Picture Books Aren’t Just for Kids!
Modeling Text Structures through Nonfiction Mentor Books

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Mrs. Spencer (all names are pseudonyms) holds up a copy of *Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World’s Most Famous Bear* (Mattick & Blackall, 2015) and asks her sixth-grade class, “What text structure dominates this story?” The middle level students respond excitedly with “sequential!” In this particular class, Mrs. Spencer has twenty-nine students that represent English language learners from Mexico, Vietnam, and China. Four of her students receive services through the district’s gifted and talented program, and five students receive special education services. Additionally, nine students read below grade level, twelve students read on grade level, and eight students read above grade level. Given her diverse group of learners, Mrs. Spencer seeks to engage her students by integrating reading and writing.

To continue her lesson, Mrs. Spencer asks the students to quickly write down a few reasons they recognize this the text structure. Kevin, one of Mrs. Spencer’s struggling readers, whose reading level is still at the elementary level writes:

I know this story is sequential becuz the author uses words like “then”. She also describes how the solider finds Winnie and takes her to London. Everything happens in order. I really like reading this book becuz I can understand it. I feel like I get what Mrs. S is saying.

In his response, Kevin illuminates two challenges many middle school teachers face: 1) how to adapt texts for middle level students reading below grade level, and 2) how to engage young adolescents with complex content. In this article, we discuss practical strategies for integrating nonfiction mentor books into middle school classrooms to teach text structures.

Using nonfiction texts, in this case picture books related to content-area topics, as mentor texts can provide powerful advantages for young adolescents.

Shifting the Focus: Integrating Reading and Writing

Research, legislation, and teacher preparation programs consistently tout that reading and writing should be integrated rather than taught in isolation (Graham & Harris, 2016). Yet, many classroom schedules still reveal separate time slots for reading and writing. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) provide standards for each literacy skill but denote the skills should be taught together. This leads to the question: why are reading and writing not integrated? Simply stated, integrating literacy skills is challenging, messy, and time consuming.

However, with a few tweaks to current practices, teachers can integrate reading and writing in meaningful ways. In this article, we provide strategies for teaching expository writing using nonfiction mentor texts. We believe strongly in pairing fiction and nonfiction picture books with content, but in this article we focus specifically on expository writing as a model, which necessitates an emphasis on nonfiction picture books. Nonfiction texts build middle level students’ information literacy skills (Soalt, 2005), which are heavily emphasized in the CCSS. Reading nonfiction texts also helps build twenty-first-century skills such as thinking critically, recognizing issues of global concern, developing the capacity to identify key environmental and civic issues that must be addressed, and analyzing from multiple perspectives (Kaufman, 2013; Morrell, 2012). Using nonfiction texts, in this case picture books related to content-area topics, as mentor texts can provide powerful advantages for young adolescents. Mentor texts are selected works that can be studied through close reading and book analysis. Through this intensive study, middle level students focus on the strengths...
of the text, making them cognizant of writing techniques. Finally, by utilizing nonfiction picture books in middle school classrooms, struggling readers can engage with texts that are at or below their reading levels. The shorter length of most picture books fosters reading and study within one class session, allowing for maximum interpretation of the skills being taught.

By combining these two reading strategies—using nonfiction texts and studying mentor texts—teachers can help young adolescents become more confident writers (Graham & Harris, 2016), more skilled readers (Dollins, 2016), and better analysts of text structures in both reading and writing (Lapp, Grant, Moss, & Johnson, 2013; Moss, 2004). These skills will serve middle level students well as they move into more advanced studies in high school, where the most powerful predictors of academic success are reading comprehension and writing (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Additionally, reading nonfiction mentor texts and studying them for text structures can focus students’ attention on features of expository writing such as establishing clear arguments, providing evidence and support, organizing ideas logically, and engaging the reader (Marinak & Gambrell, 2009; Sanders & Moudy, 2008).

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**Text Structures: Useful to Readers and Writers**

Text structures are the methods through which a text is organized (Dymock & Nicholson, 2010). Traditionally, the focus on text structures has fallen solely on the perspective of the author. In other words, young adolescents are taught that authors organize their work in a specific manner to help the reader understand the material. In the opening vignette, the author of *Finding Winnie* establishes a sequential text structure through the use of dates and historical events.

