Exploratory: Using Questions to Outline

DISCUSSION

Can any of us forget the dreaded formal outline teachers asked us to complete before writing? In his book Write to Learn, Donald Murray suggests eleven alternatives to the formal outline and offers this piece of advice: “None of these is the way to outline. Develop your own system of outlining. Outline only if it helps you, and then outline in a way that provides that help” (p. 100).

In the next two lessons we offer two of Murray’s strategies that are simple enough for young writers to use.

HOW TO TEACH IT

A simple way to organize your writing is to consider the questions a reader will have about your subject. I’ve been thinking about writing a book about saltwater taffy. Ever since I was little I’ve been going to this shop in the summer where I can watch the taffy makers work. I’ve been researching this topic a bit. Today I’m going to think about the questions my readers might ask:

- Why do they call it saltwater taffy? Is there really salt in it?
- How do they make it?
- What flavors can you get?
- When did they first start making this kind of candy?
- Why do people love it?
- Why does it come in different shapes?
- What is saltwater taffy?

The next thing I’ll do is put these questions in order by thinking about what the reader might need or want to know first and so on. (Place numbers next to the questions as you talk about each.)

I think it makes sense to begin with the last question, What is saltwater taffy? Then I’ll move to the question, When did they first start making this kind of candy? From there I’ll write about how they make it, what flavors they have, and why it comes in different shapes. And for the last question, I’ll give my opinion on why so many people love it.

Now I have a road map that will guide me as I start to write. I may find the need to change as I go along and that’s okay. But for now, this helps me get started.

If you are thinking about how to organize your writing, you might give this strategy a try. See if it works for you!

Jen Ham and Kim Sambles

Teaching Information Writing K-8

Nonfiction Craft Lessons: Teaching Information Writing K-8

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Narrowing Your Focus

**DISCUSSION**

We believe that teachers should give students as much choice as possible in nonfiction writing. But many kids get bogged down by general topics about which you could write not just one book, but a whole series! This is not surprising when we assign each student to write about a general topic—a particular state, for example. Such topics often lead to flat, laundry-list writing. It’s our job to help students find topics that are manageable in size and scope.

**HOW TO TEACH IT**

I want to tell you a little story about a fourth-grade boy named Owen. The kids in Owen’s class were going to write an information report on a subject that interested them. His teacher took the class to the library and let the students decide what they wanted to write about. Owen did a little research and made his decision: “I’m going to write about the universe.”

He dragged a ton of books back to the classroom and started to research.

“How’s it going?” his teacher asked after two days.

“It’s too much!” he moaned. “I think I’m just going to concentrate on our solar system.”

Owen kept narrowing and narrowing his topic. Finally he ended up writing about Ganymede, which is Jupiter’s largest moon. He did a fine piece of writing.

When you write nonfiction you need to focus your topic until you find a particular angle that seems right. Take a slice of the pie. The universe was too big a topic for Owen to research, but he became an expert on one of Jupiter’s moons.

Jennifer Owings Dewey writes information books. She could have written a book about amphibians, but instead she decided to write about frogs. In fact, she wrote about one kind of frog—poison dart frogs.

Today I want you to think about your topic. Is it too broad and general? Would it make sense to try to narrow your focus? That’s something that we might talk about today as I come around to confer with you.
Writing an Introduction

**DISCUSSION**

The introduction is a chance for young writers to state in a simple, concise form what the piece will be about. After you teach this idea, keep a wary eye out for formulaic writing in which all your students’ introductions begin to sound the same. If that starts to happen, you may want to show them examples of different kinds of introductions. It’s important that they get a sense of the range of options available for writing an introduction.

**HOW TO TEACH IT**

(Start by reading the one-page introduction from *Brain Surgery for Beginners and Other Major Operations for Minors*.)

Are you interested? I read that because today we’re going to talk about writing an introduction. When I say *introduction* I mean the opening sentences, or paragraphs, of a piece of writing. Think of it as shaking hands with a new person, your reader, for the first time. It’s an important first connection.

You can write different kinds of introductions. The one I just read had a humorous, playful tone. Here’s another book, *All About Rattlesnakes* by Jim Arnosky. His introduction begins with five questions and his promise to answer them in the book.

