

# Expository Text Structure and Reading Comprehension

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## Abstract

Reading and learning from text involves the ability to identify its main ideas. A large amount of reading research suggests that readers' ability to comprehend, retain and recall textual main ideas is related to their knowledge and use of text structure as a text processing strategy to guide their encoding and recall of textual materials. Some teaching strategies that teachers can use to teach expository text structures are also provided.

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**Keyword:** Reading, Textual, Strategy

## Introduction

Students, especially those at college and university levels, are required to read and learn from a massive number of expository texts. One of the purposes of reading expository texts is to learn from them. Learning from a text means the ability to extract or comprehend the main idea of the text. The academic success of students, then, depends upon the ability to understand what they read, to grasp the gist of the text, and to ignore irrelevant details (Anderson & Armbruster, 1982; Williams, 1984; Williams, Taylor & de Cani, 1984). Therefore, it is important for students to know how to read expository texts.

### Text Structure and Its Role in Reading Comprehension

Using expository text structures has been found to be a text processing strategy that can enhance reading comprehension. Text structure is a major component of texts. It refers to the organization of ideas in text (Taylor, 1992). It specifies the logical connections among ideas and the subordination of some ideas to others (Meyer & Rice, 1984). Moreover, it provides the organizational plan that not only guides the author when writing but also helps the reader identify the interrelationship among ideas in the text (Meyer, 1982, 1985; Myer & Rice, 1984, among others). Although text can be roughly divided into two types, narrative and expository, only expository text structures will be emphasized in this article.

Meyer (1975) postulated that text structures are one basic type of schemata. In Meyer's view of discourse processing, skilled readers approach a text with knowledge of how texts are conventionally organized. For a given text, they look for the textual schemata in their repertoire to help them understand the text. The schema then functions as an outline that guides them in organizing the text during the process of encoding and in reconstructing the text during recall. Suppose a reader reads a problem-solution text. If he/ she can identify the text structure, he/ she will look for the problem and the solution. In addition, he /she will also look for the causes of the problem and other details relevant to the problem and the solution. Meyer argued that the inclusion of signals in a text can make the text structure more transparent. For instance, providing such a signal as "The problem is...." could enable readers to be aware of the problem-solution structure so that they can process the text appropriately.

## Types of Expository Texts

By using a propositional analysis of text into a hierarchically organized tree structure called the “content structure,” Meyer (1975, p. 23) found that passages can be classified into five basic types of expository prose, depending on differences in the top-level structure in the content structure. These five types are: collection, description, causation, problem/ solution, and comparison.

According to Meyer and Freedle (1984), the collection type is simply a grouping or listing of ideas, concepts, or events which are associated in some manner. If the ideas are associated by sequence, the listing becomes more organized, for instance, a listing of historical events sequenced by time of occurrence.

The second type, description, is a specific type of grouping by association in which one element of the association is subordinate to another, that is, to the topic. The description gives more information about a topic by presenting an attribute, specification, or setting.

The third type, causation, is a grouping of ideas both by chronological order and by causal relationship, for example, the if-then statements, the cause-effect statements.

The fourth type, problem-solution, has all the components of cause-effect with the additional component of overlapping content between propositions in the problem and solution, whereas the fifth type, comparison, is organized on the basis of opposing viewpoints.

Among the five discourse types, causation, comparison, and problem-solution are more tightly organized, while collection and description are more loosely organized.

## **Effects of Text Structures on Reading Comprehension**

A lot of research on text structure and reading comprehension reveals that using text structure, or following the rhetorical organization of text while reading, as one of the text-processing strategies can enhance their text comprehension and recall of important textual information (Carrell, 1984, 1992; Horiba, 2000; Kendeou & van den Borek, 2007; Kintsch & Yarborough, 1982; Meyer & Poon, 2001; among others).

Carrell (1984), for example, examined the effects of four discourse types of expository prose—comparison, causation, problem-solution, and description—on the recalls of advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) readers from different language backgrounds. The study results revealed that if ESL readers used text structures to process the text and to organize their recall protocols, more information was retrieved. It was also found that the recall of the tightly organized discourse types was significantly better than that of the loosely organized type, which suggests that certain organizational types of expository prose may be generally more facilitative of recall for ESL readers than other types.

In her subsequent study, Carrell (1992) investigated learners' awareness of text structures and their recall of texts written in those structures. The study results revealed that there were relationships between awareness of text structure and quantity and quality of recall. Subjects who used the text structure of the passage to organize their recalls recalled not only more ideas in total number of ideas, but also more of the main ideas and major topics of the reading passage.

## **Teaching Expository Text Structure**

Since the use of expository text structure in text processing can enhance readers' comprehension, recall and retention of text, knowledge of expository text structures and the effective use of these structures as a reading strategy need to be explicitly taught to language learners.

