Abstract

Teaching children in the primary grades the text structures and features used by authors of information text has been shown to improve comprehension of information texts and provide the scaffolding and support these children need in order to write their own information texts. As teachers implement the *English Language Arts Common Core State Standards* (CCSS), they will need support and training on how to meet these increased curricular demands. In this article, we describe how children's information books can be used as exemplars of well-structured text models to teach young students how to write selected discourse patterns required in the CCSS. As children in the primary grades learn to recognize and use well-structured example information texts as models for their own writing, they will be better prepared to deal with less well-structured, more complex text examples in their reading and writing in the years to come.

Keywords: Information text; text structure; primary grades; writing models

Using the Text Structures of Information Books to Teach Writing in the Primary Grades

The *English Language Arts Common Core State Standards* have given informational text an increasingly prominent place in classroom reading and writing instruction (CCSS, 2010). To build proficiency in reading informational text throughout a student's K-12 educational experiences, the *English Language Arts Common Core State Standards* (CCSS) emphasize that students read and receive more literacy instruction using informational text. The recommendation is that K-12 students read and receive literacy instruction with a 50/50 proportion of information to narrative texts by grade 4 and a 70/30 proportion of information to narrative texts by grade 12. A major purpose for the CCSS is to prepare K-12 students to be college and career ready readers and writers. The increase in focus and attention on informational texts is due in large part to the fact that most adult reading and writing involves informational text (Smith, 2000). The craft and structure of information texts is a major category of study in the CCSS in which students are expected to learn how information texts are composed and organized.

The study of information text organization and structure, sometimes referred to as close readings, has long been found to positively affect students' text comprehension and composition (Pearson & Duke, 2002; Williams, 2007). In their research on teaching text structures to improve reading comprehension, Meyer & Wijkumar (2007) showed that teaching text discourse patterns and structures through the use of model -texts- and then applying these in children's writing helped them to simultaneously improve comprehension and writing composition. Read, Reutzel, and Fawson (2008) provided similar data demonstrating that using children's trade books as "text models" for teaching text structure to young children is an effective practice for increasing young students'

reading comprehension of information texts. Additionally, the practice of reading books as models of writing has been shown to influence students acquisition of writing genres, discourse patterns, and text structures (Coker, 2007; Donovan & Smolkin, 2006; Meyer & Wijkumar, 2007).

Text structure, as described in the CCSS qualitative text complexity description, focuses upon text organization and text features to include conventional and unconventional text structures and the inclusion of simple, integrally related text features such a signal or clue words or phrases, headings, sub-headings, typography, paragraph structure, and graphic displays (CCSS, 2010). Informational texts are organized around several conventionally accepted text structures: *description, sequence, problem/solution, compare/contrast, and cause/effect* as presented in Figure 1 (Meyer & Poon, 2001; Williams et al., 2007, 2009).

Insert Figure 1 [Information Text Structures] about here

Text structure is inherent in a text's purpose and organizational pattern reflecting the logical connections among ideas in the text (Williams et al., 2007). Text structures not only describe how a particular text is organized but also how other general rhetorical structures are organized as well as the cognitive entities found in the coherence representations of good readers (Kintsch & Kintsch, 2005; Meyer & Wijekumar, 2007).

Although some students can deduce conventional text structures or organizational patterns, many students require intensive, explicit instruction in order to recognize and understand how to use these conventional informational text structures to improve their comprehension of informational texts (Pearson & Duke, 2002; Williams, et al., 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009). Williams (2007) asserts that "People sometimes argue that because

only a small proportion of authentic text actually follow any single specific structure, there is little reason to spend much instructional time on text structure. It is true that for some children the reading experience attained over the first years of schooling will be sufficient for them to attain sensitivity to structure. For many children, however, this is not enough…early comprehension instruction is likely to be more effective if it includes specific instruction in text structure, including the use of texts that are well structured and prepared specifically for particular instructional purposes," pp. 201-202.

