

Expository Writing

Expository writing is, without a doubt, the genre that your child will use most often in their school careers and on into their working lives. By definition, expository writing is written to inform an audience of others. You will see this type of writing from your child in the form of research papers, reports, essays, response to literature, how-to pieces, compare/contrast pieces, and writing across the curriculum. As an adult this form of writing is seen as a college admission or job application essay, a query letter, proposal, or inter-office email.

With this in mind, your child will learn the foundation and specific skills to be a successful writer in this genre. Empowering Writers materials have been designed to build the necessary skills: organization, writing broad yet distinct main ideas, writing a variety of supporting details, using statistics and information that have been researched, crafting attention-grabbing introductions, and writing powerful conclusions.

The following pages from *The Comprehensive Expository Writing Guide* have been chosen for parents as both background on Empowering Writers and specific techniques taught in expository writing. When reading magazine and newspaper articles these skill areas are great jumping off points for discussion.

(continued ...)

Organization

Expository writing, by its very nature, requires careful organization. In order to deliver information in a way in which the reader can easily grasp, information must be arranged and presented in a logical, sequential manner, with like details grouped together. Often times, students, when writing about a topic, simply list details in random order, as they come to mind. This abstract random collection of facts does not lend itself to solid elaboration on the part of the author, or clear comprehension on the part of the reader.

So how can we best organize exposition? As stated earlier, the basic organizational plan for an expository report, essay, or article, is as follows:

- **Introduction Paragraph** - The first paragraph in which the author grabs the reader's attention (lead) and tells the reader what the entire piece will be about (topic sentence).
- **Body of the Piece** - A number of paragraphs, each with a broad yet distinct main idea sentence, which explains what the paragraph is about, followed by a variety of supporting details. (Often times teachers require three paragraphs in the body of the piece, however, two well-developed paragraphs, or 4, 5, or 6, paragraphs work equally as well - the key is for the author to write as many paragraphs as needed to fully explore the topic. Requiring three paragraphs can result in a formulaic, one size fits all approach that limits the author.)
- **Conclusion Paragraph** - The final paragraph which creatively reiterates the main ideas and restates the thesis or topic sentence in a general way. This may be accomplished in a straightforward, although not literal repetition, or it may be implied.