To teach students knowledge and use of text structure, teachers have an array of teaching techniques to choose from. For instance, they may use semantic webbing (Anderson & Armbruster, 1982), map construction (Berkowitz, 1986), flowcharting (Geva, 1983), or other graphic organizers (Akhondi, Malayeri & Samad, 2011).

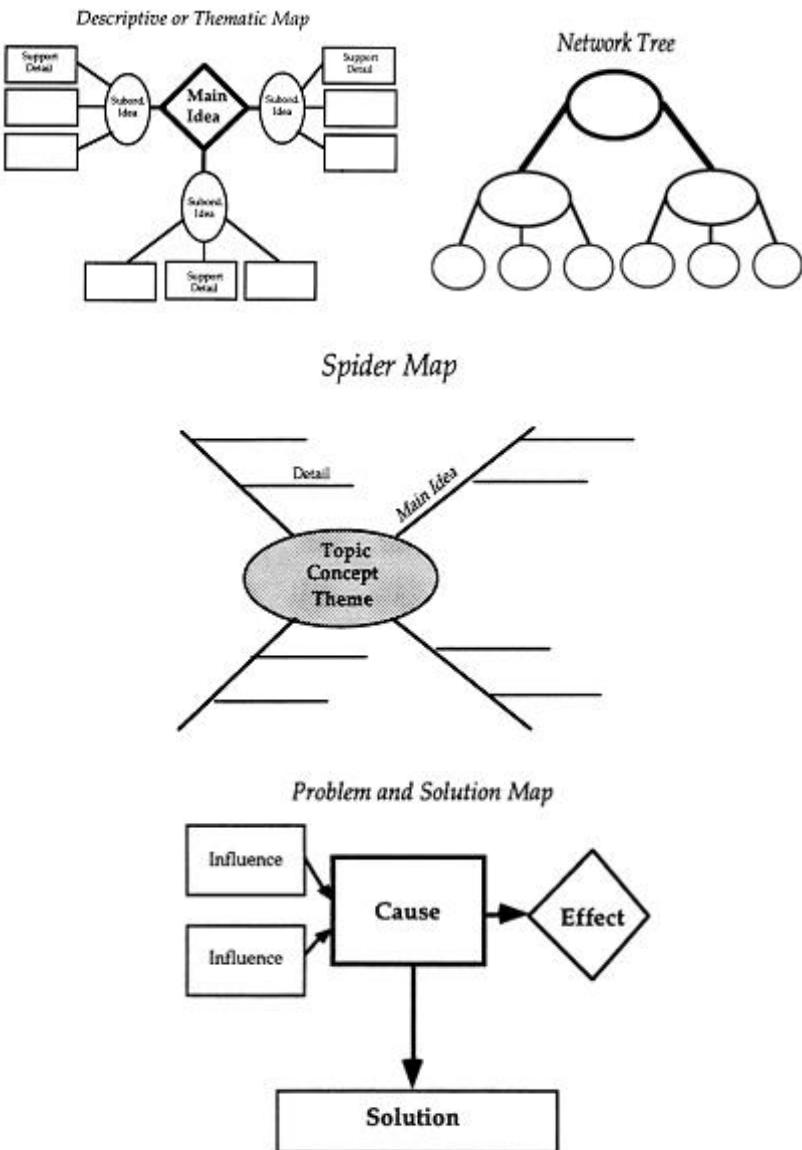
Akhondi, Malayeri and Samad (2011) gave some recommendations to teach expository text structures in class, as follows:

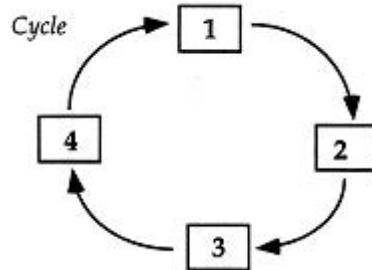
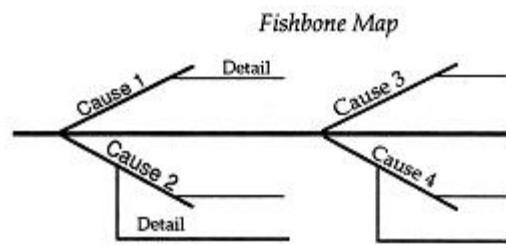
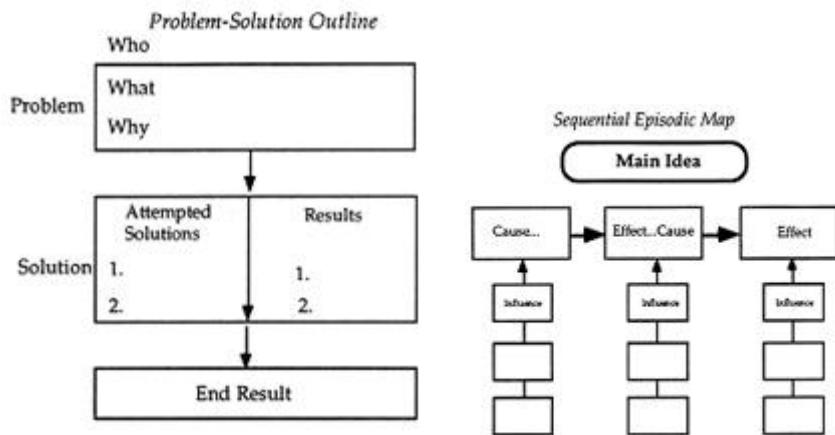
- Introduce the text structures by beginning with description and finishing with comparison.
- Teach only one text structure at a time for three to four sessions before proceeding to the next one.
- Draw students' attention to the signal words and phrases in each sample text. Then, give more details on other signal words for each expository text structure.
- Ask students to identify signal words and phrases in the text and have them write short paragraphs using each text structure type
- Use graphic organizers, or a visual and graphic display that shows the relationships between textual ideas, to help students understand the interrelationships of ideas in the text.

