



# Transactional Writing: Explanation

LEVEL 1i 1ii 1iii 2 3 4 5

## Why Cockroaches Are Weird!

### THE LEARNING CONTEXT

The teacher undertook a two-week unit on explanation writing. He realised that students could write explanations from the social, natural, or physical worlds, and decided that they would relate most easily to the social world. Their first explanations were about “How to throw a good party”.

He led lots of discussions on what happens before, during, and after a party, and the possible consequences of not doing “the right thing” when throwing a party. He also modelled an explanation-writing format. All students attempted to write their own explanations, but many were able to write only a set of procedures. Explanation writing from the social world proved to be difficult for many of them.

So he then moved them on to writing explanations from the natural world, and selected the *School Journal* article “Cockroaches – Creepy or Incredible?” (3. 1. 02) as motivation for this. The students enjoyed reading and analysing the article as a class, and listed the details they felt should be included in an explanation of “why cockroaches are weird”. They also found additional information on the internet.

Before they started to write, the teacher developed an extensive list of success criteria with them. They knew as they began to write that they should be:

- thinking about their audience and writing directly to them (possibly using humour)
- demonstrating some sense of personal voice
- writing an engaging introduction and a strong conclusion
- including considerable detail
- separating ideas into paragraphs, and linking with connectives such as “furthermore” and “nevertheless”.

He wanted to move them beyond just a formal approach, to having fun with the text form.

The students all wrote an initial draft, got feedback from writing buddies against the success criteria, and then wrote second drafts using this feedback.

### Teacher-student conversations

After Stephanie's second draft:

Teacher: I really like the general thrust of your work - I can see that you've thought well about your audience ... Great introduction – you clearly state your focus and I think it's clever how you've brought in other animals. I also really like some of the surface features you've used, like your choice of font for “Freaky” at the end of paragraph four.

He then moved on to offering a range of ideas for development:

Teacher: I think you should re-look at the order of your ideas – do they logically move into each other? Maybe using bullet points would help with re-ordering. I also think you should try and make your conclusion a little stronger, and make sure it links with your introduction in some way.

Stephanie worked on some of these points in her third draft, especially re-ordering her ideas and making her conclusion stronger. She eventually proofread this draft for publication.

### INTEGRATING READING AND WRITING

Students often need to do research when writing explanations. As with this exemplar, they should be given opportunities for close reading of selected texts containing factual information.

Teachers can provide a selection of research material, which will include texts illustrating the language features expected of this form. While the focus of these lessons was on particular science content, the teacher was able to give some guidance and support for the literacy skills required to produce a written explanation, drawing attention to the structure of published texts that present information and explanation to a particular audience.

### WHERE TO NEXT?

To move Stephanie towards the next learning step, the teacher might encourage her to focus on:

Impact

- ensuring that awareness of the audience does not distract too much from the content.

Structure

- exploring ways of making links between as well as within paragraphs.

Vocabulary

- considering the impact of some technical vocabulary.

Surface features

- using apostrophes correctly for contractions and to indicate possession.

This could be done by:

- modelling of writing using these strategies, and discussion about the process
- exploring models of writing which exemplify the strategies
- working with Stephanie to develop further criteria for successfully achieving the purpose.



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### CURRICULUM LINKS

*English in the New Zealand Curriculum*

#### Level 5: Writing Functions

**Transactional Writing:** Students should write coherent, logical instructions, explanations, and factual accounts, and express and argue a point of view, linking main and supporting ideas, and structuring material in appropriate styles in a range of authentic contexts.

#### Levels 5 and 6: Reading and Writing Processes

**Exploring Language:** Students should: using appropriate terminology, describe, discuss, analyse, and apply the distinctive conventions, structures, and language features of a range of texts and explain how they suit the topic and purpose.

**Thinking Critically:** Students should: interpret, analyse, and produce written texts, identifying and discussing their literary qualities, and explore and identify attitudes and beliefs in terms of personal experience and knowledge of other texts.

**Processing Information:** Students should: using appropriate technologies, retrieve, select, and interpret information from a variety of sources, and present accurate and coherent information for a range of purposes, analysing the processes used.

