



Transactional Writing: Explanation

LEVEL 1i 1ii 1iii **2** 3 4 5

Why Does Earth Need the Atmosphere?

THE LEARNING CONTEXT

Although the teacher formally taught explanation writing in term three, she had built up to this during the year.

In term one, through the reading programme, she realised that many students were unable to answer :How?: or :Why?: questions clearly. Most wanted to give simple answers that began with :Because....:

In term two, the class undertook a science unit on the solar system, in which they had to explore the question :Why is earth the only planet in the solar system that will support life?:. They researched their explanations through books, the internet, and a visit to the planetarium, and many presented them as a series of bullet points. At this stage, the teacher had not shown them a formal structure for explanation writing.

At the beginning of term three, she presented this structure, focusing on :Why?: rather than :How?: explanations because the latter tended to become a set of procedures. In doing this she was assisted by the book *Text Types in English* and the internet site www.primaryextra.co.uk.

She found that she had to model this structure over many days, because some students wanted to imply their reasoning, rather than make it explicit. She suggested that they think of their writing pieces as a person, with a head (introduction), body (main reasons), and feet (conclusion). The main reasons needed to be clearly and objectively stated and linked to possible consequences.

From this modelling, the students :unpacked: the criteria they were to practise in their explanations. They were to use such sentence structures as, :If ... then ...: and :As a result ...:

Both the teacher and the students explored the writing form through a range of health-related topics (:Why do you have to behave appropriately in an earthquake?;, :Why do you have to eat vegetables?;, :Why are fast foods bad for you?;, :Why should you choose milk toothpaste for your teeth?;). But the teacher also reminded them that the form they were practising would be appropriate for explanations relating to their previous science unit on the solar system.

Jane decided to explore the topic, :Why does Earth need the atmosphere?;. Having researched the topic, she drafted her explanation against the :success criteria:, shared it with a buddy and then with the teacher.

Teacher-student conversations

After making sure that Jane had followed the necessary processes, the teacher and Jane checked her writing against the success criteria.

Teacher: Who have you read it to?

[Jane indicates.]

Teacher: Have you proofread for spelling and punctuation?

[Jane nods.]

Teacher: Are there any words that you're not sure of?

Jane: No, I think I've got them all right.

Teacher: Great. How about sharing it with me now.

[They read together.]

Teacher: That's really neat. I'm really impressed. I think you've met our criteria. Let's check.

Yes, you've got a clear introduction. Yes, your reasons are clearly stated and I can see the consequences.

Yes, you've got a conclusion. But is having an

INTEGRATING READING AND WRITING

Opportunities should be sought in classroom reading programmes for students to respond to written and visual texts, identifying how processes or phenomena can be explained. Picture books with narrative text will be useful, with teacher prompts to focus students on topics that lend themselves to explanation. Exposure to transactional texts will be essential. The :reading to: programme will be an opportunity for discussing specific vocabulary, language features, and diagrams, which may be transferred to student writing and drawing.

WHERE TO NEXT?

To move Jane towards the next learning point, the teacher might help her to focus on:

Ideas

- expanding her reasoning by undertaking further research on how the atmosphere works.

Structure

- linking the introduction (particularly the opening question) and conclusion more explicitly.

This could be done by:

- modelling of writing using these strategies, and discussion about the process
- exploring models of writing which exemplify the strategies
- giving feedback against the criteria that have been set with Jane.



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CURRICULUM LINKS

English in the New Zealand Curriculum

Level 2: Writing Functions

Transactional Writing: Students should write instructions and explanations, state facts and opinions, and recount events in a range of authentic contexts.

Levels 1 and 2: Reading and Writing Processes

Exploring Language: Students should explore choices made by writers, and identify and use the common conventions of writing and organisation of text which affect understanding.

Thinking Critically: Students should identify and express meanings in written texts, drawing on personal background, knowledge and experience.

Processing Information: Students should identify, retrieve, record, and present coherent information, using more than one source and type of technology, and describing the process used.

English in the New Zealand Curriculum, pages 35-36

REFERENCES

Anderson, Mark and Anderson, Kathy (2001). *Text Types in English*. Australia: Macmillan Education.

Ministry of Education (1994). *English in the New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.



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Why Does Earth Need the Atmosphere?

WHAT THE WORK SHOWS: Jane writes a simple but very clear explanation of a topic that interests her. She confidently uses cause-and-effect sentence structures and displays an impressive mastery of surface features.

Student's first draft

Deeper features

Ideas

Explains a selected phenomenon clearly.

Supports ideas with some details.

Attempts to make reasoning as objective as possible.

Structure

Begins to sequence explanation logically and confidently – starts with lead paragraph and ends with short summary.

Uses cause-and-effect words to link ideas.

Beginning to paragraph ideas.

Sentences

Uses a range of sentence types and lengths.

Vocabulary

Uses precise topic-appropriate vocabulary.

Language features

Uses present tense for regular occurrences.

Uses a comparison to make the explanation clearer.

Why Does Earth Need the Atmosphere

Earth needs the atmosphere because it keeps the air in.

The atmosphere also stops Earth from becoming too hot or too cold.

If an atmosphere can keep air in it can keep dangerous rays of the sun and meteors out. So the atmosphere is like a big blanket over Earth which keeps good things in and bad things out.

An atmosphere makes water so we can drink and if we didn't have water we would die.

As a result Earth is the only planet people can live on

Surface features

Grammar

Uses most grammatical conventions correctly and confidently.

Spelling

Demonstrates good understanding of all basic sounds and patterns in written English.

Punctuation

Punctuates with increasing independence.



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Why Does Earth Need the Atmosphere?

9.8.02

Student's first draft

Why Does Earth Needs the Atmosphere
Earth needs the atmosphere because it keeps
the air in.

The atmosphere also stops Earth from becom-
ing too hot or too cold.

If an atmosphere can keep air in it can
keep dangerous rays of the sun and meteors out.
So the atmosphere is like a big blanket
over Earth which keeps good things in and
bad things out.

An atmosphere makes water so we can
drink and if we didn't have water we would
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As a result Earth is the only planet people
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