Recently published *Institute of Education Sciences* (IES) "evidence-based" practice guides for primary grade (K-3) educators have strongly recommended explicitly teaching conventional informational text structures as an important part of reading comprehension instruction (Shanahan et al., 2010). Past research has shown that knowledge of or a sensitivity to informational text structures enhances students' abilities to identify important ideas, construct accurate meaning, acquire new content knowledge, predict future events, summarize, and monitor comprehension of information texts (Hall & Sabey, 2005; Williams, et al., 2004, 2005, 2007).

For text structure instruction to be optimally effective in the early grades, teachers need to scaffold young students' text structure knowledge development by using well-structured exemplar texts. Many informational texts are poorly written, lack a clear structure, or switch frequently between structures (Kantor, Andersen, & Armbruster, 1983). Well-structured exemplar texts exhibit "simple, well-marked, and conventional structures" (CCSS, 2010, Appendix A, p. 5). This same panel suggests, "teachers use familiar ideas or topics when teaching students about the structure of informational text, and initially use texts that provide clear, easy-to-recognize examples of the structure"

(Shanahan et al., 2010, p. 19). Such well-structured texts make use of signal or clue words and other text features (as shown in Figure 1) to signal important organizational units and transitions for the reader. Graphics, photos, charts, and tables inserted into informational texts should clarify rather than confuse or distract from comprehension of the content. Using well-structured exemplars of informational text structures to provide text structure instruction helps young students more easily recognize text structures, thus allowing them to use this knowledge later on to comprehend less well-structured, complex information texts (Hall, Sabey, & McClellan, 2005; Williams, 2005; Williams et al., 2007; Williams, Stafford, Lauer, Hall, & Pollini, 2009).

Although recent instructional research demonstrates the effectiveness of text structure and text feature instruction on primary grade students' reading comprehension as early as second grade (Hall, Sabey & McClellan, 2005; Reutzel, Smith & Fawson, 2005; Williams, et al., Williams, et al., 2004, Williams, et al., 2005, Williams, et al., 2007, Williams, et al., 2009), many primary grade teachers admit to limited familiarity with the use of informational texts to teach text structures to young children (Hall & Sabey, 2007). In this article, we describe how to use children's information books as exemplars of well-structured text models to teach young students how to write selected discourse patterns required of teachers and young students in the CCSS. We have known for many years, that what children read provides them a model for writing (Eckhoff, 1983, 1986). As a result, we offer an example *read-to-write* lesson plan for teachers to use when helping children perform close text readings to understand text structures found in information books that support the teaching and learning of writing information texts in the primary grades.

Using Information Books as Text Structure Models

We begin by identifying writing standards (grades 1-3) in the CCSS that lend themselves easily to using information books as models (and the text structure utilized within each of these books) to assist young students in writing their own informative texts. Please note that due to the space constraints of this article, we selected only one writing standard for grades 1, 2, and 3 and only one corresponding text structure to use in each example. However, there are multiple CCSS writing standards that could be used for text structure analysis and writing instruction at each grade level. For each of the writing standards, we provide exemplars of well-structured information texts that teachers can use as models for writing instruction.

Sequence Information Texts – First Grade

In the K-5 Writing Standards of the CCSS (2010, p. 19), Grade 1 students are expected to, "*Participate in shared research and writing projects (e.g., explore a number of 'how-to' books on a given topic and use them to write a sequence of instructions).*" This standard is designed to provide students with the opportunity to write procedural texts that require a *sequence* text structure as is typically found in a *how-to* piece of writing. Sequential text structures are designed to organize information within texts in a way that highlights time order, processes, cycles, or procedures. The best way to help young children recognize the often transparent nature of text structures and features found in children's books is to call attention to these during shared readings of well-structured exemplar information books – information books that provide clear cut examples of sequential text structure.

There are many well-structured sequence information books that can be used as

models for first graders to use in learning how texts can be organized sequentially in writing. For example, *Make an Animal Mobile* (French, 2002) is an example of a well-structured of sequence text structure. In this information book, the author provides step-by-step directions on how to make a mobile. A second exemplar sequential text structure book, *Stars of the Show* (Hammonds, 2004) shares the step-by-step processes for putting on a play. Another excellent model of sequence text structure for first grade students is *Divide it Up!* (Leslie, 2006). This book demonstrates how to divide things up mathematically and sequentially. A final example of sequence text structure for first grade students is *From Tadpole to Frog* (Kottke,1998), which explains the life cycle of how a tadpole becomes a frog.

