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Guiding Students Through Expository Text with Text Feature Walks

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The text feature walk guides students in the reading of text features in order to access prior knowledge, make connections, and set a purpose for reading expository text. Results from a pilot study illustrate the benefits of using the strategy, and practical suggestions for implementation are offered.

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Most primary students have used the picture walk technique to preview text (Stahl, 2004). By looking at and talking about the illustrations in a text, students activate prior knowledge, make predictions, and set a purpose for reading (Clay, 1991; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Effective primary teachers use this instructional strategy when teaching students how to read (Taylor, 2002), yet this supportive practice is not as common when students read expository text and is often discarded as students move from reading picture books to chapter books.

When students enter the intermediate grades, they are required to read more textbooks and informational texts to learn, but reading textbooks and informational texts can be difficult for students due to the higher level vocabulary and concept-dense content. In addition to these complexities, expository nonfiction also contains numerous text features that supplement and present important content that the student must read in order to fully comprehend. Interestingly though, students often ignore these essential text features (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2008; Spencer, 2003), even though they have been taught their importance.

After acknowledging that our intermediate students failed to read or gave little importance to text features when reading, we developed the text feature walk strategy. The text feature walk is a technique that follows a protocol similar to the primary picture walk. This article will describe how to employ a text feature walk in your classroom and report on the benefits we have garnered from using this technique, including results from a pilot study we conducted in the spring of 2007 to determine its effectiveness (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2008).

Rationale for the text feature walk

Whether you teach one subject or all subjects, ultimately your goal is the same: student learning and achievement. To assist teaching and facilitate student learning, we often teach students to employ a strategy. Strategies help learners organize information, reflect on a topic, and learn. In addition to having various strategies to assist with content learning, knowing how to navigate the text is extremely important. Teachers must recognize factors within a text that can enhance or impair comprehension. These factors fall into three categories: text features, text organization, and text content.

Text features include all the components of a story or article that are not the main body of text. These include the table of contents, index, glossary, headings, bold words, sidebars, pictures and captions, and labeled diagrams. These features can be helpful if they are concise, related to the content, and clear, or they can be harmful if they are poorly organized, only loosely related to the content, or too wordy. Text organization refers to the patterns and structures used by the author(s) to write the text. A well-organized text assists the reader through predictable placement of information. A poorly organized text can impede the reader by being counterintuitive. The content of a text is what we want students to learn. Content can be accessible if it is reduced to manageable chunks, or it can be intimidating if it includes too much specialized academic vocabulary and too many abstract concepts.

The text feature walk is a structure that addresses each of these facets of expository text. The success of the text feature walk is dependent on knowledge of text features and the ability to self-scaffold through discussion. We teach students to use this structure to help them predict what they will be learning. In a text feature walk, students work in a small group, reading each feature in the order that it appears and discussing what they think they will be learning. As each feature is read, students must think about and discuss how the information relates to the main idea of the text.

As students move through text features in a given section, they become familiar with the text's organization and access important background knowledge related to the content (Honig, Diamond, & Gutlohn, 2000). Sometimes, if the content is unfamiliar and students are unable to make connections, the text features actually frontload vocabulary and concepts that will be important in the main body of the text. These discussions help students create mental models and increase the likelihood that they will read and remember (Recht & Leslie, 1988). As students make their predictions and discuss various features, they anticipate what they will read and set a purpose for their reading (Lublinter, 2001).

In addition to the benefits already discussed, the text feature walk is an engaging structure that builds students' interest in learning and enhances their construction of meaning. This type of active learning is important for both vocabulary acquisition (Kibby, 1995; Nagy & Scott, 2004; Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1998) and content learning. Ruddell (2009) recommended that reading strategies do three things: (1) provide students with the opportunity "to interact and transact with the text" (p. 220), (2) purposefully guide the student as they read in the content area, and (3) help students to integrate their reading with content learning. The text feature walk accomplishes all three of these goals.

Introducing students to a text feature walk

Used correctly, the text feature walk is a very powerful tool (see chart below). The key to proper usage is all in the preparation and training of students. You should start by making sure they are familiar with text features. Have students look at pages in a science or social studies book. Instruct them to run their hands over the main body of text. Explain that everything else is considered a text feature.

Ask students why authors and designers include text features. It is helpful to spend a few weeks having students simply identify and read various text features prior to initiating a text feature walk. The text features in the table below are quite common and among those you will want to directly teach to students. Knowledge of text features is not the only prerequisite to a successful text feature walk. In addition, you want to be sure students know the difference between an interactive conversation about a text and just taking turns talking about a text.

