

Teaching nonfiction text structure

BY KATIE COPPENS

Start the school year with a lesson on nonfiction text structure. In small groups, students are given a variety of nonfiction science books. They are tasked with observing the books to determine the various forms of text structure. Then, using this information, they infer the author's purpose for structuring the book in this way. We then discuss that this is a pre-reading strategy, called *surveying*

the text, and is the first of many methods they will learn over the year to help improve their reading comprehension.

Alexandra Bluestein (2010), a language arts curriculum instructional leader, emphasizes the role that text features can have in helping students sort out the most important information in the text. She explains how text features help build the

bridge between nonfiction text and comprehension. Knowing the importance of text features before beginning the book observation activity, I ask students to give examples of text features and text structures because I have found that they often confuse the terms. By listing some text features on the board, such as the table of contents, graphs, and bold font, students see that *text features* are components, or organizational features, of the text (Figure 1).

Text structure is an author's method of organizing the information (Figure 2). There are thought to be five common text structures: description, cause and effect, compare and contrast, problem and solution, and sequence (Meyer 1985). When doing the book observation activity, students also find that there are other text structures, such as organizing information alphabetically and using a question-and-answer format. My goal is not for students to memorize the forms of text structure, but to be able to identify an organizational method used by an author.

FIGURE 1: Nonfiction text features [Cox 2012]

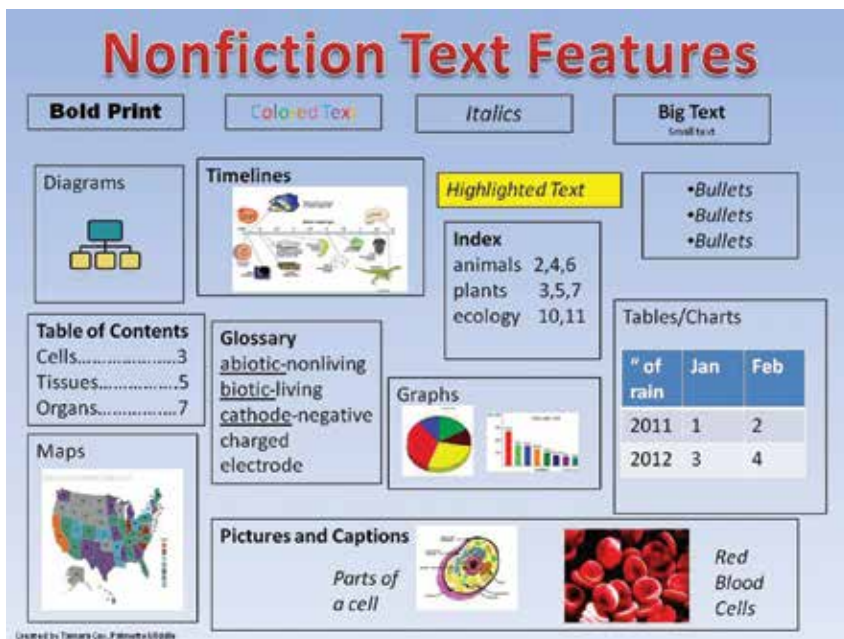


FIGURE 2: Text structures (Simoneau, Orcutt, and Konrade 2018)

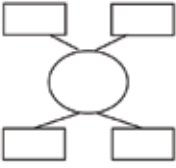


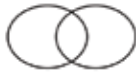
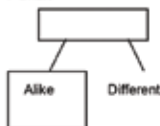