Graphic Organizer - The Expository Pillar

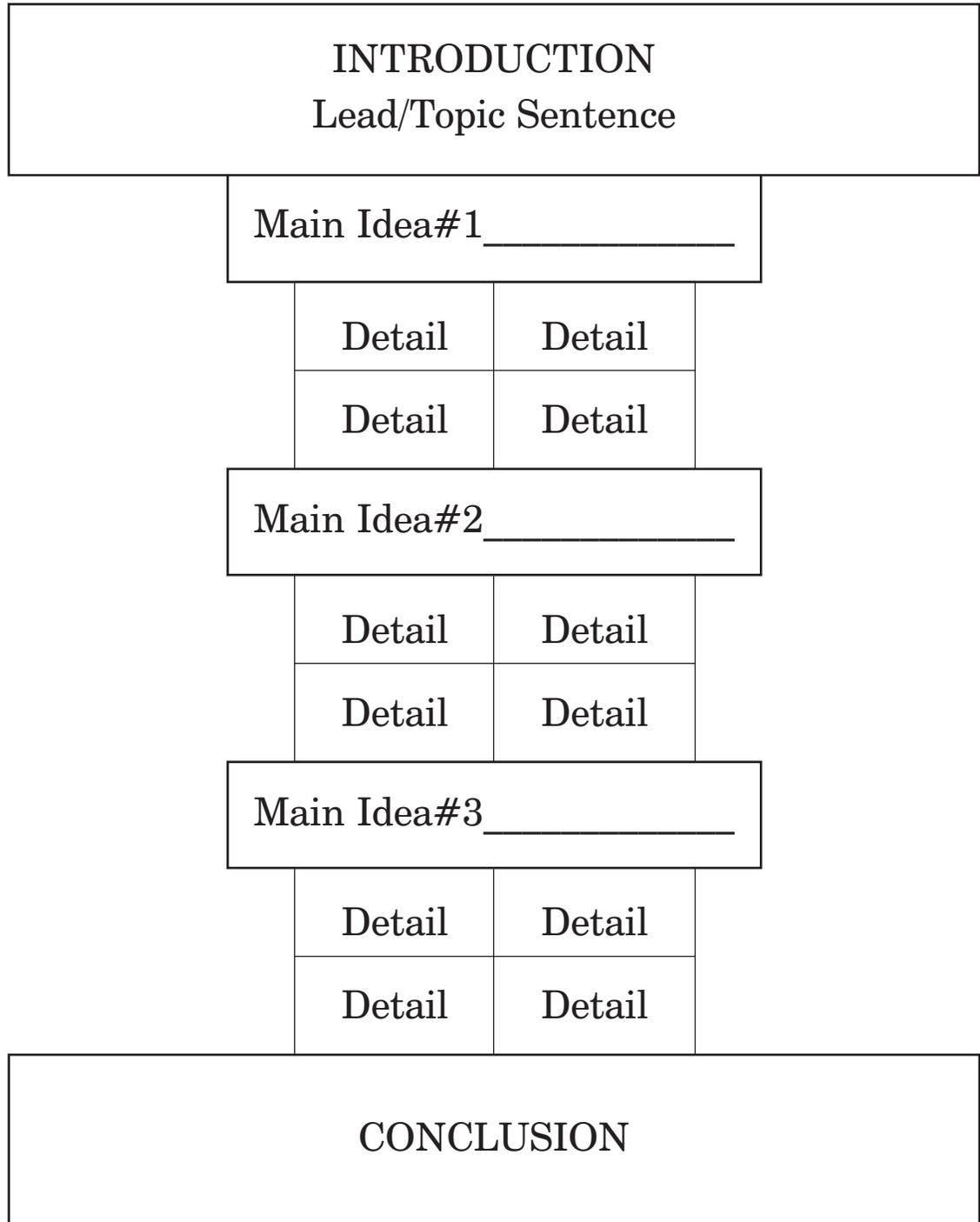
The graphic organizer we use to best illustrate this organizational framework is the EXPOSITORY PILLAR, pictured on the next page. There are a number of reasons that this pillar is helpful.

- It is set up so that the eye moves top to bottom, left to right, in the same way that the resulting written composition will be assembled - the same way in which we read. When the topic and basic main ideas are arranged in this manner, it provides more logical structure to the author than the traditional web, which lends itself to abstract random construction.
- The introduction and conclusion are the broadest, most general parts of the piece, and are, likewise, represented by the largest sections.
- The main ideas, which are more specific than the topic, are represented by a box smaller than the introduction and conclusion sections. Each main idea is supported by a variety of details.
- The details are the most specific elements, represented by the smallest, most numerous boxes.

We use the pillar as a guide to organization and elaboration. It is used in conjunction with a simple, succinct, and practical **PREWRITING PLANNER** that clearly represents the TOPIC and each MAIN IDEA - in other words, a simple **summary** of the essential outline of the piece. During their prewriting and planning, students learn how to generate broad yet distinct main ideas and to represent them within the simple **prewriting planner/summarizing framework**:

TOPIC: _____	Ex. TOPIC: The Rain Forest
MAIN IDEA #1: _____	MAIN IDEA #1: Climate /Weather
MAIN IDEA #2: _____	MAIN IDEA #2: Plants/Trees
MAIN IDEA #3: _____	MAIN IDEA #3: Animals
MAIN IDEA #4: _____	MAIN IDEA #4: Deforestation

THE EXPOSITORY PILLAR



Name _____

MAIN IDEAS--DON'T OVERLAP THEM! - 1



Read the TOPIC and related main idea sentences below. Help the author decide whether the main ideas are distinct enough or whether they overlap. Write a “blurb” for each main idea sentence. THEN READ EACH DETAIL SENTENCE AND USE NUMBERS TO MATCH IT WITH THE CORRECT MAIN IDEA SENTENCE. IF IT MATCHES WITH MORE THAN ONE, THE MAIN IDEA SENTENCES ARE NOT DISTINCT ENOUGH!