However, text structures are more than just a tool for writers. In fact, from a psychology perspective, text structures are the way in which a reader organizes information in his or her mind. In other words, the reason text structures are effective is that they provide a road map for the reader. Students who are able to discern a text’s structure can mentally (or physically) fill in the authors’ organizational pattern. Not only will this allow middle level students to better understand the text, but it also assists in recall of information and helps the reader see gaps in the text.

To date, research agrees on five text structures (see Table 1) that are recognized by specific key words.

**Table 1.** Types of text structures, key words, graphic organizers, and sample picture books for teaching text structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Structure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th>Graphic Organizers</th>
<th>Sample Picture Books</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cause-and-Effect</strong></td>
<td>Shows the relationship among events</td>
<td>because, as a result, therefore, since, so</td>
<td>Cause-and-Effect Map</td>
<td><em>Aliens from Earth: When Animals and Plants Invade Other Ecosystems</em> by Mary Batten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compare-and-Contrast</strong></td>
<td>Shows the ways in which two or more subjects are similar and different</td>
<td>differs from, in contrast, alike, same as, on the other hand, either, both</td>
<td>Venn Diagram Comparison Chart/ T-chart</td>
<td><em>Aaron and Alexander: The Most Famous Duel in American History</em> by Don Brown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Descriptive</strong></td>
<td>Gives many details about a topic</td>
<td>for example; such as; like; in comparison to; in contrast to; first; second; last</td>
<td>Mind Map Outline</td>
<td><em>So You Want to be President?</em> by Judith St. George &amp; David Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sequence</strong></td>
<td>Presents details in time order—from first to last or sometimes from last to first</td>
<td>first, next, not long after, while, at last, later</td>
<td>Timelines Sequence Maps</td>
<td><em>The Boy Who Loved Math: The Improbable Life of Paul Erdos</em> by Deborah Heiligman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem-and-Solution</strong></td>
<td>Identifies a problem and then proposes a solution</td>
<td>because, as a result, therefore, since, so</td>
<td>Mind Map Web</td>
<td><em>The Right Word: Roget and His Thesaurus</em> by Jen Bryan &amp; Melissa Sweet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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patterns, and visual aids. We include examples of graphic organizers students could use when reading or writing certain text structures. These graphic organizers can assist middle level students in organizing information and aid teachers in providing instruction.

Using Nonfiction Mentor Books to Teach Text Structures

In the opening vignette, Mrs. Spencer uses a nonfiction picture book to teach text structures. She has read the book with the class, given them information about various text structures, and allowed her students to interpret the text structure used to tell the narrative, which is based on true events. What process did she follow to get the results, such as motivating her student, Kevin?

Step 1: Teach an Overview of the Different Types of Text Structures

Before ever reading a picture book with her students, Mrs. Spencer spent time teaching the students the five different text structures, including key words to identify them and graphic organizers that can be used to understand the organization pattern. By doing this, Mrs. Spencer ensures that her students have the foundational information to understand more complex structures in nonfiction writing. Each teacher may follow a different approach to teaching text structures based on their teaching strengths and their students learning needs.

Step 2: Read Along, Identifying Important Components of the Text

After the students have foundational knowledge about text structures, it is important they apply that information. Mrs. Spencer reads a picture book with her students and allows them to identify important components in the text. These may be main ideas, key words, or even graphics that help tell the information. Mrs. Spencer documents these ideas on the board as students mention them. Afterward, Mrs. Spencer and the students take inventory of the ideas. What patterns emerge? Do these ideas successfully retell the information? Is any information missing? By answering these questions, the students can begin to see which text structure the author used to organize the information.

Step 3: Use a Graphic Organizer to Identify the Text Structure

Once students have evaluated important ideas, they can now attempt to fill in a graphic organizer. Mrs. Spencer asks her students which graphic organizer they think would best fit the information they have listed. At this stage, Mrs. Spencer allows the students to try several different organizers—a web, a T-chart, and a timeline. The students quickly see that the T-chart is unbalanced, and they are confused about how to proceed with it. When they try the web, the information fits, but no clear pattern can be listed in the center circle. Finally, when they try the timeline, they feel it works best. The students can now fit in any details that may be missing in the timeline by revisiting the picture book. Figure 1 shows a timeline example of Finding Winnie from Mrs. Spencer’s student Joey.

