

## ***Informational Text***

To understand informational text, readers need to identify the major concepts in the selection and the important details that support each major concept. The manner in which these major and supporting ideas are organized can vary. An author writes an informational selection to provide information for the reader. The nature of that information and the author's specific purpose determine how the writer organizes concepts and ideas.

Unlike narrative text that has one predominant structural pattern, informational text has several possible organizational structures. There is, however, no one, agreed-upon listing of these structures. Different nomenclature and slight variations in definition characterize attempts to categorize and describe informational text structures. For the sake of simplicity in this Handbook, four patterns of organization of ideas are used. They are:

- **Enumeration/Description:** A major idea is supported by a list of details or examples.
- **Chronological/Sequential Order:** A main idea is supported by details that must be in a particular sequence.
- **Comparison/Contrast:** The supporting details of two or more main ideas indicate how those concepts are similar or different.
- **Cause/Effect:** The supporting details give the causes of a main idea or the supporting details are the results produced by the main idea.

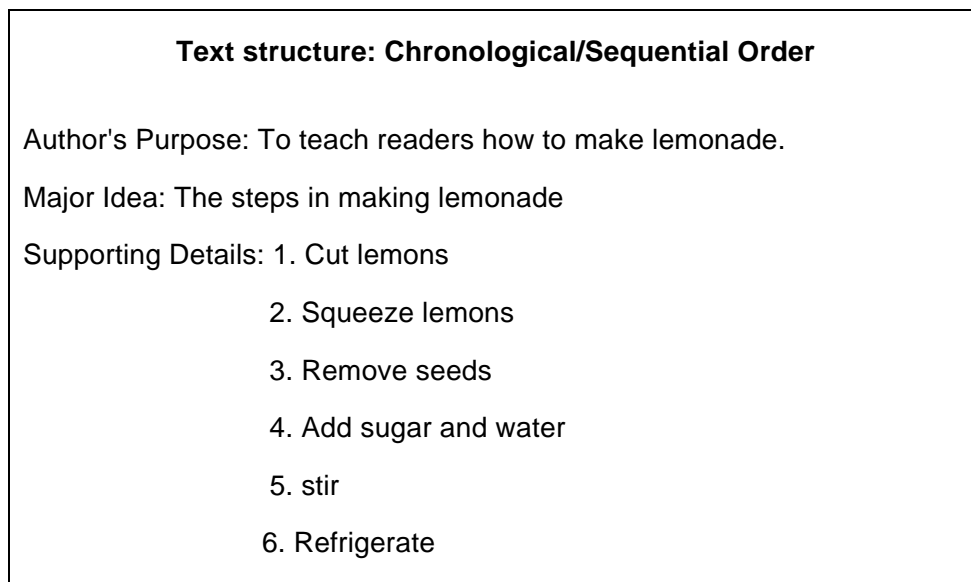
Although most students are aware of text structure in narratives, that is not true necessarily for informational text. This is because informational text is structurally more complex and because students have not been exposed to nearly as many good examples of it. To read informational materials effectively, students must become adept at detecting the relationships among the main ideas and their supporting details. Current research indicates that teachers need to provide daily read-aloud of informational as well as narrative selections.

In preparing to conduct reading instruction using an informational selection, it is recommended that teachers first create an informational map or a type of graphic organizer to assist in planning and conducting the lesson(s). Because of the possible complexity of informational writing, teachers may elect to use the following guidelines for creating an informational map as suggested by Vacca and Vacca (1996):

1. Look for the most important idea in the selection. Note any signal words that indicate an overall organizational pattern.
2. Locate additional important ideas. Identify their relationships to the most important one.
3. Outline or diagram these ideas, visually representing in some way the superordinate and subordinate concepts.

The resulting informational map or graphic organizer provides a verbal and visual display of the selection's structure that can take a variety of forms and serve several educational purposes. Figures 6 and 7 contain maps illustrating the chronological order and comparison/contrast patterns. Blank maps of all four structural patterns that can be used for teacher planning are provided. (Figures 11,12,13,14).

Not each paragraph has a readily discernible text structure. Where more than one text structure is present, a major or overall structure usually can be identified.



**Figure 6**

	<b>Text Structure: Comparison/Contrast</b>	
Author's Purpose: To show similarities and differences between baseball and basketball		
Supporting Details	Major Idea Baseball	Major Idea Basketball
Attribute 1: Where played	Played on a field	Played on a court
Attribute 2: Number on team	9 players on team	5 players on team
Attribute 3: Item used for play	Uses a ball	Uses a ball

**Figure 7**

- Teach students to identify the patterns of organization

Piccolo (1987) recommends introducing and working on the patterns one at a time and in the following sequence: chronological order, enumeration, cause/effect and comparison/contrast. Use short, easy paragraphs and the accompanying teacher created maps or graphic organizers to define, explain and illustrate each structural pattern. Help students discover the common distinguishing features in these examples.