TOPIC: AN AWESOME PLAYGROUND

MAIN IDEA SENTENCES:

BLURB

MAIN IDEA #1: An awesome playground is fun. _____

MAIN IDEA #2: There is cool equipment to play on. _____

MAIN IDEA #3: You can play pretend games there. _____

DETAIL SENTENCES:

BELONG IN PARAGRAPH #1, 2, AND/OR 3?

I love to go on the giant slide. Main Idea(s) # _____

The monkey bars are awesome for swinging. Main Idea(s) # _____

The tire swing is a lot of fun. Main Idea(s) # _____

You can pretend that the climbing tower is a castle. Main Idea(s) # _____

Are the main ideas distinct enough? _____

As a class, use the topic “AWESOME PLAYGROUND” and PICK, LIST, and CHOOSE in order to generate an effective collection of BROAD YET DISTINCT MAIN IDEAS.

Name _____

Main Ideas--Overlapping or Distinct? - 1



Read each group of Main Ideas. If they overlap, cross out the ideas that are too similar and replace them with distinct ideas. Then write a main idea sentence for each main idea. You may use the sentence starters on the bottom of the page to help you.

Ex. TOPIC: SPACE TRAVEL

MAIN IDEA #1: ~~It's fun.~~ *fast*

MAIN IDEA #2: Helps scientists learn.

MAIN IDEA #3: ~~It's cool.~~ *expensive*

(Fun and cool are too similar and will overlap.)

MAIN IDEA #1: Space travel is an extremely fast way to get around.

MAIN IDEA #2: We can learn a lot about science from space travel.

MAIN IDEA #3: It is expensive to send people into space.

Ex. TOPIC: CITIES

MAIN IDEA #1: skyscrapers

MAIN IDEA #2: traffic

MAIN IDEA #3: things to do

MAIN IDEA #1: _____

MAIN IDEA #2: _____

MAIN IDEA #3: _____

Sentence Starters

- Have you ever seen ___? • Visitors are amazed by ____.
- Cities are known for ____.
- Watch out for ____.
- While in the city you might ____.
- City dwellers can ____.
- What many people notice about the city are/is ____.
- If you enjoy a variety of activities ____.
- In the city you can ____.
- Look out for ___!
- Get a load of ____.

Name _____

DETAIL-GENERATING QUESTIONS

- **What does it “look” like?**

(sound like? feel like? taste like?
smell like? seem like?)

- **Why is that important?**

(Why is that important to your main idea?)

- **Is each detail in a separate sentence?**

(Separate the Grocery List!)

- **Did you give a specific example?**

(Avoid general language such as
“stuff” “things” “nice”, etc.)

“The Golden Bricks”

Five Powerful Building Blocks That Give Your Pillar Strength

QUOTE: The words of an *authority or an expert* on the subject you’re writing about. Be sure to tell the reader who the expert is and what his/her qualifications are.

ex. Ms. Kathy Jones, executive producer, says, “This movie will be a hit!”

NOT just: Ms. Kathy Jones says....

STATISTIC: Information presented as a number, ratio, or percentage.

ex. On average 100,000 people use this product daily.

or

It has been proven that 9 out of 10 people own.....

or

Studies show that 85% of people visit.....

AMAZING FACT: An unusual, amazing, little-known fact that will surprise your readers.

ex. It is hard to believe, but when a sea star loses an arm, they grow another in its place!

ANECDOTE: A SHORT explicit story used to illustrate a main idea.

ex. That reminds me of the time when I wore my clogs and slipped on the icy path. This is just another example of why it is important to dress appropriately for the weather.

DESCRIPTIVE SEGMENT: A vivid 2 or 3 sentence description that uses the five senses to illustrate an example of some kind.

ex. Cars and buses rush past in a blur. Taxi horns blare. The air is filled with the smells of exhaust. Pedestrians crowd the sidewalks. Skyscrapers tower overhead. The city is a bustling place!

