Writing: Informative Text

Introduce the Text Type

Talk with students about informative text: *Informative text includes, among other things, news articles, many Web sites, research and lab reports, manuals, and text analysis. When we write about the information we read, we extend our learning. Informative writing is not about moving information from one place to another or regurgitating what we've read. Informative and explanatory writing is about sorting, categorizing, and elaborating information to make sense of what we've read and to communicate our knowledge to our readers.*

Determine Features

Have available several samples of informative writing. Allow time for students to examine the samples. Then focus students' attention on the features: *These samples of informative text are all written to provide information about a topic. Even though these texts are different, they have some features in common. I notice that all of them have a structure that organizes the information into topical categories. Sometimes this is done using headings; other times it is done simply using paragraphs.* Add "structure that groups information by topical category" to a list of features of informative texts.

Ask students what other features they notice. Have them turn and talk to discuss with partners. Then add their ideas to the features list. The list might include:

- structure that groups information by category
- an opening that captures the reader's attention
- facts, definitions, and examples to explain the topic
- domain-specific and technical terms that relate to the topic
- text features, such as headings and graphics, that add to the meaning of the text and categorize the information
- a strong ending that leaves readers with a sense of completion and closure

Introduce the Assignment

Introduce with a prompt Say: *After reading a topical text, answer the question: What does the author really want me to know about this topic? Let's use The Pledge of Allegiance as the topical text.*

Model sorting information from one section of the text using a web-type graphic organizer. Include information embedded in text features and graphics. Then have students work in pairs or small groups to list additional facts, details, and ideas from one section of the text by category. Remind them to identify the key ideas within each category.

When students have completed the webs, ask volunteers to identify categories and ideas that seem important. Ask: *How do the categories connect to and reflect the key ideas in the text?*

Model the Writing

Begin a model of informative text that has a clear focus a strong opening and one key idea contained in the text.

Say: *I want to start with a strong opening to engage the reader, so I will use a question to pull the reader into my writing. Knowing a bit more history about the Pledge really helps it come alive! Now I will answer the prompt, "What does the author really want me to know about the topic? The role of the Pledge of Allegiance has changed over time. Notice that I used a big idea from the text to focus my writing.*

Writers group related information logically in informative texts because a logical structure helps the reader understand the information. Often, the structure of informative writing is preplanned so that the ideas are presented with clarity and coherence. Because my focus is on the changing role the Pledge has played, the structure of my writing will likely look at the writing of the Pledge, its history since it was written, and how the Pledge is used now.

Let's use our webs to find the key details we need to support both the focus of the paragraph and the focus of the writing as a whole.

Give students a few moments to turn and talk. Be sure students understand that they are looking for details about how the pledge got started. Then skip to the end modeling how to conclude an informative text.

> Do you think you know and understand the Pledge of Allegiance? Knowing a bit more history about the Pledge really helps it come alive! The role of the Pledge of Allegiance has changed over time.
>
> The Pledge was written by a man named Francis Bellamy in 1842. He wrote it so that students would have something to say at a celebration of Columbus Day.

> In conclusion, even though the Pledge of Allegiance was written for a single event and has changed over time, it has remained a very important symbol of our citizens' loyalty to the United States of America.

Support Writers

Display your modeled writing for students along with the features list. Then instruct students to begin informative texts of their own, based on the key ideas they identified from their categorizing webs.

Students should develop their writing with facts, definitions, concrete details, and content-specific vocabulary found in the text and their graphic organizers. Remind students that informative writing needs to flow smoothly from one idea to the next.

Revise

Display your model summary along with the features list that you created with students. Say: *Now that you've written your informative summary, it's time to revise and edit. Revising means taking a careful look at the content of our writing. We want to be sure our ideas make sense. After all, we are trying to share information with our readers so that they can extend their learning too!*

I'm taking a closer look at the third sentence of my introduction: The role of the Pledge of Allegiance has changed over time. I realize now that I want to revise this sentence. It does not seem connected to the sentences that come before both. It seems to be just sitting there. Watch as I revise: Many people do not realize that both the Pledge and the role it plays in our society have changed over time. *The phrase I added helps connect the ideas and makes the paragraph flow more smoothly.*

Direct attention to the features list and ask students if there are any additional features they would want to add. Then turn revising over to partners. Have them read each other's work, focusing on meaning. They should make sure their partners have provided main ideas along with details that are organized by categories that correspond with those main ideas. They should make sure they have connected ideas using appropriate words and phrases. Direct them to return to the features list as a checking point for their summaries.