For each pattern, demonstrate that certain words and phrases are 'signals' which help identify the organizational structure. Point out to students through these typical paragraphs how the words and phrases function. Table 1 provides a partial list of common signals for the four patterns of organization.

**Signal Words and Phrases Associated with Patterns of Organization**

Enumeration	Chronological/Sequential Order
for instance	first
for example	next
such as	then
to illustrate	initially
most important	before
in addition	after
another	when
furthermore	finally
first	preceding
second	following
Cause/Effect	Comparison/Contrast
because of	different from
as a result of	same as
in order to	similar to
may be due to	as opposed to
effects of	instead of
therefore	although
consequently	however
for this reason	compared with
if ... then	as well as
thus	either... or

**Table 1**

Demonstrate the importance of these signal words and phrases by showing students sentences or brief paragraphs with these terms deleted. Have students fill in the blanks and discuss why some alternatives make sense and others do not. Similarly, show the students pairs of sentences and have them identify the signal words and phrases that could connect them. Then have the students identify the organizational pattern that each option would create.

Example: It was raining very hard.  
The river overflowed its banks.

Because it was raining very hard, the ...  
(Cause and Effect)

It was raining very hard, and then the river ...  
(Chronological Order)

Provide guided practice in identifying organizational structure by having students read paragraphs representing all four patterns. Ask them to describe how the ideas are organized and why they think so.

- A word of caution: Identifying patterns of organization is not the ultimate goal of text structure teaching. This ability is only beneficial as students internalize knowledge about text structure and subsequently use it to enhance their comprehension.
- Teach students to use the patterns of organization to improve their comprehension.

McGee and Richgels (1986) describe an instructional procedure for teaching students to attend to and use an author's structure while they are reading. As suggested above, begin by creating a map or graphic organizer for the selection to be read and use this to familiarize the students with the ideas in the selection. To do so, talk about the meaning of the organizer by expanding on the information and the relationships represented. Then direct the students to write a passage that incorporates the information represented in the graphic organizer. Since they do this prior to reading the selection, the students need to rely on the organizational aspects of the organizer. Help guide this writing process by calling attention to each section of the organizer. Finally, have students read the selection to compare their passages with the complete text. Direct them to notice the similarities and differences between their writing and the original text and have them discuss what they have found.

Another effective technique to illustrate how the information fits together is by using Pattern Guides (Olson & Longnion, 1982). These are variations of the traditional study guides used by many teachers. Again, using the teacher-prepared informational map or graphic organizer, create a chart or diagram for students to complete that reflects the major concepts and supporting ideas of the selection. Often a given pattern guide will closely resemble the map that was created for instructional planning. Figure 8 provides an example of a cause and effect pattern guide. Direct the students to read the selection and fill in the requested information. Post-reading class discussion can focus on how the structural organization influenced the way the information was presented.

### Sample Pattern Guide

During the Middle Ages (1450-1700) the Italian city states traded products with many other places. Aspects of this trade caused capitalism to grow in many ways.

As you read pages 215-217, find the specific aspects of trade and the effect that each had on the growth of capitalism.

Cause: Trade

1. (Large profits)
2. (Partnerships created)
- 3.

Effect: Growth of Capitalism

1. (Reinvested in business)
2. (Business expanded)
- 3.

