements
 announcements
 autobiographical sketches
 book jackets
 calendars
 directions
 commentaries
 editorials
 handbooks
 how-to's
 interviews
 invitations
 job descriptions
 journals
 letters
 memoirs
 newsletter articles
 observations
 pamphlets
 preparation for poster displays
 reports
 requests
 reviews of books, films, TV shows, documentaries
 songs
 speeches
 time capsules
 tributes

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- Turner, A. (1987). *Nettie's trip south*. NY: Macmillan.

Mary C. McMackin is a faculty member in the Graduate School at Lesley College in Cambridge Massachusetts.