Edit

Let students know that we edit to make sure that our writing will make sense to readers. We look for errors in spelling, capital letters, and so on because these errors can get in the way of readers' understanding.

If you have not already done so, work with students to develop an editing checklist based on the Grade 4 ELA Common Core State Standards, along with standards from lower grades that students have not yet mastered. Then have students use the editing checklist to do an edit of each other's work. Depending on student needs, focus the editing on one or more conventions such as the following:

- *Sentence variety:* Students should use a variety of sentences to help their writing flow smoothly: simple, compound, and complex. Model how to combine sentences using commas and conjunctions. Model how to check sentences for subjects and verbs to ensure that they are complete.

- *Verb tense*: Remind students that verb tense reflects whether action took place in the past, takes place in the present, or will occur in the future. Sometimes things happen over time, in which case the progressive verb tenses (past, present, or future) should be used. Model checking verb tense in your own summary so that students will know to make verb tense consistent in their writing.

- *Spelling:* Share strategies for spelling, such as word families, spelling rules, using reference sources, and so on.

Share and Reflect

Allow time for students to share their completed informative text. Have students point out what other writers have done well. Be sure to note the strengths in student writing to reinforce their successful use of strategies. Have students share their work by publishing it on a class wiki. As students read other topical texts and write similar pieces, they can add to the wiki to create a classroom collection of knowledge and expertise.

Then ask questions to help guide students' reflection:

- *For what purpose do we write informative texts?*
- *Why is it important to categorize information in informative writing?*
- *What information from the text did you use to develop your topic? How did you decide which information to include?*
- *How do you feel about your knowledge of the topic? Can you explain how writing extended your learning so that you know more than you would have if you had simply read the text?*
- *Suppose that a friend asks you for tips on writing informative text. What advice will you give?*

Extend Students' Thinking

Use these ideas to extend student thinking about informative text and to give them additional practice creating authentic pieces of this type of writing:

- Have students consider what text features might strengthen informative writing. They might, for example, add headings or bold words to emphasize the logical grouping of the information. Encourage students to add such features to their informative writing so that students will become more familiar with their use.
- Work with students to think of other opportunities to practice this type of writing: chapter review, unit review, oral reports. Remind them that informative writing extends and deepens their learning.
- Have students read similar books on different topics and then write an informative piece that summarizes their learning. Have students use the summary to create a digital presentation for the class.
- The publishing step of the writing process is important in order for students to invest in the writing process. Knowing that a real audience will read what they have written invigorates students' writing. If publishing on a wiki page is not a possibility, consider creating a class book and sharing it with other classes.
- Students can create other webs suitable for categorizing information and store them in their writing folders for future assignments.
- Have students return to a previously written informative piece to evaluate the opening and closing, make sure there is a logical structure, and be sure the reasons have been elaborated upon.
- Give students pieces of informative text—such as science articles, news articles, and history-fair presentations—to evaluate. How do the writers present the information? What makes one more interesting than another? How could the writer have elaborated more to give the text more meaning? Allow time for students to share their findings.

Tip
Students may want to add a graphic or more information about the topic. For example, they could include a picture of the American flag or a timeline to show important events affecting the Pledge. Help students locate sources that provide appropriate infographics and other text features that can add to understanding the key ideas in the piece.

Self-Assess
Have students assess their own writing. Provide these questions for students' self-assessment:
- Did you use a structure that grouped information by category into sections or paragraphs?
- Did you start your informative piece with a sentence that grabs readers' attention?
- Did you elaborate your big ideas by providing interesting detail?
- Did you include enough information to demonstrate your understanding of the topic and provide your readers with an understanding of the topic?
- Does your conclusion briefly summarize what you have said?