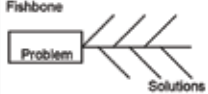

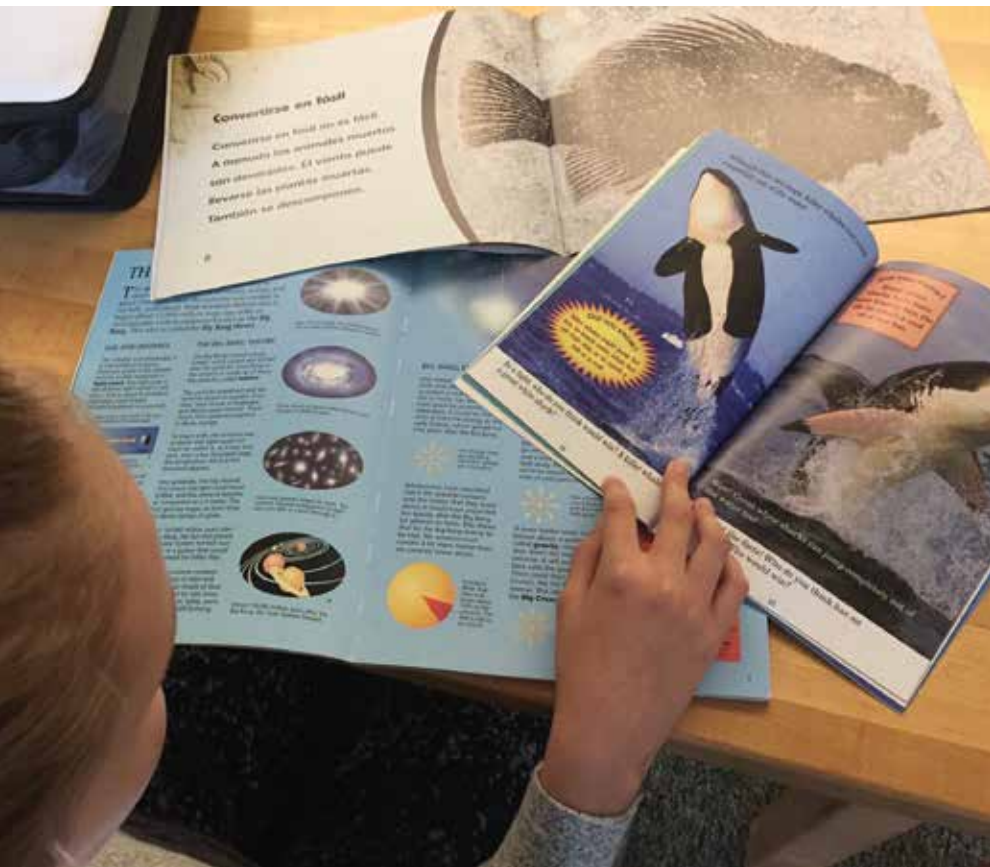
Structure	Definition	Signal Words	Graphic Organizers	Summary Questions	Paragraph Frames
Description	The author explains a topic, idea, person, place, or thing by listing characteristics, features, and examples. Focus is on one thing and its components.	For example Characteristics are Such as Looks like Consists of For instance Most important *Look for topic word (or synonym) to be repeated throughout the text.	Concept Map 	What specific person, place, thing, event, or concept is being described? How is the topic described? (How does it work? What does it do? What does it look like? Etc.) What are the most important attributes or characteristics? How can the topic be classified? (For example, a robin can be classified as a type of bird.)	A _____ is a type of _____. It is made up of _____ and looks like _____. Some _____ have _____ such as _____. For example, _____. _____ has several characteristics. One characteristic is _____. Another is _____, which is important because _____.
Sequence	The author lists items or events in numerical or chronological order. Describes the order of events or how to do or make something.	First, second, third Next Then, after Before, prior to Not long after While, meanwhile Simultaneously At the same time Following Finally At last In the end On (date) At (time) Directions	Timeline 1 2 3 4 5 → Steps/Directions  Cycle/Circle 	What sequence of events is being described? What are the major events or incidents that occur? What are the steps, directions, or procedures to follow? (What must be done first, second, etc.?) What is the beginning event? What other events or steps are included? What is the final outcome, event, or step?	Here is how a _____ is made. First, _____, Next, _____, Then, _____, Finally, _____. On (date) _____ happened. Prior to that _____ was _____. Then _____, After that _____, In the end, _____.
Compare and Contrast	The author explains how two or more things are alike and/or how they are different.	Differs from Similar to In contrast Alike Same as As well as On the other hand Both Either, or Not only, but also Yet, although, but, However On the other hand * Also look for "est" words: best, fewest, tallest, etc.	Venn Diagram  T-Chart 	What items are being compared? What is it about them that is being compared? What characteristics of items form the basis of the comparison? What characteristics do they have in common; how are these items alike? In what way are these items different?	_____ and _____ are alike in several ways. Both _____ and _____ have similar _____. Both also _____ as well as _____. On the other hand, one way they differ is _____. Another difference is _____. Although they share _____, only _____ is the _____-est.
Cause and Effect	The author lists one or more causes or events and the resulting consequences or effects. Effect = What happened? Cause = What made it happen? Purpose is to explain why or how something happened, exists, or works. *Often there will be an "if/then" pattern	Reasons why Reasons for If...then As a result of Therefore Because of So Since In order to Leads or leads to Effects of Caused by Result Outcome Impact Influenced by Brought about by	 	What happened? Why did it happen? What was the reason for...? What was the effect(s) of the event? What happened as a result of...? What were the results or outcomes caused by the event? In what ways did prior event(s) cause or influence the main event? Will this result always happen from these causes?	The reason why _____ happened was because of _____. If _____ hadn't happened, then _____. Due to _____ occurring, _____. This explains why _____. The cause of _____ is not easy to define. Some people think the cause is _____. Others believe the main cause is _____. Understanding the cause of _____ is important because _____. The effects of _____ are significant because _____. One effect of _____ is _____. Another result is _____. Because of these outcomes, it important that _____.
Problem and Solution	The author states a problem and lists one or more possible solutions to the problem. May also include the pros and cons for the solutions.	Problem is... Dilemma is... Puzzle is... Solved Question Answer Because Since This led to The main difficulty One possible solution is... One challenge... Therefore, This led to, so that If...then, thus	Fishbone  	What is the problem(s)? Who had the problem? What is causing the problem? Why is this a problem? What is wrong and how can it be taken care of? What solutions are recommended or attempted? What can be improved, changed, fixed, or remedied? What are the pros and cons of the solutions offered?	_____ had/is a problem because _____. One possible solution is _____. This answer is good because _____. Therefore, _____. As a result, _____. The problem of _____ really boils down to the issue of _____. In the past, the common solution was to _____. However, this was only effective in terms of _____. There are now other solutions that might work. One option would be to _____.

