Analyzing Expository Text Structure

The sequential **narrative framework**—beginning, middle, end—and the literary elements of setting, plot, character, problem, and resolution are recognizable to anyone who has heard a fairy tale or seen a movie. **Expository text** is framed around different structures, and these structures crop up both in trade books and in textbooks. Understanding the **expository text structures** gives readers a better shot at determining important information when reading nonfiction. These **structures** are often **signaled by particular words**, phrases, and headings. Structure aids coherence. A coherent text leads the reader to meaning.

At a nonfiction reading workshop led by Jan Dole, we explored some of the most common expository text structures by building sentences around the term *goose bumps.*

Cause & Effect: **(when, because, if…then, as a result, consequently, etc.)**
Goose bumps make me shiver. When the temperature drops below 45 degrees, my skin crinkles into goose bumps.

Problem & Solution: **(But…, One reason for the problem is…, to solve this…, etc.)**
Goose bumps make me shiver. But they disappear as soon as I cover up with a jacket or sweater.

Question & Answer: **(Question…, answer to the question…, etc.)**
What happens to people when they shiver? They get goose bumps.

Comparison and contrast: **(same as, similar, alike, different from, as opposed to, etc.)**
Some people get goose bumps from fear. Others get goose bumps when they are touched emotionally.

Description: **(For instance, such as…, an example, characteristics, etc.)**
Goose bumps make me shiver. I get little bumps on my skin. They look like sesame seeds.

Sequence: **(first, second, next, then, after, finally, now, soon, not long after, etc.)**
Goose bumps make me shiver. First I get cold. Then I shake all over.

These examples are typical of the way expository text is structured. The text in standardized tests and traditional textbooks frequently falls into one or another of these text structures. If students know what to look for in terms of text structure, they grasp the meaning more easily.

Teachers and students can practice analyzing text structure, creating examples, and identifying patterns. After we have talked about and worked with text structures extensively, my colleagues and I encourage kids to identify expository text structures while reading in small groups and pairs. Grappling with nonfiction text structure and coming to understand it helps readers determine essential ideas.

Taken from Nonfiction Matters: Reading, Writing, and Research in Grades 3-8 by Stephanie Harvey