

Writing in the Content Areas

Introduction and Expository Texts

One of the driving forces behind my decision to research more about expository texts in the classroom and content area writing is because of the shift that is happening in classrooms from narrative styles to expository. I want to become more acquainted with the expository genre, the reasoning behind this shift and the best way to instruct expository writing for first graders. There are many different factors that attribute to the best practices in expository writing and my hope is that I will be able to implement some of these strategies in my own classroom.

I have found writing to be one of the more challenging subjects to instruct and manage in first grade. I have chosen to research writing in the content areas, more specifically science, as I hope to be able to put my studies to use in my own classroom during our All About writing unit. While this is a unit driven by Oakland Schools writing program that was adopted by my school district, the content itself falls in the realm of science and writing an expository text based off of the research students perform.

It was said in Graham and Fitzgerald “One of the more significant shifts in the writing standards for the CCSS is an assumed progression through grade levels from the dominance of narrative writing to a focus on informative and argumentative writing. The reason for such a shift is a concern for academic standards that might prepare students for the world of work and college-level writing” (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 143). While educators, and perhaps parents may understand this transition, it may be more of an abstract concept when dealing with elementary students, or more specifically, first graders in my classroom. Students in first grade are in the developmental stages of writing. Some may argue that six and seven year olds are still working on mastering the foundational skills of reading and writing: decoding, reversals, capital letters, etc., and that these concepts should be receiving more attention in the lower elementary grades so that they can then build upon these skills with what the CCSS is expecting students to learn.

That said, “The CCSS repeatedly call for a balance between informational literary texts, between reports and stories, between fact and fiction” (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 353). In first grade, six and seven year olds hold smaller amounts of background knowledge or life experience to meet certain writing criteria that have been set by CCSS. For example, a prompt may ask students to “write about their favorite birthday”. Well, any first grader would probably write about their last birthday as memory prior to age five is typically lacking. A prompt of “what’s your favorite subject” may produce answers including “centers” or “nap time” because kindergarten does not necessarily include a daily schedule of academics as first grade through fifth grade would.

With the implementation of informational texts from CCSS, students are writing about things they are familiar with in the form an animal, a place, an event, etc., rather than an event in their personal lives. As challenging as this may be, it is important that “they appreciate that a key purpose of writing is to communicate clearly to an external, unfamiliar audience and to adapt the

form and content of their writing to accomplish a particular task and purpose” (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 363).

Review of Research Literature / Why The Shift

As formal and informal reading assessments have become more of a focal point in today’s classrooms, teachers are seeing an increase in the expository text genre within curriculums and daily instructional practices. “An increasing amount of research has consistently indicated the importance of including expository text in children’s textuary diet and preparing children to read this material proficiently. Expository text and strategic reading are particularly important, given current emphasis on assessing reading achievement” (Pilonieta, 2011, p. 45). Teachers are now working towards creating a balanced literacy library so that students are more familiar with the genres that were not as commonly used in former years.

This article discussed the value of exposing young students to expository text. “Lack of proficiency with either type of genre can have significant ramifications for students, since performance on high-stakes test is used to make decision regarding grade promotion and graduation. These consequences reverberate into advanced schooling and the workplace as researchers agree that expository text literacy is essential for success in these venues (Montelongo, & Hernandez, 2007; Moss, 2008; Ranker, 2009; Webster, 2009 (Pilonieta, 2011, p. 45). It may be an unrealistic thought that the six and seven year olds that make up my classroom each year will have the ability to succeed in these various areas twenty years from their current age. However, research shows that “early and continued exposure to different types of writing is related to later reading success in the content areas” (Pilonieta, 2011, p. 45). I recognize my role in creating well-versed readers so that they can have the utmost success in their later education as well as in their future careers.

“In elementary classrooms, the information report genre takes many forms-content area textbooks, information books, and magazines and encyclopedia articles and that this genre is also commonly requested for writing assignments and appears on many state writing assessments” (Donovan & Smolkin, 2011 p.406). The weight that both informational reading and writing carry poses the question, “are teachers doing the right instructing?” or more specifically, “am I do the right instructing?” There are pacing guides and curriculum guidelines to follow but in the article *Supporting Informational Writing in the Elementary Grades*, the author’s stated that they’ve “recognized this as an area where teachers can use additional guidance” (Donovan & Smolkin, 2011, p.406).