WHAT YOUR INTRODUCTION PARAGRAPH NEEDS

A LEAD: Catch the reader's attention with:

- an amazing or unusual fact
- a question
- a descriptive segment
- a statistic
- a quote
- an anecdote

A TOPIC SENTENCE: Briefly, *clearly*, tell the reader what the piece will be about.

Read each introduction paragraph that follows. Pay attention to the different kinds of leads. The lead appears in italics. The topic sentence is underlined. Notice that the topic sentence in each example is the same!

They're cute and furry, sophisticated and intelligent, playful and independent. Without a doubt, cats are beautiful, easy to care for, and great company!

(Type of lead: descriptive segment)

These celebrities of the animal kingdom have been featured everywhere from Broadway to King Tut's tomb! Without a doubt, cats are beautiful, easy to care for, and great company!

(Type of lead: amazing fact)

"I'd travel anywhere around the globe to make a picture," says Hollywood actress Maxine Foster, "as long as I could bring my kitty cat along on the shoot!" Without a doubt, cats are beautiful, easy to care for, and great company!

(Type of lead: quote)

What do more than 70 million Americans have in common? They are the proud owners of the fabulous feline! Without a doubt, cats are beautiful, easy to care for, and great company!

(Type of lead: statistic)

Are you looking for a good companion, a faithful friend, some good clean entertainment? Then look no further! Just buy yourself a cat! Without a doubt, cats are beautiful, easy to care for, and great company!

(Type of lead: question)

I come home and plop down on my couch, exhausted. A warm ball of fur rubs against my ankles, jumps onto the couch and cuddles up, purring softly. Suddenly I feel the stress of the day melting away. Without a doubt, cats are beautiful, easy to care for, and great company!

(Type of lead: anecdote)

Notice that there is no doubt what any of these paragraphs are introducing....an expository piece of writing that will provide information about the following topic: CATS MAKE WONDERFUL PETS. Also notice that the author can be as creative as he or she wants to be in constructing an attention grabbing lead--each lead sentence was effective.

CONCLUSIONS

The concluding paragraph should “sum up” the main ideas of an expository piece. However, this should not be a totally redundant restating of the main ideas. Here is an example:

So now you know what frogs look like, where they live, and how they grow and change. THE END

It is clear that the piece focused on the topic of frogs, and that the main ideas dealt with their physical characteristics, habitat, and life cycles. However, this kind of redundant restating is boring. **There are a number of different techniques that can be used to creatively restate the main ideas that we will explore in this section:**

- RESTATE EACH MAIN IDEA AS A QUESTION • WORD REFERENTS
- DEFINITIVE WORDS/PHRASES • INFORMATIVE VERBS
- HYPOTHETICAL ANECDOTES
- RESTATEMENT OF GENERAL TOPIC SENTENCE

Some of these techniques (questions, word referents, definitive words/phrases, restatement of general thesis statement) are easy and effective for younger students and function as a bridge to the more sophisticated skills (hypothetical anecdote, informative verbs) which are better applied by more mature students. We will explore each of these techniques, and encourage students to apply them as they are ready. An example of each follows:

RESTATE EACH MAIN IDEA AS A QUESTION -

Would you enjoy a nature walk by the marsh or pond? Are you entertained by the flopping about of tadpoles and the leaping of long-legged green frogs? If so, you should get to know the common, yet fascinating frog!

Let's analyze the way that each main idea was referenced in the above example.

- appearance: *long-legged green* • habitat: *marsh or pond* • life cycle: *tadpoles - frogs*

WORD REFERENTS - rephrase key words and phrases for sentence and word variety.

*Would you enjoy a nature walk by the **marsh or pond**? Are you entertained by the flopping about of **tadpoles** and the leaping of long-legged, green **amphibians**? If so, you should get to know the common, yet fascinating frog!*

Notice the use of “marsh or pond” in place of “where they live”, “tadpoles” and “long-legged green amphibians” in place of “how they grow and change” and “long-legged, green amphibians” in place of “frogs”. (Also, notice the last sentence - an example of restatement of topic sentence.)

