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Expository Text Structure and Student Learning

David Hayes

Upper elementary teachers may wonder why some of their students with no history of comprehension problems suddenly struggle with understanding their social studies, science and health texts. These teachers might correctly point to the more difficult concepts presented in these texts and to the more technical vocabulary that their students will now encounter. Yet these factors are only part of the problem that students face when they move from stories to content material. Upper elementary teachers need to understand that their students are meeting a new type of text, structurally different from the stories used in the basal readers and trade books that have comprised most of their students' prior reading experiences. Teachers can make their students' transition to this type of text smoother by guiding their interactions with the specific structural patterns of content texts. This article deals with the text patterns commonly found in social studies books.

It is through story that children first engage in the reading act. "Once upon a time," "the third time she came to the giant's castle," and "they lived happily ever after" are surface representations of the conventions of story of *narrative* structure. Stories follow a similar pattern: *a character in a situation* (Cinderella being abused by her stepmother), *an initiating event* which propels the story forward (the prince will hold a ball), *a series of events* (the fairy godmother's help, the meeting with the prince, the shoe-losing departure, the

search for the shoe's fit), and a *climax* (the shoe fits Cinderella's foot).

As children hear and begin to read stories, they come to internalize this sense of story structure (Applebee, 1976; Stein, 1979). Teachers know that they can make story structure more accessible to children by asking questions directly linked to the unfolding of a particular story. Once children have gained an expectation that any story they confront will develop in a predictable way, they can turn their attention to the events of the story being read and thus comprehend it. Although students will continue to meet narrative text for the rest of their literate lives, they will by sixth or seventh grade be expected to learn mainly from books which are not written in a narrative format. As children needed time to internalize the structure of story, so they will need time and instruction in internalizing the newer structures in which information will be communicated in their content books.

Expository text patterns

In fourth, fifth and sixth grade, children begin to learn about state, national, and world history through reading their social studies books. Historical information found in social studies textbooks is presented in a number of explanatory or expository patterns. Teachers who use social studies texts need to be able to identify the three most common patterns that their students will meet and to help their students become aware of these structures.

Historical events unfold in a pattern called *chronological* (or time order): First this happened, then this, followed by that. Chronological structure is similar to the familiar narrative (a series of events) but lacks its closed structure because

history is a never ending story. Embedded in this chronological structure is a second pattern called *cause-effect*: Because that happened, this followed. A third type of pattern is used when an issue crucial to the understanding of historical events is presented with a set of clarifying or supporting statements. This pattern is called *enumeration*.

An example of these three types of patterns can be found in the following excerpt from a popular fifth grade social studies text (Berg, 1979):

Lesson 3: Women Fight For Their Rights

Life for American women greatly changed with the growth of factories. Growing numbers of women took paying jobs. Some went to work in factories. A few went to work in offices. A large number began sewing clothes for money in their homes.

In looking for jobs, women found they were not allowed to do certain kinds of work. Most of the jobs that women could get paid low wages. None of them offered much hope for the future. A poor boy could hope to be a rich businessman when he grew up. But in the 1800's, a poor girl had no hopes like these. State laws worked against women. They said that if a woman married, her husband controlled all she earned.

Beginning in the 1840's, women formed groups to work for more rights. One woman, who wanted to be a printer, explained why in this way:

"We women did more than keep house, cook, sew, wash, spin and weave, and garden. Many of us had to earn money besides. We worked secretly, because everyone had the idea that men, not women, earned money, and that men alone supported the family. Most women accepted this as normal. But I do not believe that there was any community anywhere in which the souls of some women were not beating their wings in rebellion. I can say that I sat and sewed gloves. The few pennies I earned could never be mine. I wanted to work, but I wanted to choose my job and I wanted to collect my wages."

The women's groups grew much larger after the Civil War. As more and more women took paying jobs, they saw why women needed more rights. The groups especially wanted women to be able to vote. They believed that if women could vote, they would be able to get rid of some of the laws that hurt women.

Leaders like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton led the efforts to get women the vote. They tried to get each state to change its voting laws. Women won the vote in Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho before 1900. (Berg, Roger, 1979, "Lesson 3: Women fight for their rights," Scott, Foresman Social Studies, Fifth Grade, pp 265-266. © Scott, Foresman Publishing Co. Used by permission.)

This lesson focuses on women's changing position in 19th century America, a period of industrial expansion, and the information presents the unfolding of a series of historical events:

1. Life for American women greatly changed with the growth of factories.
2. In looking for jobs, women found they were not allowed to do certain kinds of work.
3. Beginning in the 1840's, women formed groups to work for more rights.
4. The women's groups grew much larger after the Civil War.
5. Leaders like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton led the efforts to get women the vote.
6. Women won the vote in Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho before 1900.

If we examine this chronological structure, we see that its pattern is similar to narrative:

character in situation: women in a changing America
initiating event: women are not allowed to do certain kinds of work

series of events: groups are formed, groups grow larger, efforts are made to win the vote

climax: women win vote in several states

Of course, no true climax is reached here because the issue of women's rights in the US is far from being resolved.

We can see that chronological structure basically taps the memory level of recall. (When did women's groups begin to grow larger? Who led the efforts to get women the vote?)

In looking for the second type of expository structure, the cause-effect pattern, we must integrate memory (what the text explicitly tells us) and interpretation (what we might logically infer from the text information and analyze from our own experiences, evaluating as we read). In the second paragraph we read, "In looking for jobs, women found they were not allowed to do certain kinds of work." This condition will cause some response from women. They might accept the situation as it is, or they might follow any of a number of paths to enter these job fields. They might get training to qualify for these jobs, might try to change the laws through the existing legislative system, or work for the right for women to vote so that they can directly exert an influence on the laws. Whatever the responses, we can view them as the effect of the condition. This is *cause-effect*. In this "evolving story," women chose to work for some more rights, including the right to vote.