The figure below represents the lesson plan format that is used for my writing lessons developed by Oakland Schools. It is an ideal way of keeping structure within each unit so that students understand their the expectations of a lesson.



Figure 1: Oakland Schools Lesson Plan Structure

Suggested Strategies in Expository Writing

Text Feature Walks

When reading from expository texts, students are introduced to a genre where the illustrations are no longer cartoons and the story line does not involve a problem and solution. This stark contrast between genres of fiction that many young students are exposed to can cause some confusion in the way students comprehend the text. In the article, *Guiding Students Through Expository Text With Text Feature Walks*, Kelley and Clausen-Grace state that text feature walks “guide students in the reading of text features in order to access prior knowledge, make connections, and set a purpose for reading expository texts” (Kelly & Clausen-Grace, 2010, p. 191). There is value to activating prior knowledge in young students so they can begin reading with connections that can be made. (See Figure 2 for text feature descriptions).

A more familiar strategy to activating background knowledge or making connections is called a “picture walk”. “By looking at and talking about the illustrations in a text, students activate prior knowledge, make predictions, and set a purpose for reading (Clay, 1991; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). This is a common practice in elementary classrooms and aids in developing conversation and comprehension before a text is read. The familiarity that students have to picture walks works in tandem with text feature walks. It was said that, “Teachers must recognize factors within a text that can enhance or impair comprehension. These factors fall into three categories: text features, text organization, and text content” (Kelly & Clausen-Grace, 2010, p. 192). A teacher must keep these factors in mind to best guide their students through an expository text to ensure comprehension.

Figure 2: Text Features

Name of text feature	Purpose of text feature
Title	Quickly tells the reader what information they will learn about
Table of Contents	Shows students the different chapter or section titles and where they are located
Index	Directs students where to go in the text to find specific information on a topic, word, or person
Glossary	Identifies important vocabulary words for students and gives their definitions
Headings/Subtitles	Help the reader identify the main idea for that section of text
Sidebars	Are set apart from the main text, (usually located on the side or bottom of the page) and elaborate on a detail mentioned in the text
Pictures/Captions	Show an important object or idea from the text
Labeled Diagrams	Allow readers to see detailed depictions of an object from the text with labels that teach the important components
Charts and Graphs	Represent and show data related to, or elaborate on, something in the main body of a text
Maps	Help a reader locate a place in the world that is related to the text
Cutaways/Cross Sections	Allow readers to see inside something by dissolving part of a wall or to see all the layers of an object by bisecting it for viewing
Inset photos	Can show either a faraway view of something or a close-up shot of minute detail

The general format for a text feature walk is described below:

1. Begin by explaining that a text feature walk is like the picture walks they did when they were learning to read picture books.
2. Explicitly model how you as an expert reader use a text feature to make a prediction using a think-aloud in a whole group setting.
3. Explain how the information in the text feature may contribute to the main idea of the text.
4. Cluster students so each group is heterogeneous with varied strengths
5. All group members should discuss the predictions, questions, or connections they have to the feature and how they think it relates to their predicted main idea.
6. Have students read the main body of the text and debrief with them on what they learned and how the text feature walk assisted with comprehension.
7. Check in with groups to remind students the purpose of their reading.

In a study done through this article, it was said that, “After three years of implementing text feature walks with students, we knew the practice engendered more meaningful predictions and deeper comprehension” (Kelly & Clausen-Grace, 2010, p. 194). This, in turn, allows students to then take their deeper comprehension from expository texts and create a more meaningful and accurate written piece. This would be a well-suited approach for the All About Frogs writing that is written by my first graders. I plan to utilize text feature walks with my students at the beginning of the All About unit so that students in my room are also able to make more meaningful predictions and gain deeper comprehension to aid in writing a more developed story.

Think Aloud

Comprehension in expository texts presents challenges, as the illustrations don’t necessarily “tell the story” as in fictional books. The images seen in expository texts are meant to explain a process, a stage in a life cycle, or provide evidence to the research being presented. The article *Comprehension of Expository Text: Insights Gained from Think-Aloud Data* provides a strategy that may be used for students to gain more understanding from these types of texts.

“Comprehension is a complex set of processes that involves the encoding of facts, the activation of knowledge and the generation of inferences to connect information in was that make it understandable and memorable (Gillam, Fargo, & Robertson, 2009, p. 82).

