

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 textural structures can cause students to struggle with comprehension.

FOR READERS

Text Structure as Architectural Shape

One way to begin a consideration of structure—even before beginning to read—is to look at the physical shape of a text. How many paragraphs (stanzas, chapters, parts) does it have? Are all the parts the same size? Are some sections bulkier than others? If so, where in the piece are they situated? Are some parts much smaller than others? For example, has the writer used one-word or one-sentence paragraphs? What does that suggest about the importance of the content in this segment or its organizational function? For example, in Steve Jobs’ commencement address, “You’ve Got to Find What You Love,” Jobs uses three single-sentence paragraphs (2, 10, and 16) to provide transitional elements for his speech.

Help students think about the implications of the physical structure. Where might they anticipate a climax or change of direction? What areas of emphasis are suggested by the physical structure of the piece? This is a productive time to discuss paragraphing and its function as a form of punctuation that signals both a coherent unit of content and a place for readers to pause slightly longer than they do with a period at the end of a sentence. The paragraph indentation signals a shift. Good readers learn to attend to how these shifts work and what they suggest about both content and emphasis.

Text Structures as Idea Chunking

An additional way of thinking about text structure is as a clustering or chunking of ideas on a similar topic. In academic writing, authors often use headings to help readers recognize different content chunks. A content text chunk might contain multiple paragraphs—even pages—devoted to the same related topic. For example, the writer of a text might begin by presenting several paragraphs of historical background for an existing situation, then summarize a number of earlier interpretations and judgments of that background (the classic “they say” component of an academic argument), and finally present his or her own claim and the evidence supporting that claim. If readers have been taught that certain textual components—a thesis, for example—always appear in certain parts of a text (i.e., the first or second paragraph), they may be puzzled and confused by sophisticated texts that withhold a claim until later. “Say, Mean, Matter” (see Assignment Template Appendix C) and “Says and Does” (see Considering the Structure of the Text in “Rhetoric of the Op Ed Page”) are useful analytic tools to help students unpack idea clusters and discover additional ways of structuring the presentation of their ideas. Descriptive Outlining, first presented in “The Rhetoric of the Op-Ed Page,” not only asks students to identify the content chunks in the Rifkin article, but has them identify the rhetorical functions of different segments.

Text Structures as Organizational Patterns

Help students recognize three main organizational patterns they will encounter in their reading. These same patterns are found in many different genres; however, they are rarely found in isolation. More commonly, writers use multiple organizational patterns in an extended text as they lay out a series of ideas for readers. Providing students with the academic language to label text structures enables them to differentiate blocks of texts within an extended work and readily follow the unfolding of an author’s argument.

Spatial Organization is the structural strategy of description. It may help students to think of the ways in which a movie camera records a scene: near to far, far to near, right to left, left to right, top to bottom, bottom to top as they work to transfer a verbal description to a visual mental image.

Chronological Organization is the organizational structure of narration. Stories—even brief anecdotes—use time, presenting the beginning, middle, and end of an event. When teaching chronological structures, be alert to the possibilities of flash back and flash forward. What is the impact of disrupting the chronological sequence by rearranging the order of events? What is a writer’s purpose in doing so?

Logical Organization uses the structures of analysis: process, enumeration, classification, part-to-whole, problem and solution, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and definition. Each analytic structure is shaped differently, and each is most effectively used in response to a particular content and/or purpose.

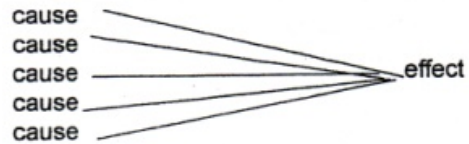
- Process structures are used to explain how to do something. Key terms such as *first*, *then*, *next*, and *finally* can help readers recognize process structures.