Step 4: Scaffold with Organization Patterns When the Text Structure Isn’t Clear

Sometimes teachers and students may find that the text structure of a particular book does not fit one category. In this case, using organization can help lessen confusion and make the structures identifiable. First, teachers should consider that all books have macro and micro organization patterns. Macro organization refers to the text structure present from beginning to end. For example, in The Boy Who Loved Math: The
Improbable Life of Paul Erdos (Heiligman & Pham, 2013), the life of a famous mathematician is told sequentially. The reader hears about Paul Erdos’s childhood and his successes traveling the world collaborating with other mathematicians and scientists. However, within different parts of the book, the reader can identify specific problems, such as building relationships, that Paul experiences. Within these sections of the book, the reader clearly sees a problem-solution structure as Paul journeys throughout his life. These smaller sections utilizing different text structures can be described as micro organization.

Good authors use both macro and micro organization to detail the complexities of their writing. By teaching young adolescents these two levels of organization and sharing that various text structures can be combined to make writing more sophisticated, students will gain skills they can implement when writing their own pieces. To help middle level students identify multiple patterns teachers can ask questions such as

- What text structure is present from the beginning to end of the book?
- On page X what text structure is used to detail the problem?
- Which graphic organizer matches the information presented in the middle of the book?

Once students understand these complexities in short picture books, they can apply the same understanding to longer textbook readings, scholarly articles, and chapter books. Finally, they can ask the same questions when they analyze their own writing to provide evidence for using a variety of text structures.

**Step 5: Give Students Practice Using Text Structures in Their Own Writing**

Once students have mastered the skill of identifying text structures in other pieces of writing, they need opportunities to apply what they know. At this stage, students can use the picture books as model texts—well-written texts that have features of good writing. For example, students can use Finding Winnie to practice writing their own nonfiction narrative about a famous figure’s life. They would begin by brainstorming their ideas and then fitting those ideas into a timeline or another graphic organizer for the sequential text structure. Then they would use that graphic organizer to organize and write their own ideas. In Figure 2, Joey has created a timeline for his own story from the Finding Winnie model. Through this process, students mimic good writing, understand how text structures make their own writing unique and organized, and apply text structures. Joey used his timeline structure to brainstorm for his own story, seen in Figure 3. This method provides structure and guidance to reluctant writers by showing them a clear path to writing.

**Recommendations for Teachers**

Teachers can support writing in many ways, including using picture books, studying mentor texts, and analyzing text structures. Additionally, writing can be an emphasized component of English/language arts and other content area classrooms with a few simple adjustments to instructional practices.

**Study Writing in Picture Books**

Picture books are often extremely well written. Nonfiction picture books combine teaching students about important topics with high-level vocabulary and...
well-constructed sentences. By studying these books, students get to read at or below their reading level, which can motivate students by allowing them to experience successful reading while seeing effective models of good writing.

**Teach Graphic Organizers Associated with Each Text Structure**

Using graphic organizers as they read, students learn to interpret the organizational patterns of text. Once cognizant of the organization patterns, students can reconstruct the meaning of the text within their minds. This visual image in the brain allows the students to recall the information, critique the information, and apply their understanding of text structures to their own writing.

**Analyze Text Structures in Nonfiction Mentor Texts**

Once students have read the nonfiction picture book and constructed a graphic organizer, they are able to then determine the text structure used. This understanding gives students deeper meaning for how text structures are constructed and why they are used. When students understand this background information, they can better understand how to use text structures effectively in their own writing.

**Conclusion**

Integrating nonfiction picture books into reading instruction can provide middle level learners with motivation, engagement, and mentor texts. When teachers combine picture book instruction with teaching text structures, middle level students gain a better understanding of how texts are organized, strategies for recalling information, and approaches to use in their own writing. Using additional writing strategies, of the teacher’s choosing, students can master close reading by analyzing picture books, which can carry over into the students own independent reading and writing.

**CONNECTIONS FROM readwritethink**

In this lesson from ReadWriteThink.org, students investigate picture books organized in comparison/contrast structures to discover methods of organization and the ways authors use transitions to guide readers. Students can then decide what organizational patterns and transitional words work best to accomplish their individual purposes in writing and apply those to their papers. This lesson is designed to be used during a unit when students are writing a comparison/contrast paper. It will be most helpful prior to drafting, but it could also be useful during revision.

Lisa Storm Fink
www.ReadWriteThink.org
http://bit.ly/2jdWxAk
Books Appropriate for Teaching Text Structures

**Cause-and-Effect**


**Compare-and-Contrast**


**Descriptive**


**Sequence**


**Problem-and-Solution**


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