ALERT

ADOLESCENT LITERACY: ENGAGING RESEARCH AND TEACHING

Make room for
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE OF TEXT STRUCTURES

LiteracyGAINS

DID YOU KNOW?

Text structures are organizational patterns that are used to present ideas and information. Any piece of written text has an organizational pattern; in fact, any text, whether it's an artwork, blueprint or debate has a structure. Often the structure of the text supports one or more purposes of the text.

However, identifying patterns of organization is not the primary goal of teaching text structure. The main goal is to improve reading comprehension, writing organization and understanding of how ideas are shaped for different purposes.

Students benefit from explicit instruction about text structures because it helps readers navigate the text to anticipate or predict what to expect, determine the most important parts, make meaning of the information presented, and recall information (Duke et al., 2011). When students understand text structures, they can also apply the same patterns to organize their thinking and writing.

Narrative text (e.g., stories) has a structure that includes a set up, complication/ conflict and resolution. On the other hand, expository or informational texts (e.g., essays, reports, summaries, word problems) can include one or a combination of structures, including description, compare and contrast, sequential/procedural/ chronological, cause and effect, and problem-solution. Whereas narratives involve plot, characters, and setting for example, expository or informational texts are framed as answers to questions, either explicitly or implicitly given in the text.

> "Knowing the way in which a text is structured helps the reader organize the information in the text and associate that material more quickly with his/ her prior knowledge."
>
> Kinberg, 2007

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR ADOLESCENT LEARNERS?

Understanding how text structures shape ideas is one of the areas of literacy that poses a challenge for adolescent learners, both as readers and writers. This is especially so as adolescent learners encounter an increasing volume of complex and sometimes specialized texts (Carnegie, 2010). "One of the confounding things for many readers is that expository text structures change frequently... expository text

structures change at least every section. Expository writers may even change the text structure as frequently as every paragraph in order to address the content appropriately. This is especially true in textbooks" (Keene, 2008).

The ability to work with text structure makes expository or informational text easier to understand because awareness of text structure offers adolescents more control over the text. Awareness of text structure provides a "visual" or framework of the text which aids understanding. "The author of a text, like an architect who draws a blueprint, has created a representation of his or her ideas. The reader, like a builder, must take this representation and construct something. Much like the builder constructs a house, the reader must construct meaning" (Jetton and Dole, 2004).

IN THE CLASSROOM

GETTING STARTED

- Activate students' prior knowledge by posing open-ended questions, such as, *What kinds of informational text do you read (e.g., textbooks, newspapers, magazines)? Based on the title and a quick scan of the text, what text structure do you think the author might have used to organize this piece of writing?*
- Take the time to explicitly teach text structures separately (see table on page 3). For example, use think alouds to show how to navigate text structures (e.g., point out signal words) and how to make predictions based on the organization.
- Allow for talk when exploring new text structures, for example, have students talk about what they are noticing about a structure to collaboratively build understanding.
- Use graphic organizers, which mimic a structure, to record important information from the text. Explicitly point out the relationship between the graphic organizer and the text structure. Also show how the text structure may influence their note-taking.
- Use shared writing to construct a text using a particular structure, and talk out the decisions during the writing.
- Have students reassemble sentence strips into a paragraph using signal word clues and their knowledge of text structures.
- Remove signal words from a paragraph and have students try adding appropriate signal words to make meaning of the text. Share the original text and have them compare and discuss their decisions.
- Ask students to identify the implied question(s) a text attempts to answer, and use information to monitor their understanding.
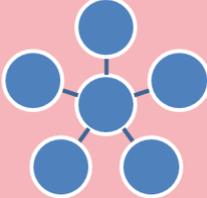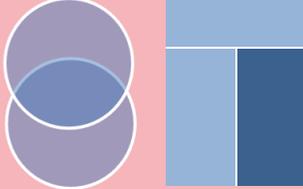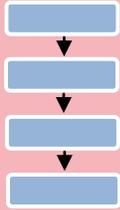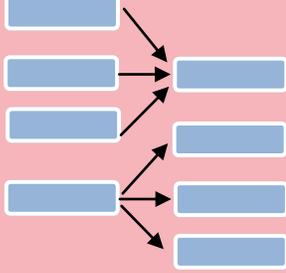
TRY IT OUT: EXPLORING TEXT STRUCTURES

Provide a sampling of relevant texts to groups of students. These may include articles, print ads, song lyrics. Have them read the texts to identify the structure or structures that are in each text. Once students have identified the structure(s), provide them with additional texts of similar types, and have them determine whether or not these share the same structures as the first set. Prompt students to draw some conclusions based on their exploration using questions, such as *Do rap songs contain description of a problem? Do they provide a problem and/or solution?*

Finally, ask groups to discuss how identifying the text structures may help them understand the content of the texts.

## MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH TEXT STRUCTURES

When working with text structures, there are a number of connections that can be made explicit. The chart below identifies

- The function of a particular text structure,
- The explicit or implicit question the text addresses,
- What learners can anticipate when working with the text,
- Signal words that may be used in the text, and
- Graphic organizers that may be useful to 'mimic' the structure.

Text Structure	Function	Connections	Sample Graphic Organizer
Description	provides details, characteristics, features and/or examples of an object, idea, topic, event, person or place	Question cue: *What does it look (or, sound, feel, taste) like?* Anticipate: a list or series of details which describe Signal words: *such as, looks like, consists of, for instance, for example*	
Compare/ Contrast	explains how two or more objects, ideas or actions are alike and/ or different	Question cue: *How is _____ similar to and/or different from _____?* Anticipate: determining what is significant about the similarities and/or differences Signal words: (compare) *although, in common, alike, same as, as well as,* (contrast) *however, whereas, on the other hand, but, instead of, in contrast to*	
Sequential/ Procedural/ Chronological	organizes items, events, or steps in a numerical, procedural or chronological order	Question cue: *What happens (next)?* Anticipate: type of order, and the sequence of key points of information Signal words: *first, second, third, next, finally, lastly, then, prior to, while, eventually, gradually*	
Cause and Effect	provides one or more causes or events and the resulting consequences or effects in order to explain why or how something happens, works or exists.	Question cue: *Why did it happen?* and *What was the result/outcome?* Anticipate: determining the degree to which all possible causes and effects have been included; the consequences that result from an action Signal words: *as a result of, because, due to, consequently, therefore, since, in order to, on account of, resulting in*	
Problem- Solution	states a problem and outlines or analyzes one or more possible solutions to the problem	Question cue: *What is the problem or challenge and how can it be solved or addressed?* Anticipate: if the problem is clear, if the solution is viable Signal words: *main difficulty/challenge/ issue is …, the solution, this leads to, therefore, thus, in order to*	
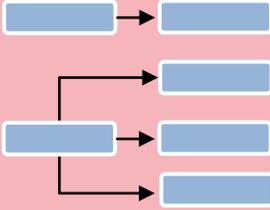
"Structural complexity increases. Not only do texts and sentences become longer and vocabulary more difficult post-third grade, but the structure of content area texts changes also. In the elementary …text structure is signaled explicitly, and only one logical relationship is explained at a time. However, in the high school example, the signals for the text structure are not explicit and there are several logical relationships between ideas."

Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010
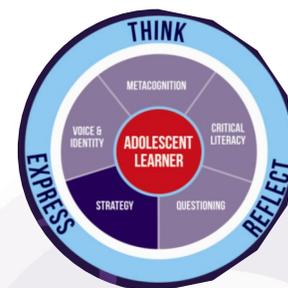
The *Adolescent Literacy Guide* outlines components which support students' abilities to think, express and reflect. Strategy is one of the components to which this ALERT connects.

RE-FORMULATING TO PROMOTE READING-WRITING CONNECTION

This strategy will help students explore different text structures and think more deeply about the decisions authors make when presenting information.

- Provide students with a piece of text related to a topic under study and that has a clear text structure (e.g., a problem-solution on global warming, a compare/contrast on how to measure the circumference of a circle vs. the perimeter of a rectangle, a chronological text on events of the War of 1812).
- Have students read and identify the structure of the text (e.g., using an anchor chart or guide similar to the chart on page 3). Use questions to prompt thinking about the purpose of the structure, such as *How do you know what structure it is? Why do you think the author used this structure to present the information? How does the text structure help you understand the content?*
- Invite students to identify and record the important information from the text (e.g., on a graphic organizer).
- Encourage students to work in pairs to discuss how they could rewrite this information in paragraph form using a different text structure. Use prompts to guide their thinking, such as *What other text structure would be appropriate? What signal/linking words could they use? Does more information need to be gathered to switch text structures? How does the emphasis of the content change in the restructured text?*
- Give pairs time to re-formulate the text using a new text structure.
- Have students share any challenges they encountered and decisions they made in adapting the material into another text structure.

IN BRIEF

Although explicit teaching of text structures will allow students to identify the cues and functions of various texts, the main goal of instruction in this area is to give students greater control to draw information and ideas from a variety of complex texts, organize their own writing, and to frame their thinking.

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FOR MORE ON...

Adolescent Literacy

Literacy GAINS (2012)
Adolescent Literacy Guide: A Professional Learning Resource for Literacy, Grades 7-12.

Building Background Knowledge

Literacy GAINS (Spring 2013)
ALERT: Make Room for Building Background Knowledge

Promoting Purposeful Talk

Literacy GAINS (Fall 2012)
ALERT: Make Room for Talking to Learn