Problem/Solution Text Structure – Second Grade

In the Writing Standards K-5 of the CCSS (2010, p. 19), Grade 2 students are expected to, "*Recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.*" This standard is designed to provide students with the opportunity of writing text that would require a *problem/solution* text structure. This text structure is used when authors describe a complex problem and then explain the multiple paths pursued to fix a problem. In the early grades, however, problem solution text structure is often much simpler. Rather than posing sophisticated problems requiring complicated solutions, problem solution texts often ask a question and then answer it.

Examples of well-structured problem/solution or question/answer information books that can be used as writing models in the early grades includes *Michelle Kwan* (Goodridge, 2003). The author asks and answers a variety of questions about this famous figure skater. A second book, *Measuring Tools* (Daronco & Presit, 2001) presents

questions and answers about the variety of tools we use daily. Another good model of the question/answer text structure to be used to support second grade students' information text writing instruction is *What Holds Us to Earth?* (Boothroyd, 2010). This book asks and answers questions about how gravity works. A final exemplar of the question/answer text structure for second grade students is *Animal Tool Time* (Miller, 2005), which asks and answers questions about how different animals use tools in their daily life.

Descriptive Text Structure – Third Grade

In the Writing Standards K-5 of the CCSS (2010, p. 20), Grade 3 students are expected to, "*write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.*" This standard includes four sub-objectives: (a) Introduce a topic and group related information together; include illustrations when useful to aid in comprehension; (b) develop the topic with facts, definitions, and details; (c) use liking words and phrases to connect ideas within categories of information; and (d) provide a concluding statement or section. This standard is designed to provide students with the opportunity of writing information text that would require a *descriptive* text structure. This text structure is used when authors describe information on a given topic or topics.

There are a variety of well-structured descriptive information books that can be used as writing models to meet these Common Core writing standards. For example, *A to Z China* (Fontes & Fontes, 2003), is an example of a descriptive text structure where the authors provide lots of descriptive information about China. A second book, *Constellations* (Sipiera & Sipiera,1997) presents descriptive information about constellations. Another good model of the descriptive text structure is *Edgar Degas*

(Venezia, 2001). This book provides information about this world famous artist. A final exemplar of descriptive text structure for third grade students is *The National Anthem* (Sorensen, 2008), which provides details and information about the national anthem.

Using Reading Models to Support Writing Instruction

Now that we have located several exemplars of well-structured information text exemplars, we describe how teachers can use these to model text structures used in reading to support writing instruction with young children. In this section, we outline example lessons that incorporate well-structured information texts as models for student writing. This is a reciprocal process that begins with a close reading of or analyzing the text structures found in well-structured information texts. In a close reading of a text during shared reading, teachers help students identify features, elements, and signal words that are often unique to each text structure and then in turn show children how to use these same features, elements, and signal words in shared writing experiences. This reciprocal process is illustrated in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 [Reading to Writing Lesson] about here

We begin with a shared reading lesson in which the teacher models for young students what to notice or look for that reveals the underlying organization or structure of an information text. This model lesson shown in Figure 2 can be adapted to any one of the five text structures we have previously described. A corresponding graphic organizer should accompany each lesson. Graphic organizers provided in Figure 3 are examples of those that could be used with this model lesson; and they also correspond with the well-structured model text types previously described - sequence, problem/solution or question/answer and descriptive text structures.

Insert Figure 3 [Graphic Organizers] about here

Analyzing Information Text through Close Readings

Prior to teaching this lesson plan, it is critical that students have previously been taught the five text structures (see Figure 1), text features, and graphic organizers so that they are familiar with these terms and structures. Williams, Hall, and Lauer (2004) recommend ample instruction in these three areas. Once this information has been taught, the read to write lesson plan follows these general steps:

- **Text Structure**. Determine the text structure you will focus on for this lesson. Select several (at least three) well-structured information books (see previous recommendations) that use this text structure. For a shared reading lesson, you will need to enlarge the books so all students can see. This is easily accomplished using a computer projector and document camera.
- **Read the title aloud**. Explain to students, "We will be reading a book about…" Think about the text structure that the author used to share this information.
- **Taking a Text Feature Walk**. Much like a picture walk, we take a text feature walk before reading the book. We begin by scanning the book for a *table of contents*. If there is one, show it to students and remind them how authors use a table of contents to show how they will organize the contents of the book. Scan the book for *headings*. If headings have been used, explain how authors use headings to organize the information within the book. In well-structured information text examples, the text feature of headings is directly tied to the entries in the table of contents. Headings are used to group sentences to address a similar topic. Scan the book for diagrams, graphs, charts, etc. that are commonly

used in information text. Explain to students that this information that can enhance our understanding.