*English in the New Zealand Curriculum, pages 35-36*

#### NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement)

**Transactional Writing:** Explanation  
Achievement Standard AS90053: English 1.2 Produce Formal Writing.  
[www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/ach/English/AS90053.doc](http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/ach/English/AS90053.doc)  
New Zealand Qualifications Authority (2001).

**PDF:** [www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/ach/English/as90053.pdf](http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/ach/English/as90053.pdf)

Unit Standard 8812: Produce Transactional Written Text in Simple Forms.

**PDF:** [www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/units/pdf/8813.pdf](http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/units/pdf/8813.pdf)

### REFERENCE

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



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## Why Cockroaches Are Weird!

**WHAT THE WORK SHOWS:** Stephanie uses black and grotesque humour and a deliberately colloquial style to ensure that her classmates enjoy this bizarre explanation about cockroaches. She shows an acute awareness of her audience. She talks directly to them, almost as if she is giving a speech, and her writing voice is easily identifiable. Yet she is also able to include all the relevant facts in a well-structured way.

Student's second draft

### Deeper features

#### Ideas

Supports explanation with a range of detailed reasons that are interesting and precisely expressed. Some of these take the reader in lateral directions.

#### Structure

Sequences explanation confidently.

Links main and supporting ideas within paragraphs.

Includes a strong introduction and conclusion.

#### Sentences

Uses a variety of sentence structures with considerable impact. This includes rhetorical questions.

#### Vocabulary

Selects and uses a range of precise vocabulary that is both topic-appropriate and chosen to appeal to the audience.

#### Language features

Uses an informal style (humour and colloquialisms) deliberately to engage her reader.

Using features such as rhetorical questions and comparisons with control and intent.

### Why cockroaches are weird!

The cockroach is a weird critter. You see – actually you don't see grass hoppers or crickets running and jumping around with no head for a week. You don't even see the old drop-tail lizard, eating paint or glue. If you thought beagles (the dogs) had a good sense of smell – cop this – the male cockroach, can smell their female friend from miles, and miles, and miles away....weird huh.

Have you ever squashed a cockroach? Have you ever noticed the white, squishy stuff? Well, that white, squishy stuff is it's fat. The fat gives the cockroach the energy it needs when it has no food, and without water for a week. Imagine that! Us humans can't last without food for approximately 40 days, and without water, at the most, 3 days. Actually any more than that then we would die....or snap.

Most beings have a brain, in fact all beings have a brain, but not many have one near their stomach. I've heard of dogs playing poker and, I thought that was weird, but this is really weird!

If you want weird I'll give you weird. A cockroach round about this big [3 centimetres] or a bit bigger lived before and through, the dinosaurs whom are, millions, and millions, and millions times bigger. Scientists believe that cockroaches could survive an atomic bomb....Freaky. I wouldn't be surprised if they lived forever.

Now – we all like to taste hamburgers, with our slippy, sloppy tongues, but the cockroach likes to taste their weird food with their antennae and chew with their six, yes six, jaws. As a matter of fact, they don't even have tongues. I don't know about you but there is a bucket outside I need to be sick in. EEK!

Lets take our minds off things and breathe in the beautiful fresh air – with our lungs of course, something cockroaches don't have. Thats right, cockroaches don't have lungs; they have tubes on the sides of their body. This stuff has really got to me.

In conclusion, I think cockroaches are freaky in fact more freaky than weird. Speaking from someone who knows weird, cockroaches are the second weirdest living thing.

### Surface features

Uses the writing conventions of grammar, spelling and punctuation with only a few intrusive errors, most of which could be easily attended to with more careful proofreading.



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### Why cockroaches are weird!

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Have you ever squashed a cockroach? Have you ever noticed the white, squishy stuff. Well that squishy, white stuff is its fat. The fat gives <sup>the cockroach</sup> the energy it needs when it has no food, for the cockroach can live without food for a month, and without water for a week. Imagine that! Us humans can't last without food for approximately 40 days, and without water, at the most 3 days. Actually any more than that we would die..... or snap.

Most beings have a brain, in fact all beings have a brain, but not many have one near their stomach. I have heard of dogs playing poker, and I thought that was weird, but this is really weird.

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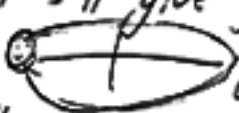


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