

Understanding Text Structures

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In *An Introduction to Symbolic Logic*, Susanne Langer writes, “The structure of a thing is the way it is put together. Anything that has structure, then, must have parts, properties, or aspects which are somehow related to each other” (60). Looking at text structure—how text parts function to create a whole—is a key concept when analyzing texts. It is particularly useful when thinking about *how* a piece of writing works or *why* a writer organized material in a particular way. When thinking about the structures found in extended texts, the relationships and juxtapositions of the parts can be as useful to identify and consider as the individual parts themselves. Students taught to recognize text structures—and to use the appropriate academic language to describe them—become better readers of sophisticated texts. Recognizing the structure of a text as well as the structures of its internal parts helps students anticipate the content they encounter and understand its function in the piece as a whole. Not recognizing the verbal and visual cues that signal organizational and

Enumeration is listing. Typically the items in the list are all at the same level of importance. Bullet points or numbers often signal the list structure.

Definition requires two separate but linked logical structures: classification followed by differentiation. First, the items, events, or ideas under consideration must be classified into a group of similar items, events, or ideas. Next, the particular item, event, or idea must be presented in a way that differentiates it from all similar items, events, or ideas. For example, the definition of a “fork” might first classify it as an eating utensil. Next, the description “with tines” could be added in order to differentiate it from spoons, knives, chopsticks, and, perhaps, fingers. Definition is often used to explore the nuances between or among related ideas such as “bravery” and “recklessness” or “band,” “tribe,” and “chiefdom.”

The “Rhetoric of the Op-Ed Page” module (as well as other modules throughout the course) contains cells called “Considering the Structure of the Text” that are designed to give students practice thinking about and working with text structures.

FOR WRITERS

One of the most effective ways to have students develop a ready recognition of different text structures and their functions is to provide them with opportunities to apply those structures in their own writing. As suggested above, certain organizational structures lend themselves to particular rhetorical purposes. As students expand their writing into longer pieces and reports (and as they model their own writing on some of the texts used in this course), they are likely to recognize the need to rely upon multiple text structures as they develop an argument.

Familiarizing students with a broad range of possible structural options empowers them to present their material in a clear and logical fashion. It shows them how to present complex ideas in ways that are difficult or impossible if the only structural tool available is the commonly relied upon five-paragraph

Text Structure as Architectural Shape

Perhaps the most useful instruction for high school students preparing for post-secondary work is to teach a thoughtful use of architectural shape. Authentic text structures are organic. They emerge from the confluence of content, purpose, and audience. A specified number of paragraphs is not a structure; it is simply a number of paragraphs.

Writers structure texts to accommodate the kinds of content they wish to present as well as to emphasize certain points. They choose organizational structures that will help readers follow the logical unfolding of their ideas. They use punctuation—as well as paragraphing (as with the one-sentence paragraphs noted above)—purposefully. The architectural shape of texts can provide readers with additional information about the sequence and importance of specific ideas.

An overarching way to describe text structure is to think of beginning, middle, and end. The beginning of a text—its title and its opening paragraph(s)—interests readers and situates them

“Because of cell phones, hiking in wilderness areas may be safer than before, but it is also noisier than ever. Although people might bring cell phones with them to use in case of an emergency, emergencies are rare. More often, people receive incoming business and even social calls. Technology seems to be following us everywhere: into the wilderness and then back into civilization.

Works Cited

Dynock, Sue, and Tom Nicholson. *Teaching Text Structures: A Key to Nonfiction Reading Success*. New York: Scholastic, 2007. Print.