**Figure 8**

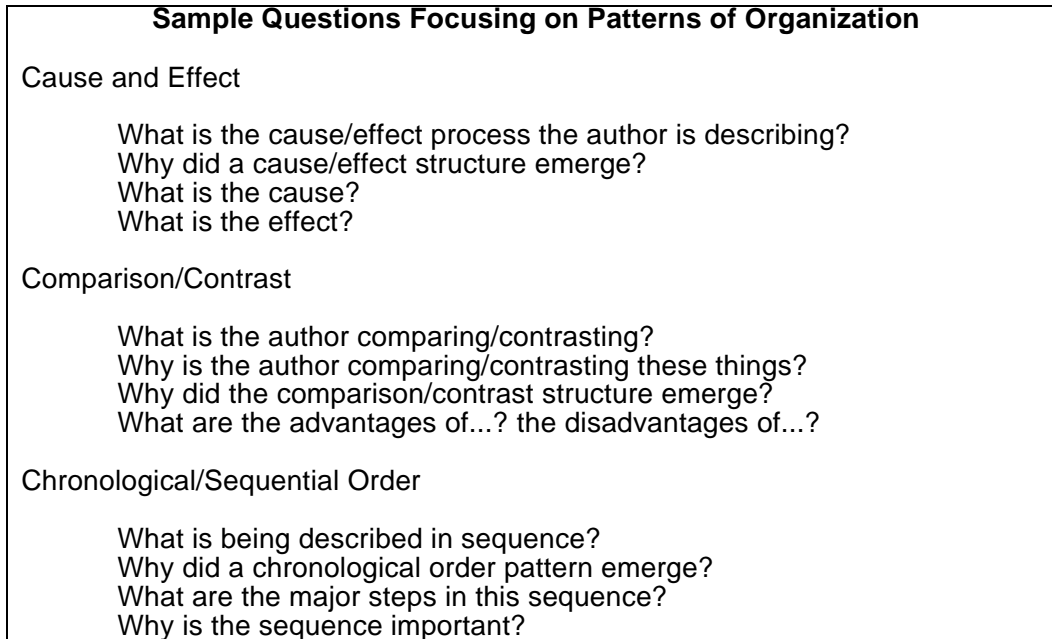
For some students who become proficient in recognizing and using text structure as they read, it is appropriate to have them create their own graphic organizers either in groups or individually. This activity will explicitly reinforce the importance of text structure. Class discussion and debate can focus on how and why the various organizers differ.

- Use informational maps or graphic organizers to guide the discussion of a selection.

When teachers construct an informational map, they are identifying the most important aspects of that selection -- the main concepts and supporting details. During-reading and after-reading discussions should center on these ideas. Relatively minor details, perhaps included as brief illustrations or as an author's aside, should not be emphasized. Sample questions used to stimulate and focus class discussions may be:

- Why did the author write this article?
- What was the author trying to prove in writing this?
- What is the most important idea in this selection?
- What are the three main points made by the author?
- Are there other ideas the author could have included?
- What statements support the author's main idea?
- How does the author prove his/her main point?
- Can you think of additional ideas that would support this point?
- Do you agree with the author? Why? Why not?

Muth (1987) recommends that questions also should be asked which help students (1) develop an awareness of the text structure present in the material and (2) understand the relationships among the major ideas. She states that this is one of the easiest yet most effective ways to ensure students' understanding and application of text structure knowledge. See Figure 10 for suggested questions for three patterns of organization.



**Figure 9**

Figures 10,11,12, and 13 provide map or graphic organizer outlines that teachers can use or modify to plan instruction. Additional suggestions for incorporating mapping activities into instruction are provided by Flood and Lapp (1988), Johnson (1989) and Miccinati (1988). For more information on narrative and informational text, including descriptions of research-based instructional activities, see Muth (1989).

Text Structure: Enumeration

Author's Purpose:

Major Idea:

Supporting Details:

Major Idea:

Supporting Details:

Important Vocabulary:

Important Reader's Aids:

**Figure 10**

Text Structure: Chronological/Sequential Order

Author's Purpose:

Major Idea:

Supporting Details: 1.  
2.  
3.  
4.  
5.

Important Vocabulary:

Important Reader's Aids:

**Figure 11**

Text Structure: Comparison/Contrast		
Author's Purpose:		
Supporting Details	Major Idea	Major Idea
Attribute 1		
Attribute 2		
Attribute 3		
Attribute 4		
Important Vocabulary:		
Important Reader's Aids:		

**Figure 12**

Text Structure: Cause/Effect		
Author's Purpose:		
<u>Cause</u>		<u>Effects</u>
_____	→	_____
(Main Idea)		_____
_____		_____
_____		(Supporting Details)
_____		_____
(Supporting Details)	←	(Main Idea)
Important Vocabulary:		
Important Reader's Aids:		

**Figure 13**

## **VOCABULARY**

Words are the labels assigned to represent ideas and concepts. Understanding the meaning of words within the context of a passage facilitates reading comprehension. Teachers have traditionally recognized this fact by introducing the new or unknown vocabulary words prior to making a reading assignment. Also, the instructions emphasis in many content area classes is necessarily on helping students learn the many technical and specialized terms unique to that discipline. In a sense, to know a subject is to know its vocabulary. In this Handbook the term "vocabulary" is defined as "the meanings of words"; it is not used to mean "decoding" or "word recognition."