Akondi, Malayeri and Samad (2011) claim that graphic organizers can help students list major ideas under the main idea of the text and put the supporting details under the related major idea and thus students can comprehend and retain the textual content.

It should also be noted that since there are different types of learners who learn in different ways, teachers may have to use various techniques with their students in order to find out what works for them. As a result, they can develop the teaching techniques most suitable for their students, thereby leading to success in teaching and learning English in class.

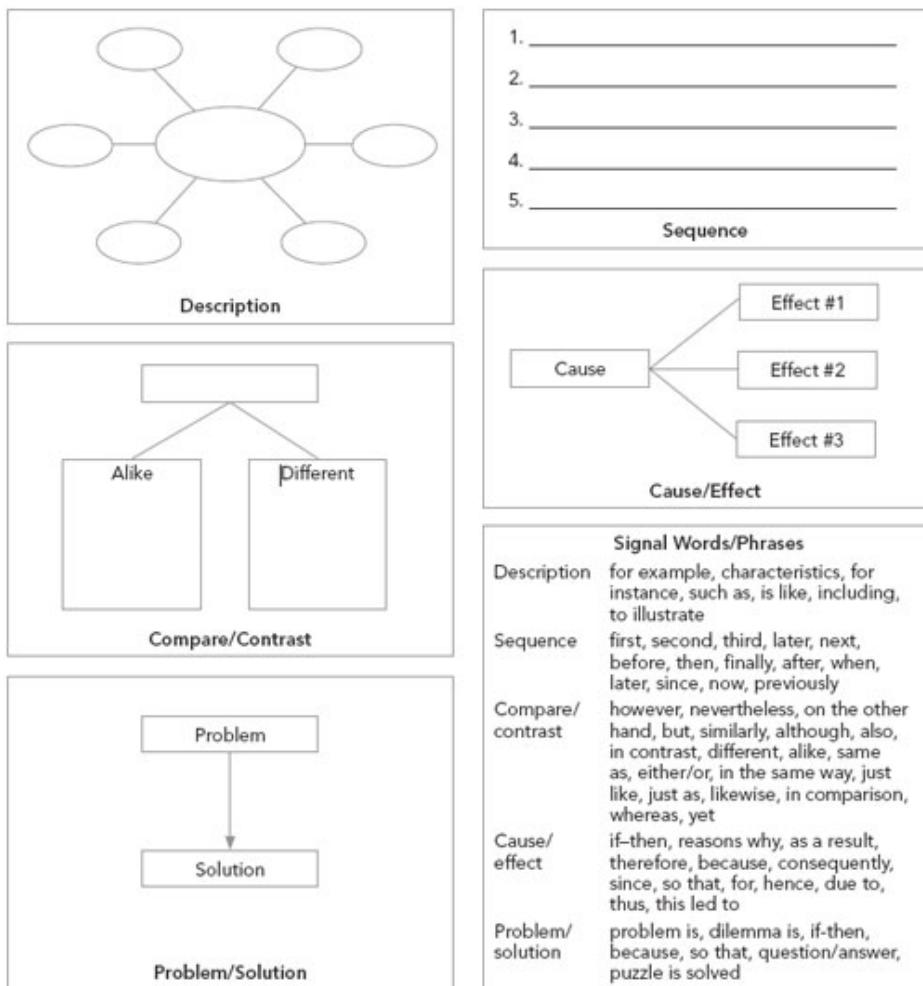
Figure 2: Some different types of graphic organizers





Source: Hall, T., & Strangman, N. (2002).

Figure 2: Graphic organizers and signal words and phrases



Source: Akhondi, Malayeri & Samad. (2011).

## Conclusion

As supported by a large body of reading research, readers' knowledge and use of text structures as a text processing strategy can facilitate their reading comprehension, recall and retention of textual main ideas. By using appropriate teaching strategies, teachers can then teach their students what expository text structures are and how to use those text structures to guide their encoding and recall of textual materials, which will lead to lasting success in language reading and learning.

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