Common text features to explicitly teach students

Name of text feature	Purpose of text feature
Title	Quickly tells the reader what information they will learn about
Table of contents	Shows students the different chapter or section titles and where they are located
Index	Directs students where to go in the text to find specific information on a topic, word, or person
Glossary	Identifies important vocabulary words for students and gives their definitions
Headings or subtitles	Help the reader identify the main idea for that section of text
Sidebars	Are set apart from the main text, (usually located on the side or bottom of the page) and elaborate on a detail mentioned in the text
Pictures and captions	Show an important object or idea from the text
Labeled diagrams	Allow readers to see detailed depictions of an object from the text with labels that teach the important components
Charts and graphs	Represent and show data related to, or elaborate on, something in the main body of text
Maps	Help a reader locate a place in the world that is related to text
Cutaways and cross sections	Allow readers to see inside something by dissolving part of a wall or to see all the layers of an object by bisecting it for viewing
Inset photos	Can show either a faraway view of something or a close-up shot of minute detail

Once students are familiar with text features and able to hold a focused discussion about text, you can easily introduce the text feature walk structure and teach them to use it. You will want to begin by explaining that a text feature walk is like the picture walks they did when they were learning to read picture books. As with any structure or strategy, you will need to explicitly model how you as an expert reader use a text feature to make a prediction. This is best done using a think-aloud in a whole-group setting (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2007, 2008). Quickly bring students into the fold by having them read a text feature and explain how the information in the text feature may contribute to the main idea of the text. This guided practice under your supervision is important so that you can revert back to modeling and direct instruction if needed. The entire text feature walk should be done before students actually read the main body of text. Then, have students read the main body of the text and debrief with them on what they learned and how the text feature walk assisted with comprehension.

Eventually, the goal is to move the text feature walk structure from whole-group to small-group use. To make this successful, you should cluster students, so each group is heterogeneous with varied strengths and no one group has all the quiet, reserved children. You might also think about which students have background knowledge of the topic. Groups of four work very well. Tell students they will take turns identifying and reading text features in the order they appear in the text. After someone reads their feature, all members should discuss the predictions, questions, or connections they have to the feature and how they think it relates to their predicted main idea. This continues on until all of the features have been discussed or time is called by the teacher.

After explaining and putting students in groups, give each group a copy of the directions to help them remember what to do. Assign a short section of text (2-4 pages), then walk around and listen in as they work. You will need to remind groups of their goal and that they should be discussing how they think the feature relates to the main body of text, not just taking turns reading the text features. Once most groups are finished, have the students come back together as a whole group to discuss what went well and what they learned from discussions. They are now ready to read and more fully comprehend the text.

Our pilot study

After three years of implementing text feature walks with students, we knew the practice engendered more meaningful predictions and deeper comprehension of text. Recognizing that discussion was integral to the success of the text feature walk, we were curious whether discussion alone would be just as helpful as the text feature-centered discussions such as we used in the text feature walk structure. To explore this question, we divided Nicki's (second author) classroom into three groups. Each group completed a before reading sheet, on which they wrote predictions of what they thought they would learn about the human body from reading their science text. Each group also read the text and answered the review questions at the end of the section selected.

The three groups were formed based on the teacher's report for the Scholastic Reading Inventory (1999) which placed students in above, on, or below grade-level groups based on their Lexile scores. From this report, three piles were made based on students' scores, one for above level, one for on level, and one for below level. The researcher used stratified random selection from each pile to create the three groups.

Group 1 served as a control group. After the students in this group made their predictions, they read the text silently then answered the review questions. Groups 2 and 3 were the treatment groups. Group 2 had a discussion about the human body with textbooks closed, then predicted, read, and answered review questions. Group 3 conducted a text feature walk of the selected section prior to writing their predictions, reading the text, and completing review questions.

The researcher (first author) and a graduate assistant read through each student's before reading sheet to determine the total number of predictions included for each group. Irrelevant ideas (i.e., those not related to the text) and repeated ideas were not included in a group's total count. Once a 95% agreement was reached, totals were obtained to determine which group had the most predictions related to the text. As hypothesized, the control group had fewer relevant predictions than the treatment groups, and group 3, the text feature walk group, had the greatest number of pertinent predictions.

To determine the effect on student comprehension and learning, the researcher and graduate assistant evaluated student responses on the checkpoint and review. The text feature walk group had the highest average correct. Surprisingly, group 2, the group that discussed the topic without the text feature walk, performed lower than group 1, the control group. Although there are limitations to our pilot study, such as having a small sample size, these results confirmed our observations that when students do a text feature walk, they are able to make better predictions and learn more from reading the text.

An effort rewarded

Our work with the text feature walk structure proved that Alice had it right: Books are much more valuable with pictures and discussion. Although teaching students to effectively navigate expository text using a text feature walk takes time initially, the rewards reaped once the structure is in place make up for it. Students learn how vital it is to read and think about the features that support text. They also make better quality predictions, anticipate their learning, and comprehend more fully, ensuring better understanding of the content being studied.

References

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Click the "References" link above to hide these references.

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