- **Read the book aloud** to students. As you read, record information from the book on a graphic organizer. Graphic organizers have long been recommended as a useful tool to assist students in understanding increasingly complex concepts and structures (Kim, Vaughn, Wanzek & Wei, 2004; Nesbit & Adescope, 2006). Each text structure corresponds to a different graphic organizer (descriptive = cluster web, sequence = cyclical or step-by-step, compare/contrast = Venn diagram, problem/solution = two boxes side by side, and cause and effect = boxes with arrows).
- **Signal words**. During the shared reading of the text, explain that authors use signal words to give the reader clues about the type of text structure being used. Identify any signal words used by the author in this book. Each text structure uses specific signal words. See Figure 2 for examples of signal words used in each text structure.
- **Illustrations**. Analyze the pictures (or diagrams, graphs, etc.) used in the book. Do they help depict the information being presented?
- **Do it again**! Repeat the previous steps with multiple examples of the specific text structure you are analyzing so students become familiar with this text structure.

Writing Information Text

Once students have had opportunities to consecutively read and analyze multiple models of the same text structure, they are ready to begin writing their own information text that incorporates this text structure. Follows these steps to teach young students to write a selected text structure:

- **Identify an information topic** to write about. Always remember to teach the same text structure in writing that you and your students have been closely reading in the previous parts of the lesson.
- **Use a graphic organizer** to brainstorm and organize thoughts and ideas that represents the text structure that has been recently modeled and one that will be used to guide the writing of the same text structure. Students may need to do some research before they can begin recording information. Model for students how to take the information recorded on the graphic organizer to write sentences or paragraphs about the topic, process, procedure, cycle, question or answer. Could headings be used to group similar sentences into a paragraph(s)? What about a table of contents? What should be written first, next, last? Show students how to use the graphic organizer as a plan for organizing the information in to be put into writing. Show them how one part of the graphic organizer is the main idea, starting point, or question. Then show them how to write a sentence(s) that state the main idea, starting point, or question. Next, show them what comes next in the graphic organizer.
- Help them see how to use **signal words** to organize their sentences or paragraphs. Remind students of the signal words that are typically used with each of the

modeled text structures.

- **Include illustrations**, graphs, charts, etc. as needed, to depict information in addition to the text of the sentences or paragraphs.
- **Read through the written text** to make sure that the information about the topic has been shared accurately and that the information has been organized to follow the text structure that was intended to be practiced in their writing. Check to see which text features of exemplar information text you have employed in your writing – Title, Table of Contents, Headings/Subheadings, signal words, etc.
- **Show students how to edit for spelling, grammar, and punctuation** before we consider the writing to be completed.
- **Decide on a title.** Encourage students to select a title that corresponds with the text structure used.

Closing Comments

Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated the importance of helping students identify the text structures used by authors to organize, signal, and present information in text (Hall & Sabey, 2007). Close reading for text structures provides a meaningful way to help students learn how to write authors write and organize their texts as models for children writing their own information texts. With consecutive examples, modeling, and guided practice, even the youngest of students will be able to identify text structures in the books you and they read as well as using these text and text features to signal organization, structure, and pattern information shared in their own writing.

Although the practice of reading information texts in elementary classrooms is not new, the concept of locating and using information texts as models for students' writing in

order to meet the demands of the CCSS is. In this article, we described how teachers can use children's information books as exemplars of well-structured text models for teaching young students how to write selected discourse patterns found in the CCSS. As young children learn to recognize and use well-structured example information texts as models for their own writing, they will be better prepared to deal with less well-structured, more complex text examples in their reading and writing the years to come.

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