The authors recommend a “think-aloud” as an effective method to achieve this type of comprehension. “Think aloud methods became popular in the 1980s for their use in revealing metacognitive processes that occur during thinking or reasoning (Ericsson & Simon, 1984). In a think aloud task, statements or verbal protocols are generated by participates as they verbalize their thoughts or thought processes while reading, listening, to stories or solving problems” (Gillam, Fargo, & Robertson, 2009, p. 82). Think-alouds essentially gives the reader accountability for their reading and comprehension, as they are required to share out their findings.

There was a specific study done had a purpose of determining whether children with and without Learning Impairments produce similar kinds of statements while thinking aloud about

expository texts, and to examine the potential relationships among statements, comprehension, and verbal working memory between and within groups. Children involved in the think-aloud task were asked to “listen to two expository text passages, one at a time, as the examiner read each one. Children were told to listen carefully because they would be asked to comment on each sentence, answer questions about the passage, and remember what they could about the passage” (Gillam, Fargo, & Robertson, 2009, p. 82) while the verbal-working memory task group answered true or false questions post reading.

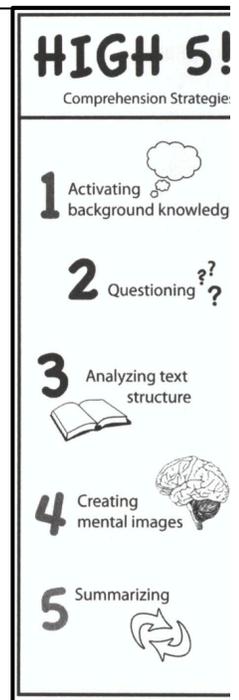
The findings from this preliminary study suggest that, “children were more likely to generate paraphrases than repetitions or inferences while thinking aloud an expository text. The children who paraphrased accurately tended to perform better on measures of comprehension. Paraphrasing requires memory for details as well as the ability to restate factual information in a text. Gillam, Fargo, & Robertson, 2009, p. 91). It is important to recognize that this think-aloud strategy provided students with the opportunity to restate their understanding in a way that was more accurate than true or false follow up questions. Teachers can steer away from that type of post-reading activity and give students the ability to share their learning in their own words, furthering their comprehension of an expository text.

I can envision this think-aloud in my own classroom where I have students reading from expository texts about frogs with a buddy or small group. I would give the class share time and create a whole-class collection of frog facts or findings that would not only reinforce their understanding but also give them more detail to include in their All About Frogs story.

High 5!

