



Transactional Writing: Explanation

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

How a Spider's Web Forms

THE LEARNING CONTEXT

The teacher introduced explanation writing by gleaning the students' ideas on what an explanation is. She then asked them to write an explanation of how the rain falls, from their previous topic study, to ascertain their writing skills. She found that most of them could not sequence ideas logically.

So she then proceeded to teach the features of explanation writing through new science topics, such as: how a poppy is formed, how a monarch butterfly is formed, and how water turns to ice and ice to water. She explored these topics through books with her students, and got them to express the content diagrammatically and in flow charts. They were to make sure they used the key content words for these topics.

The teacher then focused on:

- introducing clearly both the topic and the purpose of writing ("How?" or "Why?")
- maintaining logical sequence (using "time-order" words)
- achieving clarity of ideas
- writing in the present tense
- concluding succinctly.

She modelled these concepts with the new topics and then got the students to write their own explanations. They had to continually re-read their drafts for clarity and logical sequence, and check these with a buddy. She was pleased with their progress, as she had already discovered that it was difficult for some of them to "remove themselves" from the explanation. The scientific nature of the topics meant they could be reasonably objective in their explanations.

The teacher then introduced the topic "How a spider's web is formed" through shared reading *The Life Cycle of a Spider* (Jill Bailey), *Spiders* (Terry Jennings) and *Amazing Spiders* (Alexandra Parson). Because of the poetic possibilities of this topic, they were not only asked to write their explanations to the success criteria they had already explored, but also to consider using poetic devices. They had recently written poetically on animals.

Anna wrote her first draft and then conferenced with the teacher before revising.

Teacher-student conversations

After Anna had drafted her introduction:

Teacher: I love the way you've described the web and used the contrast idea. Why have you written "strong" and "4000" in big letters and numbers?

Anna: I wanted to make those things stand out for the reader.

Teacher: That's wonderful.

Later the teacher gave feedback on the completed draft:

Teacher: I really like the way you've described how the thread gets taken to the other branch, especially the word "blown". I can also see the web very clearly because you've said it looks like the spokes of a wheel. That's great ... It's also good that you've used the time-order words that we have talked about. I suggest you go through your writing again now, looking for any mistakes.

Anna then revised her writing as a second draft.

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 Anna towards the next learning point, the teacher might help her to focus on:

Ideas

- expanding the facts with increasing detail.

Sentences

- increasing the range of sentence structures and lengths.

Vocabulary

- encouraging extended use of precise topic-related vocabulary.

Spelling

- exploring the "-le" pattern, as in "middle", "little", "apple".

This could be done by:

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



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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

Bailey, Jill (1989). *The Life Cycle of a Spider*. New York: Bookwright Press.

Jennings, Terry (1989). *Spiders*. Junior Science Series. New York: Gloucester Press.

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

Parsons, Alexandra (1990). *Amazing Spiders*. Eyewitness Juniors. New York: Knopf.



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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 second draft

Deeper features

Ideas

Includes ideas that are mainly objective.

Supports ideas with some detail.

Language features

Uses poetic language features to engage reader.

Uses precise verbs in present tense.

Structure

Begins to sequence explanation with some confidence: starting with topic definition, ending with summary statement.

Uses a range of time-relationship words to express sequence.

Begins to use paragraphs.

Sentences

Mainly simple and compound sentences.

Varied beginnings.

Vocabulary

Uses topic-appropriate words.

How a Spider's Web Forms.

A spider web looks delicate but it is very STONG. It can hold 4000 times a spider's weight. But how does it form?

First the spider spins a thread of silk. The thread gets bloan-over to a branch by the wind. Then she makes another two threads and makes a Y shape. Next she makes more threads and they look like spokes off a weel. Then the spider goes in a spirl, out and back in, sits in the middel and waits for food.

This is how a web is formed.

Surface features

Spelling

Demonstrates good understanding of all basic sounds and patterns in written English – errors are mostly sensible.

Grammar

Uses most grammatical conventions with support.

Punctuation

Punctuates with increasing independence.



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How a Spider's Web Forms

Student's second draft

9.9.02 How (does) a spider's web

Forms.
form? X

A spider web ^{looks} delicate but it is very **STONG**. It can hold 4000 times a spider's weight. But how does it form?

1.9.02 First the spider spins a thead of silk. The thead gets ^{blown} over to a branch by the wind. Then she makes another two threads and makes a Y shape. Next she makes more threads and they look like spokes off a wheel. Then the spider goes in a spid, out and back in, and sits in the middle and waits for food. This is how a web is formed.