Marnie Wells, an eighth grader, wrote a how-to guide for an unlikely subject—how to clean an outhouse! Here’s how she begins:

This pamphlet is your guide to quick and easy outhouse cleaning. Your sparkling, fresh-smelling outhouse can be the envy of all your neighbors.

Guests will remark that your privy is the best that they have ever visited.

If you want to hear all sorts of wonderful things about your outhouse, read the following pages carefully and enjoy with the author’s compliments . . .

Think about the introduction you’ll want to write for your own information piece. The introduction you write should do these things:

- Explain your purpose for writing it.
- State the main ideas that will follow.
- Get your reader interested.
- Think about the kind of introduction you’ll want to write for your information piece.
Writing in Paragraph Form

**DISCUSSION**

Although the reminder to indent often comes as students write their final drafts, thinking in paragraphs also helps the writer to organize information. Paragraphs are an organizational tool. They make writing "easy on the reader's eye" and help writers be clear about what they think and feel. It takes years of experience to develop the skill of using paragraphs well. Here's a way to introduce students to the purpose and process of using them in their writing.

**HOW TO TEACH IT**

(Place Appendices F1 and F2 on an overhead projector or make copies so students can see the examples you will be referring to.)

Let's take a look at these two pages. They say exactly the same thing, but before you read either one I want you to think about something. If you came across these two pages and were going to read only one of them, which one do you think you'd pick?

Most of us would read this one (Appendix F2) because it looks easier to read. Reading this one (Appendix F1) feels a little like swimming underwater while holding your breath. There's no place to stop and come up for air. Paragraphs give readers a break. They also help organize information. Each paragraph usually has its own topic or central idea. Let's read the passage and see what that looks like.

I'll read this page aloud twice. The first time just listen and enjoy. The second time through I'll stop after each paragraph and consider what topic or idea is central to each paragraph.

(Help students visualize this by circling each paragraph after you read. Next to it write a key word or phrase that summarizes each central idea.)

Paragraphs make the page "friendlier" to the reader's eye and easier to understand because the information is organized around separate ideas. When you are writing today, try organizing your information into paragraphs. Begin writing about one thing (for example, the kinds of food your animal likes to eat), then indent and begin a new paragraph when you switch to a new idea (such as the different places it uses for shelter).
Writing a Topic Sentence

**DISCUSSION**

You’ve introduced the concept of paragraphs and invited students to use them when writing. Some are bound to use them incorrectly. One reason is that students sometimes have underdeveloped ideas. They write one sentence and are ready to move on to another topic. Although not all paragraphs require topic sentences, many expository texts do use topic sentences as organizers. Learning to recognize and use a topic sentence can help students develop their ideas.

**HOW TO TEACH IT**

Earlier we talked about paragraphs, and I’ve noticed many of you using them to help organize your writing. I’ve noticed that some of you have trouble deciding when one paragraph should end and another should begin. Using a topic sentence can make this decision easier. A topic sentence is one sentence that clearly states the main idea of the paragraph. Here’s an example:

(Share text from Appendix G or generate something on your own.)

*Saltwater taffy has been around a long time* is the topic sentence in this paragraph. It tells you what the rest of the paragraph will be about. As we read on we learn about how far back it goes and where it may have come from.

If you wanted to talk about the different flavors of taffy it wouldn’t make sense to put it in this paragraph. Let’s write a new topic sentence for a paragraph that will describe the different flavors.

*Saltwater taffy comes in lots of different flavors.* There are the flavors that most of us think about when we think of taffy: molasses, peppermint, vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry. But what about raspberry lemonade, piña colada, and banana cream pie? The number of saltwater taffy flavors is growing because there are new and easier ways to add flavor to recipes.

If you aren’t sure when to start a new paragraph, it may be because you aren’t organizing your writing around a series of main ideas. Writing a topic sentence helps you focus on one main idea at a time. Try stating your main idea in a topic sentence and then continue the paragraph by explaining more about that sentence. When you are ready to shift to another main idea, write a new topic sentence.
Saltwater Taffy

Saltwater taffy has been around a long time. One legend teaches that it was named after a vendor on Atlantic City’s Boardwalk who had his supply of taffy damaged by a storm tide in the summer of 1883. But even without the name—saltwater taffy—it was around long before that. Some say that taffy was invented from toffee recipes that colonists brought over from England. When making the toffee they found that when they pushed and pulled the sticky substance it began to change. Instead of toffee, they had taffy!
Using Supporting Details and Examples

**DISCUSSION**

Students too often make unsupported claims in their nonfiction writing: *The computer saves us time.* (How?) *Hockey is the most challenging sport.* (In what respect?) We need to impress upon students that in the “food chain of ideas,” big ideas are nourished by specifics: smaller details and concrete examples. By providing supporting details, students ground their writing in the real world. This gives it authority. It is also a good way to help students flesh out skimpy or underdeveloped writing.