FIGURE 3: A student examining a variety of text structures



To help students see that text features and text structure are universal, I also include nonfiction books in foreign languages. Students find this engaging and quickly realize that text structure can still be determined if a book is written in a different language. To get books for this activity, I ask my school's world language and English language learner (ELL) teachers to borrow some nonfiction books from their class libraries. This strategy also helps my ELL students feel connected to this lesson and enhances their comprehension of the topics of the books. I once worked with a

group, that included an ELL student; he watched members of his group struggle to read the title of a book in Spanish. The ELL student, who did not often speak in class, smiled as he pronounced *terremoto* (earthquake) for his group members with rolling Rs. According to Kristina Robertson (2008), for ELL students who already face the challenges of a new language, it is essential to give them a head start on understanding vocabulary and content by first helping understand nonfiction text structure. She emphasizes the importance of teachers giving direct, clear instruction on

how nonfiction text is structured and what good readers do to get information from the text. Teachers should also give students the opportunity to practice and provide students time to work with peers to increase their comprehension.

I purposely do the book observation activity (Figure 3) before starting a content-based unit so that students can practice the skill of understanding text structure without focusing on reading the actual text. This purposeful practice also allows my students to infer why authors may choose to organize their writing in a certain way. For example, some of the books that students use in this activity include nonfiction books about dinosaurs with three different text structures; two are organized alphabetically, one chronologically, and another compares and contrasts dinosaur features. When discussing why the authors chose to present the information in these varying ways, one student shared that if he were to write a dinosaur book, he would want to write it with a different text structure so that he could approach it in a unique way. This comment showed me that he understood the importance of text structure and that he was starting to think like a writer. Throughout the school year, we revisit text structure whenever we use a new book or website. Each time, the preview is a little shorter as students build independence around identifying the organization of the text.

In science class, I often wish I had more time to teach and expand on the concepts that students are learning. It may seem like teaching students how to approach nonfiction reading is another task to accomplish in an already too-full curriculum; however, taking the time to teach students these skills can save time in the long run by helping them have improved comprehension.

The more that students build a routine around reading, the more likely this is to become a habit in the future. ●

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