- 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.
- Classification is a structure that groups similar items based on specific features. A text might classify items within a large group in order to focus on a more limited selection. A general article about the impact of pollution on animal life in the San Francisco Bay might classify marine creatures simply as “vertebrates” and “invertebrates” in order to target one of those groups in its discussion. A biology text, on the other hand, is likely to have a chapter on marine animals that identifies more nuanced groupings: amphibians, annelids, arthropods, chordates, crustaceans, echinoderms, fish, mammals, mollusks, and reptiles. The levels of classification used in a text depend on the level of detail needed to present information or make a point.
- Part-to-whole structures are used to present an analysis of a complex entity by examining each of its salient parts in turn and considering how they work together. The analysis of a poem might include a discussion of the poet’s use of form, figurative language, rhythm, rhyme, and theme. An Aristotelian analysis of a writer’s argument would include a discussion of ethos, pathos, and logos. An often neglected aspect of part-to-whole analysis is a final discussion of how significant the various parts are in the context of the whole.
- Problem and solution structures are typical of many policy arguments and much academic writing (such as theses or dissertations) where the writer begins with an analysis of a problem, recommends a solution, and then sets out the arguments and evidence in favor of the recommended solution over other possibilities.
- Compare and contrast structures present two items or ideas in a way that allows readers to make logical judgments about each and perhaps choose one over the other. Venn diagrams provide useful organizers for students analyzing texts that compare or contrast one item or idea to another. Sometimes readers may find that a presentation is unbalanced. In that case, the diagram can help them fill in missing components as they assess the validity of the choice recommended by the writer.
- Cause and effect structures rarely present a single cause leading to a single effect or event. The following diagrams can help students recognize some of the ways in which a causal chain might be organized. Teaching students to test the differences between proximity and causality is important. Just because two events occur in the same time period does not necessarily create a causal relationship. At the same time, causal relationships can occur between events that are geographically or chronologically quite separate.

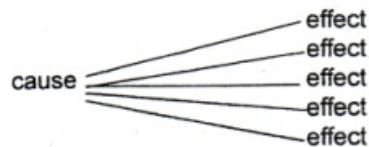
Single Cause-Single Effect



Multiple Cause-Single Effect



Single Cause-Multiple Effect



Serial or Sequential Cause and Effect



- 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 essay.

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 effectively to read the content that will follow. The middle presents the content and the discussion. This mid-section often requires a number of different internal structures in order to help readers track the presentation of material coherently. While often brief—a paragraph or two—an effective ending does more than simply summarize what has gone before. Forward, rather than backward looking, effective endings provide a sense of closure and satisfaction for readers, helping them understand the importance of the discussion presented and perhaps giving them a sense of what might, or should, come next.

Text Structures as Organizational Patterns

Teaching analytical structures helps students develop necessary logical skills such as sequencing, grouping, and examining components. Often these structures can be embedded in overall course activities, providing opportunities for formative assessment (Online Resource 1: Formative Assessment for ERWC), ways to connect reading and writing (Assignment Template: Connecting Reading to Writing), or structures for writing prompts (Online Resource 8: Designing Writing Assignments).

Help students see how they might present some content using one organizational structure, but then turn to another structure to develop their discussion further. For example, they might begin a discussion of an environmental pollution problem in their town with a physical description of the site using **spatial organization**. They might then use **chronological organization** to present the story of previous efforts to eliminate the sources of the pollution. Then they might use these first two content chunks to establish the context for the remainder of the piece, which uses a **logical organization** structure—problem and solution—to persuade readers that action is needed and suggest possible ways the community might proceed to clean up the problem. Finally, their conclusion might begin with a description (spatial organization again) of what the town might look like once the pollution has been eliminated.

Text Structures as Idea Chunking

Another way to think about text structure is to think about “chunks” of related content. Consider the chunks of content students might use as they respond to the following passage and EPT prompt:

“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. Anywhere at any time, everyone else present can be disturbed by one person’s call. Because more people in these circumstances are bothered by cell phones than are helped, these gadgets should not be permitted in certain public places or designated natural areas.”
—Lois Quaide

Explain Quaide’s argument, and discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with her analysis. Support your position, providing reasons and examples from your own experience, observations, or reading.

In the first chunk, students might take one or two paragraphs to summarize and explain Quaide’s argument and take a position: agree, disagree, or qualified agreement or disagreement. Then students would provide reasons and examples. One chunk might tell the story of a cell phone’s GPS helping rescuers locate a lost hiker. Another might discuss the fate of Christopher McCandless from *Into the Wild* and suggest that a cell phone might have saved him from starvation. A final chunk might talk about how a hiker was able to stop the bleeding of his seriously injured buddy by calling 911 for medical advice. The final chunk might be a conclusion arguing that a little annoyance for some is more than compensated for by the lives saved by cell phones.

Thinking in terms of content chunks is particularly useful in on-demand writing situations when writers have limited time (See Online Resource 9: Preparing Students for On-Demand [Timed] Writing.). Quick lists jotted during a minute or two of planning time is all that writers need to stay on track (and to remember the points they intend to make).

Teachers interested in suggestions for taking these concepts into their classrooms will find a number of practical ideas in both Sue Dynock and Tom Nicholson’s *Teaching Text Structures: A Key to Nonfiction Reading Success* and Gail Saunders-Smith’s *Non-Fiction Text Structures for Better Comprehension and Response*. Although the audience for both of these books is teachers working with students in grades 4-8, the principles and pedagogies are readily adaptable to older students.

Works Cited

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

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