**HOW TO TEACH IT**

When you write nonfiction, beware that you don’t make statements without backing them up with evidence. Let’s say that your subject is World War II and you write

*World War II was the most destructive war in the history of the planet. Today, we must do whatever we can to make sure that nothing like that ever happens again.*

That’s a noble idea, but the author didn’t give us a single fact or bit of evidence to support the statement that World War II was the most destructive war in history. What about the First World War? What about Vietnam? Those kinds of unsupported statements weaken a piece of nonfiction writing.

Today let’s take a look at *Animal Dads.* This book does many things well, but today as I reread it to you, I’d like you to pay attention to how the author backs up his statements with examples and concrete details.

(Read. Discuss.)

Today I want you to consider this idea as you revisit your writing. Have you done what Sneed B. Collard does? If you are just beginning to write, remember to back up your ideas with enough examples, details, and facts.
Using Commas to List Multiple Facts

DISCUSSION

Because a nonfiction text involves combining details and drawing relationships between various facts, it offers young writers the opportunity to stretch their abilities to write more complex sentences. Showing students how to use commas to list facts gives them a way to avoid simple, repetitive sentences.

HOW TO TEACH IT

Does anyone know what the word efficient means? If something is efficient it means that it does the job quickly and well. For instance, we've been working on learning how to move quickly and quietly from our desks to the carpet area. I could say we have found an efficient way to do that job.

I want to talk today about efficient sentences. An efficient sentence is a sentence that conveys information quickly and well. Consider the following facts about bats:

(These sentences and the one to follow should be printed on a chart.)

Bats live in tropical rain forests. They can also live in mountains. Bats live in deserts, too. They probably live right in your neighborhood.

I've used four sentences to teach that information. But because all the sentences teach about where bats live, there's a more efficient way to combine the information. Laurence Pringle wrote a sentence that combines all these facts.

Bats live in tropical rain forests, in mountains, in deserts, and probably right in your neighborhood.

What differences do you notice? (You could point out the fact that he uses only one sentence instead of four and that the commas allow him to list the information. We find it better to invite students to share their own discoveries. This doesn't mean you let go of what you plan to teach. If students do not discover Pringle's use of commas to list facts, share that observation with them as described below.)

Notice how this author uses commas to list the four places where bats may be. When you have more than two facts that group together around one idea, you can combine them by using commas like this author does. Notice that you put a comma after each fact. Just before you get to the last fact, you also use the word and to let the reader know the list is complete. Let's try it a couple of times to see how easy it is. (Appendix I offers three other clusters of simple, repetitive sentences that you can rewrite into single sentences using commas in a list.)
Writing a Strong Lead for a Biography

DISCUSSION

In many third- and fourth-grade classrooms, students write biographies of important historic men and women. Such writing often comes out dry and flat, particularly the lead. As teachers, we need to do whatever we can to revitalize these leads. We have noticed that energizing the lead in a student’s writing can have a nice echoing effect that carries to the very end.

HOW TO TEACH IT

Aimee Buckner teaches fourth grade at Brookwood Elementary School in Georgia. In this craft lesson, Aimee tries to attune her students to various ways of beginning their biographical writing:

In order to help students to see that grabber leads count in biography reports, too, we study the beginnings of each chapter in Russell Freedman’s book Indian Chiefs. I usually type all the leads onto one page and make a transparency for me and copies for the kids to use as a resource. We then read these first sentences and study how Freedman makes us want to read more about these Native Americans. He uses a variety of techniques, which we try to name. Freedman sometimes starts off with a childhood story, a quote from someone who knew the chief, a physical description of the chief, and even an active lead that puts the reader right in the middle of a battle. After we have looked at these leads and tried to name what Russell Freedman was trying to do, my students go back to the biography they are writing and rework their own beginnings.
Using Strong Verbs

Discussion

It's easy for young students to fall into the trap of describing their subjects by relying on the passive verb to be. "A hammer is a very useful tool. It is used to pound nails." Whether students write about inanimate objects such as tools (as in the book used in this lesson) or live organisms, their writing becomes more vivid and lively when they use strong verbs to describe their subject in action.