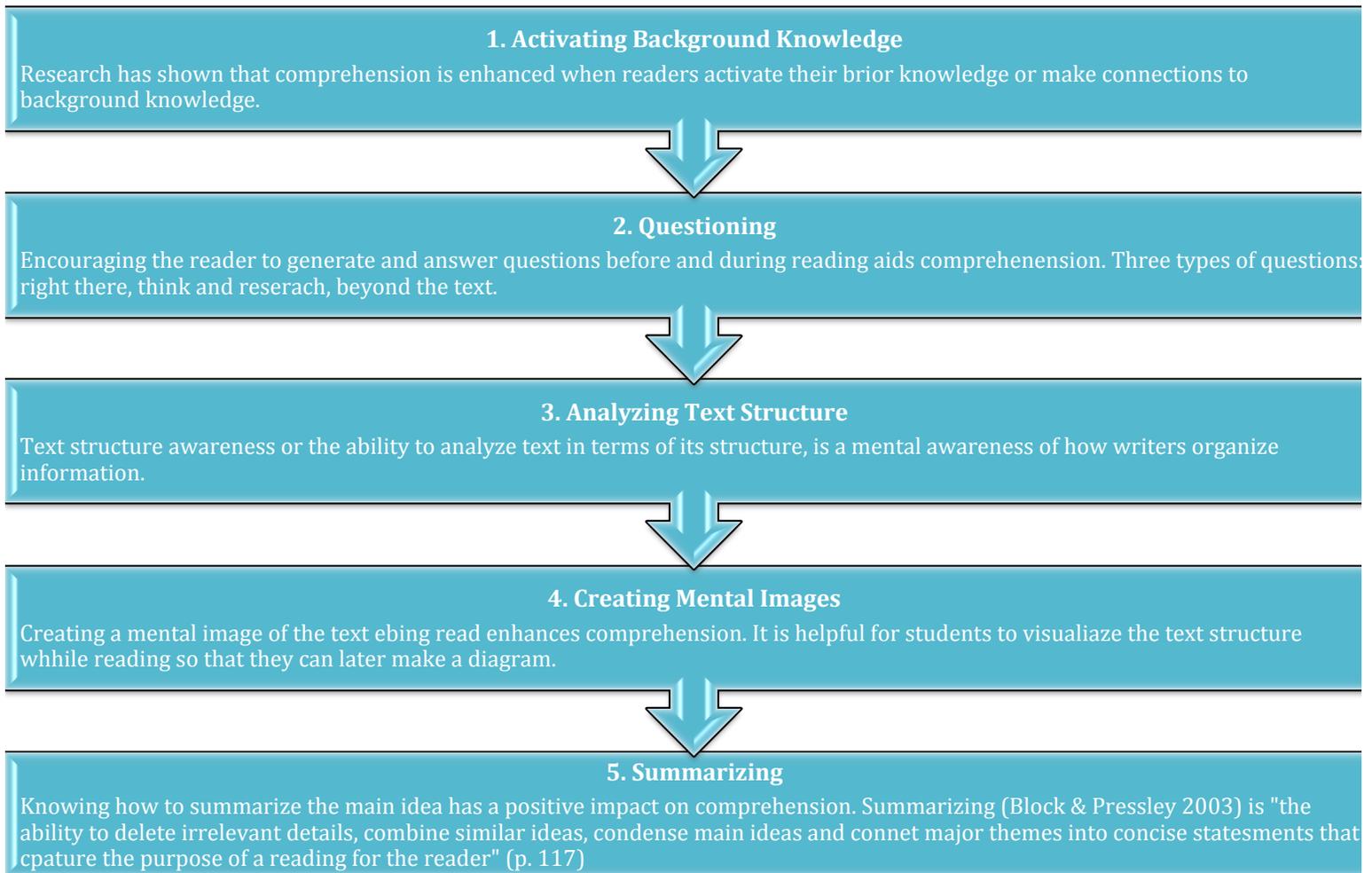
Susan Dymock and Tom Nicholson described strategy as “a plan or technique used by students to get information they need from the text, whether it is for the purpose of choosing the correct stem on a multiple-choice test or getting enough information to construct an effective report or essay” (Dymock & Nicholson, 2010, p. 166). This speaks to the exact reason behind the All About Frogs story requirement. Students read for information and then produce a story based on the information they have retained. However, the authors put it into a simpler perspective. What do we want to teach our students? “The goal is: to teach students the five comprehension strategies that we think are the most effective” (Dymock & Nicholson, 2010, p. 166).

Figure 3:
High 5 Bookmark



The reason behind these five comprehension strategies is because “skilled readers use different strategies to comprehend expository text and teachers play a critical role in the acquisition of effective strategies” (Pearson & Duke, 2002, Smolkin & Donovan 2002). We as teachers need to instruct in a way that reaches all types of learners. The “one size fits all” approach is not one that can be applied to a classroom full of young learners. There are many different comprehension strategies that are commonly used, however this article focused on five. (See Figure 4 & 5 for descriptions of High 5!)

Figure 4: High 5!



Technology

In a world where technology is growing at a rapid pace, it is important to become familiar with the ways technology can be implemented for educational purposes. In *Using Technology to Support Expository Reading and Writing in Science Classes* it was said that, “Technology encourages improved comprehension of reading and more elaborate writing in the science classroom by motivating students to act on their curiosity, access resources, and embellish their

work” (Herter & Montelongo, 2011, p. 1). Certainly there are areas in technology that these types of traits may not be active, however, a teacher can find ways in which technology can create this type of motivation in students and put it to effective use in the classroom.

Writing in the content areas can be challenging as many students are more comfortable writing fictional pieces or personal narratives where their imagination or experience can guide them along in the writing process. Writing in science presents a challenge because of the unfamiliar format students are required to write in. “Students struggle with the transition from learning to read narrative text in the early grades to reading expository text in the science classroom in upper grades as they begin reading and writing to gain information” (Herter & Montelongo, 2011, p. 1). This statement is especially applicable to me as my first grade students produce a written piece in this exact content area and open to suggestions to better approach this challenge.