Vocabulary instruction, as it has often been conducted, is not always effective. Recent research findings indicate that the typical activities of looking up dictionary definitions, writing each word in a sentence, and memorizing word meanings for a test usually accomplish very little long-term vocabulary growth. While this research does not answer all of the questions or address all of the concerns about teaching word meanings, it does provide general guidelines and suggest specific techniques for maximizing the learning effects of the time spent on vocabulary instruction

### **Selecting Words for Instruction**

Introducing the new or unknown words prior to having students read a selection is a traditional instructional practice. However, it may not be necessary, or even desirable because of the time required, to teach all new vocabulary items. A certain number of unknown or partially known words do not always decrease a reader's ability to comprehend. Research has found that (1) it is not necessary to know every word in order to understand a passage and (2) teaching all new words will not necessarily increase a reader's understanding. It is recommended, therefore, that teachers devote the time available to teaching only a limited number of terms. There are two criteria useful for selecting which new words to include in vocabulary instruction.

1. Teach words that are essential for understanding a reading selection.

Teachers can apply this criterion by asking themselves the question "If readers did not know the meaning of this word, would they still be able to understand the passage?" Often, unknown words appear in a context that may not be related to a main idea or an important detail and, if omitted, would not be missed. Therefore, teachers should choose only those terms directly associated with the selection's major concepts or ideas.

2. Teach words that are common or generally useful for students to know.

Students at a particular grade level can be expected to become familiar with certain words because they will, with increasing frequency, encounter those words in the future. Also, words that, in the teacher's opinion, represent common knowledge should be included in instruction.

Once the important vocabulary terms have been identified, teachers need to realize that it may not be necessary to spend an equal amount of time teaching each word. Some terms, such as "tuber," can be quickly defined because students are familiar with examples of the concept such as potatoes and yams. More conceptually complex and unfamiliar terms like "photosynthesis," however, will require greater time to develop the necessary understanding.

## Guidelines for Vocabulary Instruction

The main goal of vocabulary instruction is to expand each student's reading vocabulary to the greatest extent possible. Recent research has provided several principles or guidelines to assist teachers in attaining this goal. Each of these guidelines is identified and briefly explained below.

### 1. Provide opportunities for extensive reading.

In his synthesis of the vocabulary research, William Nagy (1988) states "...the single most important thing a teacher can do to promote vocabulary growth is to increase students' volume of reading." It is the incidental learning that occurs while readers are interacting with meaningful selections which accounts for a large portion of a student's vocabulary development. The implication then is that as often as possible teachers should provide reading opportunities as a part of instruction in any subject and should encourage and facilitate independent reading both in and outside of school. This recommendation does not mean, however, that teachers should refrain from providing vocabulary instruction. The research clearly indicates that maximum vocabulary development results from a combination of extensive reading and the direct teaching of word meanings.

### 2. Teach words in related clusters.

Words are not separate, disconnected units that need to be learned in isolation. On the contrary, words are related and interrelated. Synonyms, antonyms and root words are only three obvious examples of the connections that exist among words. When words are linked in sentences, their individual meanings change and are enhanced by each other. To teach words as separate entities in a list is to ignore their rich multiplicity of meanings.

When providing instruction in the meaning of a new vocabulary term, teachers should focus on its relationship to other words. For example, "cardiovascular" is introduced, defined and used several times in a chapter of a middle school health textbook. A teacher could easily and justifiably discuss that term and its relationship to "cardiac arrest," "cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)," "cardiogram" and "cardiograph." This approach would strengthen the students' understanding and increase the number of newly learned words.

Readers comprehend and learn when they are able to connect the new information in their reading material to what they already know. Vocabulary instruction, therefore, should help students make the connections between unknown words and the knowledge they already possess. Having students free-associate or brainstorm whatever comes to mind when they are presented with a new word helps teachers assess prior vocabulary knowledge and facilitate connections.

**Semantic Mapping** and the **Pre-Reading Plan** are useful variations on this word association technique.

### 3. Provide multiple opportunities for active student involvement with new words.

Once new vocabulary has been introduced, students need more than just a few brief exposures to the term to truly learn it. A memorized definition may not automatically be applied when the word appears in text. Students need multiple opportunities over an extended period of time to encounter the new term in a variety of normal contexts. They need to read, hear, write and speak it so that the word is internalized and becomes part of their usable vocabularies.

In planning vocabulary instruction, teachers need to utilize techniques that actively involve students with newly introduced words. Learners should not be passive participants in expanding their vocabulary knowledge. They need to mentally manipulate words, to see similarities and differences among them, and to consider multiple definitions and shades of meaning. Word sorting activities described below and the Semantic Feature Analysis are typical examples of activities of this type.

## Instructional Techniques for Vocabulary Development

Depending upon the material to be read and the words to be taught, the following techniques can be used to motivate students and facilitate learning. Teachers are reminded, however, that any technique should not be used as an isolated activity. Rather, all techniques should be directed to the larger goal of helping students acquire the word meanings necessary for reading comprehension.