DEFINITIVE WORDS/PHRASES - (list below) lend an air of authority and finality to the piece.

certainly surely without a doubt clearly decidedly truly for sure
absolutely definitely of course indeed undoubtedly positively

*Would you enjoy a nature walk by the marsh or pond? Are you entertained by the flopping about of tadpoles and the leaping of long-legged green frogs? If so, you should **certainly** get to know the common, yet fascinating frog!*

RESTATEMENT OF GENERAL TOPIC SENTENCE - Many students have a tendency to end their pieces with a phrase such as: *I hope you liked reading my report.* This ineffective, awkward final sentence is fairly typical, because students sense the need for some closure but are uncertain about how to achieve it. The use of the **general topic sentence** as the final sentence in the piece is an excellent alternative. Restate the TOPIC along with a general adjective:

*Would you enjoy a nature walk by the marsh or pond? Are you entertained by the flopping about of tadpoles and the leaping of long-legged green frogs? If so, you should **certainly** get to know the **amazing, fascinating frog!***

HYPOTHETICAL ANECDOTE - a situation presented that would, hypothetically, put the reader in contact with your topic.

If you ever stroll along the banks of a pond, or take a kayak or canoe out on a small lake, be on the lookout for these interesting creatures. From egg to tadpole, from tadpole to frog, these long-legged, green hopping amphibians will definitely catch your eye. Without a doubt, these comical croakers are fascinating!

INFORMATIVE VERBS - replace passive or helping verbs with informative verbs in order to easily restate each main idea. Here is a list of informative verbs for reference purposes:

recognize understand learn about discover uncover reveal study
examine observe analyze investigate find out focus on research
know delve consider determine remember explore
be familiar with be on the lookout become aware of

*If you ever stroll along the banks of a pond, or take a kayak or canoe out on a small lake, **be on the lookout** for these interesting creatures. You can **explore** their habitat and **observe** them from egg to tadpole, tadpole to frog. These long-legged, green hopping amphibians will certainly catch your eye. Without a doubt, these comical croakers are fascinating!*

All of these techniques will be presented to students, from the most basic skills to the most sophisticated, in the activities that follow. The first lesson introduces the simpler techniques.

What you can do to support your student writer:

When looking at your child's writing keep in mind the purpose of expository is to inform an audience of others. Be aware of the skills your student has learned and offer suggestions that reflect the ability level of your student. Keep in mind your child's teacher is the best resource you have for supporting the development of your child as a writer.

You might want to check out our online bookstore for suggested resource materials. *The Comprehensive Expository Guide* is our professional resource for expository writing. Another helpful resource is *Step by Step Strategies for Teaching Expository Writing* by Barbara Mariconda.

Following, you will find a number of questions to consider as you read the text of your child's work.

- Look for the overall organization of your student's piece of writing. Does it have an introduction paragraph, at least 3 main idea paragraphs in the body of the piece, and a conclusion paragraph?
- Does the information in each paragraph directly relate to the main idea of that paragraph?
- Some questions we ask ourselves to fully support the details in a paragraph include:
What does it look like? Why is it important? Did the author describe the detail?
For instance: if the detail is; *Pioneer children played with hula hoops.* a possible description might be: *Pioneer children used hula hoops as a form of entertainment. They were made from twigs that were bent into a circle shape and then rolled along the ground, tossed in the air, or used as a target for a game of catch.* This description lends itself to a more fully supported detail. Often students will name the detail but not offer the level of support necessary to give the information substance.
- The other question to lend support to details is: **Why is this detail important to the main idea?** With this question the student points out the importance of the detail as it relates to the main idea of the paragraph. For instance in the above example the importance of the detail is stated as: *Pioneer children used the hula hoop as a source of entertainment.*
- Did the author use specific details? Find overly general terms such as; nice, fun, or awesome and see if they can be replaced with more specific words or phrases.
- As you read magazine and newspaper articles look at the way in which information is explained to the reader. Is it supported with quotes, statistics, or anecdotes?
- Ask your child what types of skills she or he is learning to use in writing this year. You might have them explain these skills to you in order to help them reinforce the learning. Any time you have to teach a concept to someone else it helps you to clarify and understand it more fully.

With these questions in mind you can guide your author to edit their writing to reflect the skills they have learned.