How to Teach It

The verb is the engine of a sentence. Today we are going to look at the difference strong verbs can make in writing. It might seem that the easiest way to describe something is simply to come out and say what it is. If you were writing a book about tools for younger readers, you might write, "A wrench is used to turn a nut. A drill is for making holes in wood. Pliers are a way to hold things together or to twist wire."

In his book Workshop, Andrew Clements uses action verbs instead of the passive verbs is or are to describe how the tools work, and this makes the writing more interesting. Let's compare his descriptions with mine.

A wrench is used to turn a nut. Wrench turns the nut. Wrench turns the pipe. Wrench loosens, wrench tightens. Wrench wrestles metal.

Let's look at the verb I used and the verbs he used. (Together, underline the verbs in each sentence.)

Clements uses four verbs to show the wrench at work: it turns, loosens, tightens, and wrestles. By the time we finish reading about the wrench, we get the idea of what it does. Can't you picture someone working hard to wrestle a nut loose from its hold on metal?

All of you have subjects you are describing. There are probably places where you are using the passive verbs— is or are—when you could use a stronger verb instead. You can liven up your writing by finding those sentences and rewriting them using stronger, action-oriented words. If you find a place where you want to try that but aren't sure how, let me know and we can look at it together.
Writing a Caption for a Photograph or Drawing

DISCUSSION

It may seem odd to talk about photos and drawing in a book about nonfiction writing. But students increasingly live in a visual world. They investigate and learn from a number of nonprint sources. It's common for a student to visit an Internet site, download a photograph, print it, and incorporate it into the final report. Students need guidance so they can smoothly integrate these visuals into their nonfiction writing. Caption writing is another important kind of writing for this genre.

HOW TO TEACH IT

Let's take a look at The Great Fire, a book by Jim Murphy about the fire that destroyed much of Chicago in 1871. You'll notice that this book contains many drawings and a few photographs. Under each of these illustrations there is a short description that helps the reader understand what the photograph is about. That bit of writing is called a caption. These captions help readers understand the meaning of the illustrations.

Take a look at this drawing on page 32. It shows a fireman, and it looks like he's blowing some sort of horn. The drawing is confusing until you read the caption, which says,

Even a small fire was a noisy experience, so fire marshals and steam engine foremen carried brass speaking trumpets to make their voices carry over the roar of the flames.

Many of you are working on a finished version of your information report. And many of you are planning to use photographs or drawings. These illustrations give you an important way to teach readers about your subject, but you can't expect the illustrations to stand on their own. You'll need to take time to write captions so the reader will understand the meaning of the drawings or photographs. A good caption is short—only one to three sentences. In that short space you need to

- Explain what the illustration shows. (Be specific!)
- Name the people.
- Tell why this is important to your topic.
Creating a Glossary

**DISCUSSION**

As students delve into a topic, they typically encounter a host of strange new words particular to their subject. A glossary helps readers understand these words. Students will encounter this feature in the books they read, and they can include a glossary in their finished writing. We believe this craft lesson would work equally well for middle school students.

**HOW TO TEACH IT**

During your research, you have probably come across new words you've never seen before. Let's say you're learning more about whales. You might read words like baleen and ambergris. Sometimes you come across a word you've heard before, but the author is using it in a new way. For example, footprint is a word you know, but the "footprint" of a whale is the particular way the water looks on the surface just above where a whale is swimming.

Many nonfiction authors understand that readers need help understanding these new words. They include a glossary that has these words with a brief definition of each one. Predator! by Bruce Brooks has a four-page glossary at the end.

Let's look at Geography from A to Z by Jack Knowlton, which is one long glossary on the subject of geography.

(Read Geography from A to Z. If kids already know it, reread a few pages.)

What did you notice about this glossary? I was struck by the fact that the writing that explains words such as highland, isthmus, or volcano is pretty short, usually two or three sentences, often shorter.

As you're researching, make a list of the specialized vocabulary you'll want your readers to know. Though you probably don't want to turn your entire report into a glossary, consider including a glossary at the end.