Children need to be let in on this historical secret that is part of the way their history texts are written: historical events are a series of conditions and responses (causes and effects, initiating events and a series of response events leading to climax).

There are other cause-effect patterns within the text. Another occurs in the fifth paragraph: "They believed that if women could vote" (cause), "they would be able to get rid of some of the laws that hurt women" (effect).

Now the text, in the interest of space, will often leave out some of the details of these responses or effects. In the last paragraph, we read, "They tried to get each state to change its voting laws." Certainly, there is much more to the battle than this. In preparing the lesson teachers need to learn more about this battle. They should become familiar with children's books about this time period which they want to encourage their students to read.

The third type of expository text structure observed in these pages is *enumeration*. An issue crucial to the understanding of historical events is presented with a set of clarifying or supporting statements. In the first paragraph we read, "Life for American women greatly changed with the growth of factories." The rest of the paragraph describes, or enumerates, those changes.

Another example occurs in the second paragraph: "In looking for jobs women found they were not allowed to do certain kinds of work." Now here the rest of the paragraph leads us a bit astray. We would expect it to tell us the kinds of work women weren't allowed to do. Instead it clarifies or enumerates the condition of work itself (the jobs women obtained paid low wages with no hope for advancement, and state laws worked against change in this situation).

Students' understanding of text presented in an enumeration pattern means that their thinking must move beyond a literal recall of text data. In the second paragraph, for

example, we read, "In looking for jobs, women found they were not allowed to do certain kinds of work." As students read the clarifying paragraph, they'll need to consider what these conditions might mean for anyone so unjustly treated by relating the text to other experiences they've had. (What do people do when unjustly treated? How might one respond to this situation? What might one do to promote changes?)

A teaching pattern for expository text

Recent studies in expository text by Berkowitz (1986), Meyer, Brandt, and Bluth (1980), and Taylor (1980) all indicate that the awareness of a particular text structure positively influences students' learning of the material. The text lesson presented above may be taught to help students both understand the material and increase their awareness of the text patterns through an approach which is a modified Content Directed Reading-Thinking Activity. The DR-TA, first developed by Russell Stauffer (1969) and elaborated by Vacca and Vacca (1986), has been a major strategy in content instruction for the past 15 years. It is a prediction/verification reading activity which encourages students' thinking about a topic under study prior to, during, and after reading.

The teacher must first orient the students to this lesson by reviewing what they have learned about the period of history under study. Preceding lessons in this chapter dealt with the growth of big business, the coming of the industrial age and the forming of unions during nineteenth century America. This lesson (Lesson 3) deals with how these changes affected women and their roles during this time.

The first major statement in this lesson begins the first paragraph: "Life for American women greatly changed with

the growth of factories.” The teacher knows that the information in the paragraph that follows supports that statement (enumeration pattern). Thus, the teacher will want to ask a prediction question which draws attention to the specific changes communicated: “In what kinds of places do you think women worked?” The teacher then directs students to read the first paragraph to verify their predictions.

After the paragraph is read, the teacher asks the students to justify their predictions in light of what they have read. In many cases, the text may not address all of the students’ predictions and the teacher must be ready to direct attention to other sources of information. Further, the teacher takes the opportunity to point out that this paragraph gave more information about what its first sentence proposed. With experience, students will internalize how enumeration pattern structure works.

A second structure used in this lesson is an implied cause-effect pattern. The second paragraph deals with *cause*: “State laws contributed to the described unjust conditions.” The third paragraph relates *effect*: “Women formed groups to work for their rights.” Here the teacher will want to use the terms *cause* and *effect* in formulating a prediction question. “These unfair conditions supported by state laws *caused* women to react in some way. What *effect* do you think these conditions had on women’s actions? What do you think they did about these things?” In response, students may predict any number of things, from women just accepting this plight to their taking assertive action to correct the wrongs. Again, students will read the next two paragraphs and then discuss among themselves how their predictions matched what really happened.

The teacher continues in this predict/read/discuss format by dividing the text into its major points of information and asking prediction questions which are specifically linked to the expository pattern which has been identified. Students can make their own individual predictions or, for variety, they may be assigned to work with a study partner or small group to formulate predictions.

In this lesson the teacher has related the historical events through an overall *chronological* structure, with both *enumeration* and *cause-effect* patterns embedded within it. When students have completed reading and discussing this lesson, the teacher will wish them to have a time-order concept of the sequence of events. If, in the preparation state, the teacher has recognized the narrative-like chronology of events, a series of review questions may be asked which will reinforce this pattern for students, for example:

- “Describe how life changed for women during the period of the growth of factories.” (More women entered the work force.)
- “What conditions did women face as they entered the job force?” (Unfair labor practices were supported by state laws.)
- “What did women do as a consequence of these conditions?” (They formed groups to work for their rights.)
- “What was a major goal of these larger groups of women?” (winning the vote)
- “When and where did women first successfully gain the vote?” (Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and Idaho — before 1900)

Over time, children will come to internalize how expository text works to communicate its information. They will come to expect supporting or clarifying statements in enumeration paragraphs; they'll be able to predict possible cause-effect relationships, and they'll follow the chronological flow of any

series of historical events. Teachers can guide students toward that goal through questions that help students actively interact with expository text. Expository writing is not as familiar to children as is narrative writing, but teachers can help their students become sensitive to its patterns and learn from it efficiently.

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