The authors discussed how “technology gives students many opportunities to change their original compositions. Students can edit and re-edit their compositions to reflect the interaction between the text and their prior knowledge. Teachers can help students edit their compositions by permitting them to use the dictionary, thesaurus, and encyclopedia, use clip art, thus reinforcing student autonomy” (Herter & Montelongo, 2011, p. 4). This sparked my interest because often times there are students who are more skilled and have mastered some of the first grade concepts early in the school year and are found “finished” with their All About story much sooner than the rest of the class.

I can see some students who have the ability to navigate on the computer typing their story on the computer as a requirement rather than writing it by hand, some of the more gifted students. The All About stories are not necessarily lengthy, so these students who are more skilled in writing may first produce a rough draft by hand and then be required to produce a typed version of their story. Not only would this reinforce comprehension, but it would also motivate students to be more creative with their work, add more detail and become more involved with their story.

Mentor Texts

Students are often introduced to a writing topic in elementary school through the use of a mentor text. Some units, such as small moment, may include a mentor text that evokes a certain feeling that students could relate to and then produce their own writing with a similar emotion. When writing in the content areas, how then are teachers to choose stories that simultaneously inform students, provide text features, and enough written content to make meaning from?

In Using Mentor Texts to Teach Writing in Science and Social Studies by Kristine E. Pytash and Denise N Morgan say that, “We believe the use of mentor texts offers untapped benefits for both students and teachers in disciplinary classrooms. For students, studying mentor texts provides an opportunity to learn firsthand from other writers, to become aware of the multiple decisions writers make in crafting their texts. We believe students become better writers as they have more opportunities to read quality writing. In addition, we believe the use of mentor texts offers teachers support in teaching writing well” (Morgan & Pytash, 2014, p. p. 94). The author’s view on mentor texts is one that teachers should take note of as it will aid in better-preparing students for writing in the content areas, which is one of much focus and importance with new

standards and the shifts in educational demands.

There are three guiding principles for using mentor texts to be mindful of. The first when selection a mentor text, be sure that the text is one that relates to the topic and inform students that the texts provide an example of the final product in which they will produce (length, tone, style) so that they are prepared to take notice of those areas. Secondly, it is important for students to engage in *reading like a writer* (Ray, 2006) a term that requires the reader to notice how the writing is crafted. Third is to focus on the levels of support given to students. “One suggestion is to use a gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983): the teacher initially does most of the notice about the text until students start to see writing in this new way”. This type of guidance allows students to develop independence in their writing and hold students more accountable for what they produce in their writing.

As students continue to explore expository texts, they will more able to have “Close examination of texts helps students become well versed in the particular conventions, and terminology valued by a discipline” (Morgan & Pytash, 2014, p. 101), a valuable skill to have in their ongoing education. (See Figure 5 for Take Action strategy)

Figure 5: Take Action!

1.	Engage students in an inquiry project that allows them to explore the significant genres within a discipline. For example, students can contact experts in the field or browse appropriate publications specific to the discipline.
2.	Work with students to select mentor texts to use as models for their writing.
3.	Begin conversations with students about what they notice about mentor texts. Model for students your thinking about the texts, and offer opportunities for students to engage in close analysis so they can example features of quality pieces.
4.	Students should begin crafting their original pieces. Have students return to the mentor texts to scaffold their thinking and writing.

Evidence Based Instructional Practice

Writing in the content areas has many different strategies and approaches that are supported through evidence based practices. It is important to consider students, both working on grade-level and those approaching grade-level writing skills when developing lessons for writing. In *Implementing an Evidence-Based Instructional Routine to Enhance Comprehension of Expository Text* the authors suggest way teachers can prepare adolescent struggling readers, “Although the CCSS provides guidance regarding what students should be able to do to reach academic success, the standards do not suggest specific instructional practices to support students” (Wexler, Reed, Mitchell, Doyle, Clancy, 2014, p. 1).

It is important for teachers to understand the variety of approaches available to reach every student in writing, as well as in the other core subjects. This article included a four-step instructional routine that would aid in student comprehension of reading an expository text (See Figure 6).

<i>Figure 6: Comprehension Instructional Routine</i>	
Steps	Explanation
Explicit Instruction of Background Knowledge	Provide brief (3-5 minutes) but explicit instruction in the background knowledge necessary for students to understand the text.
Explicit Vocabulary Instruction	Preteach essential vocabulary in order for students to make meaning of unfamiliar words that will be read in the text.
Explicit Main Idea Instruction	Teach students to generate the main idea of a paragraph in the text. This is an effective way that students can monitor their own comprehension while reading complex expository text.
Peer-Mediated Practice	Students of the same age work together as partners or in a small group to complete assignments.

This process could be modeled at the beginning of a unit and completed as a whole group. Students would have a visual understanding of the way this routine would be completed and understand the steps they must follow. It also gives students accountability for their work in that they must identify the main idea of an article, something that is not explicitly stated in many expository texts, rather what the students interpret in their minds. This is a larger concept for first graders and would be beneficial to include the peer-mediated practice where students could share their thinking with their partner or group and develop a deeper understanding of a text with the conversations of their classmates.

Cooperative learning is something that students in my classroom experience on a daily basis, not only through the lessons I implement but also through the way in which I organize my classroom. I promote conversation and find importance in students working together. It develops a unified classroom setting and gives students the opportunity to make connections between their academic studies while creating connections among their classmates. When students work in partnerships or small groups at their table, I hear meaningful thoughts being shared aloud. It also gives those students that may not have the confidence to share their thinking in a smaller setting.

Graphic Organizers

Writing in the content areas is different than in narrative or fictional writing as the story elements differ and the tone is also meant to inform, rather than entertain. So then, how do students make meaning or monitor their comprehension of an expository text? Graphic organizers are commonly used for identifying the main idea and details, the setting and characters of books students may read from. With this familiarity, it is an option to use graphic organizers for expository texts as well. *Best Practices in Writing Instruction* said that, “like exemplary writing, good concept maps are usually the product of several drafts. Therefore it is important that authors continue to refine and revise their concept maps as they extend and enhance their thinking” (Richards & Millar, 2005, p. 74). While students are reading with writing in mind, it is important that they first can identify the important or the most meaningful

parts of the text.

I felt reassurance reading this and more educated in the graphic organizers I have used in my own classroom. We read from a series of articles as a whole class that introduced students to different types of penguins. This series of articles was fitting for first graders as the structure was the exact same with text features they would recognize and included a graphic organizer that would be completed as a post-reading activity. While reading we practiced highlighting facts and important pieces of information that helped us identify certain penguins apart from other penguins. Students were then able to go back to the text, or “G.B.T.T.T”, and find the parts they highlighted to write in the graphic organizer.

As a first time lesson or introduction unit to the All About Frogs unit, I found this to be extremely successful and very motivating to the students. It was also something that was appropriate as we were studying penguins in the winter and many students have seen penguins at the zoo or in movies, such as “Happy Feet” where they were able to activate their background knowledge and make connections to the different types of penguins being studied. Additionally, students were able to gain independence in this mini-unit and could work with their table group to read from the informational article and practice the highlighting procedure. Figure 8 and 9 are copies of the article and graphic organizers that were used in my classroom.

Figure 7: Penguin Article

Little Penguin



Credit: Photo by [Ken & Nveta](#). Creative Commons license

HABITAT: Little penguins live in Australia and New Zealand. They live along the shore and make nests in burrows, rocks, caves and under trees.

FOOD: They eat fish, krill and squid. Their favorite fish are sardines and anchovies.

PREDATORS: Their main enemies are sharks, seals and large gulls. The eggs in the nest are prey for snakes, lizards and rats.

COOL FACTS:

- *They are also called blue or fairy penguins.
- *The female lays 2 eggs and the parents take turns caring for the eggs. Both of the chicks usually survive.
- *The parents care for the chicks for about 5 weeks and then they are on their own.
- *They are nocturnal. They rest for small periods of time during the day. Sometimes they stay out on the water and rest there.

When they are on land, they hide in burrows during the day.

APPEARANCE: The little penguin is the smallest penguin. It is about 15 inches tall and only weighs 2 pounds! It has dark blue-gray feathers on its back that are sometimes a lighter blue. The color changes with the season and the age of the penguin. The chest and neck area is white. They have blue-gray eyes.

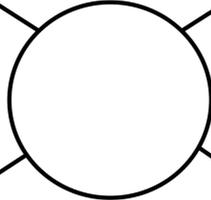
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Figure 8: Graphic Organizer

Penguin: _____

Eats:

Looks like:



Enemies:

Cool Fact:

By: _____

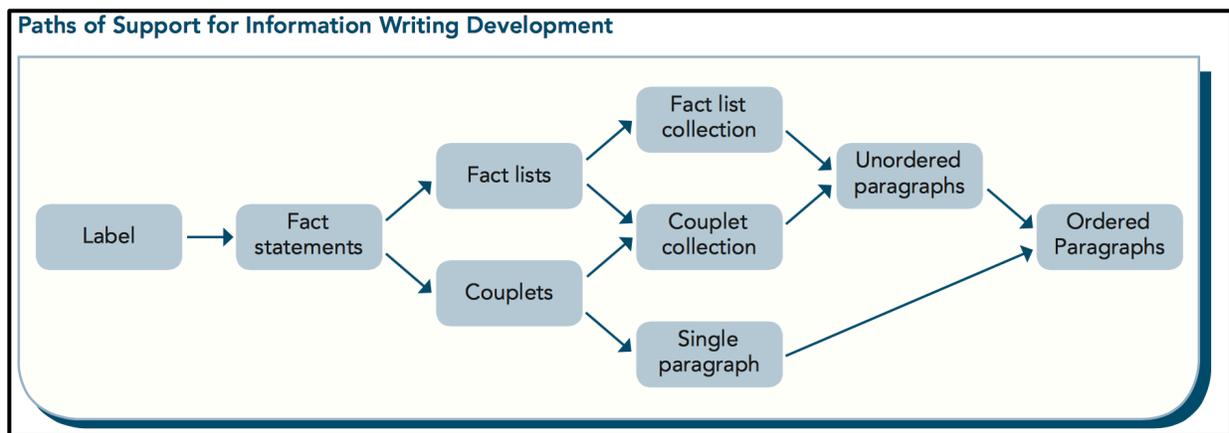
Paths of Support for Informational Writing

Shifting from what resources have proven to be effective for students, my attention is now towards what types of changes I can make as a teacher when it comes to *guiding* students in their writing process. Students have grown both physically and academically from the beginning of first grade where they enter essentially as kindergarteners that require much support and

monitoring. I have a strong desire for my students to become independent and able to monitor their own comprehension and work ethic the latter half of the school year.

One of my burning questions for this course was “how do I get students to write “more” in their writing?” While some students are able to follow a rubric of requirements and recognize certain expectations of writing, I often find that students write in a way that does not showcase their abilities or lacks detail. This question was answered through an article that provided a map for paths of support for information writing development. This gave me insight to ways I can add gradual support or prompting for informational writing with my students. To eliminate the dependence students have on adult reassurance, I try to balance between *helping* and *telling* students what to include in their stories. Donovan and Smolkin have provided an approach that would decrease the amount of “telling” I do based on what students are producing in their writing (See Figure 7).

Figure 9



Conclusion

My time spent researching expository writing was meaningful and productive. I was able to take my findings and envision them in my own classroom. By having this plan of action for future lessons, my students may be better prepared and more educated when it comes to writing in the content areas. My hope is that not only will these strategies become useful for my students, but also I am able to adapt them as I see best-fit each new group of students in first grade.

Sample Lesson Plan

Figure 10: Teaching Text Features

Overview

This lesson plan will provide students with a strong foundation for reading, writing, and using nonfiction.

Objective

Students will:

1. Gain an awareness and general understanding what text structures are
2. Learn what clues they can use to identify the text structure of a piece of writing

Materials

- [Text Structures Chart](#) (PDF)
- [Stopping a Toppling Tower](#) (PDF) — one copy for each student

Directions

Step 1: Use the Text Structures chart to explain **what text structures are** and **what clues students can use** to identify text structures.

Step 2: Help students understand the importance of understanding text structure by explaining that a reader who is aware of the patterns that are being used can anticipate the kind of information that will be presented.

Example: If we know a selection follows a “compare and contrast” organization, we can expect to read about likeness and differences between people or things. This will help us connect ideas and remember them.

Step 3: Have students reread [Stopping a Toppling Tower](#) (PDF).

Step 4: Ask students to identify what type of text structure this selection is (*problem and solution*). Ask them, “How does the reader know?” They should be able to identify that the first paragraph states that there is a “problem.” The second paragraph states that engineers have found a “solution.” Which headings offered clues?

Reproducibles

[Five Text Structures](#)

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