What is Informational/Explanatory Writing?

Informational/explanatory writing conveys information accurately and is organized around a controlling idea with a coherent focus. When a reader engages with an informational text, s/he assumes the text is accurate and true. This assumption of truth is the foundation of the informational text teaching, clarifying or exploring for the reader.

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<th>Purposes of Informational /Explanatory Writing</th>
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<td>Writer: TO TEACH</td>
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<td>Reader: Increase Knowledge</td>
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Thus, the content of an informational or explanatory piece focuses on answering a question that addresses WHAT, HOW or WHY?

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<thead>
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<th>What?</th>
<th>How?</th>
<th>Why?</th>
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<tr>
<td>types</td>
<td>size, function, behavior</td>
<td>why things happen</td>
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<td>components</td>
<td>how things work</td>
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<td>size, function, behavior</td>
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As a result, students will employ a variety of techniques to convey information (see the graphic below) as they produce an informational text. These are the
rhetorical approaches they will need in order to teach, clarify, and explore. The genres that engage informational writing and these techniques are also in the graphic.

How Does Informational Writing Differ from Argument Writing?

As Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards explains:

Although information is provided in both arguments and explanations, the two types of writing have different aims. Arguments seek to make people believe that something is true or to persuade people to change their beliefs or behavior. Explanations, on the other hand, start with the assumption of truthfulness and answer questions about why or how. Their aim is to make the reader understand rather than to persuade him or her to accept a certain point of view. In short, arguments are used for persuasion and explanations for clarification.

Like arguments, explanations provide information about causes, contexts, and consequences of processes, phenomena, states of affairs, objects, terminology, and so on. However, in an argument,
the writer not only gives information but also presents a case with the “pros” (supporting ideas) and “cons” (opposing ideas) on a debatable issue.

Thus, writers of informational texts do not present a debatable claim, but rather select a lens through which to look at information.

The CCSS that Inform the Middle School Informational Writing Units

Reading

RI.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

RI.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

RI.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

RI.10 Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Writing

W.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

W.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

W.5 Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

W.8 Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

W.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

W.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range
How Do Students Approach the Informational Writing Process?

**Topics**
In her work on the Common Core and informational writing, Lucy Calkins emphasizes the importance of students writing about a topic they are passionate about. “An information writer’s purpose, then, is to help readers become informed on a topic that feels very important to the writer” (Calkins, Curriculum Plan, Grade 6, Writing Workshop). The depth of the writer’s engagement will likely determine the depth of the reader’s engagement with the topic. As we know as teachers, when we are excited about what we’re teaching, our students tend to be as well. So as writers and teachers, our students need to get their readers excited about their chosen topic. And thus, as Calkins explains, “the unit, then, assumes that students are writing about self-chosen topics of great individual interest.”

The point here is for students to draw on prior knowledge as they begin their exploration of a topic, then pull in information gleaned from primary and secondary sources. They must then determine the focus they wish to take when writing about this topic. As the Common Core, Appendix A tells us, “With practice, students become better able to develop a controlling idea and a coherent focus on a topic and more skilled at selecting and incorporating relevant examples, facts, and details into their writing.”

Calkins also discusses the development of topic selection in terms of specificity. As a student progresses as a writer, her topics become more specific, as do her controlling ideas:

Students progress, with experience and instruction, from writing rather cursorily about very broad, generic topics toward being able to zoom in on more specific topics and therefore write with a greater density of relevant information. Eventually, experienced writers learn that they can focus not just on a smaller subject but on a particular angle on (or aspect of) that subject. That is, for students writing a six- to seven-page book, usually those writing on the topic of tigers will work with less sophistication than those writing on the topic of the hunting patterns of the Bengal tiger. (53)

**Categories and Analysis**
In addition, informational writing requires that writers put information into categories. These categories should only be determined after significant generative pre-writing and/or research. The analysis of this information will be based on the technique they are engaging (definition, cause and effect etc.). For example, the student writing about why she attends school might need to define
key terms like “learning,” “extra-curriculars,” and “floating schedule,” then explain their importance. As they progress as writers, students will become more sophisticated in their use of multiple techniques to convey information in a single piece.

Organization
The controlling idea of an informational essay does not simply determine the purpose of the piece, but also implies or indicates a possible organizational structure. If students are writing about why kids must attend school, they could organize their piece around the progression of a standard school day. While there is never one single, correct way to structure a writing piece, there are more and less logical structures. In this unit, students should be encouraged to explore a variety of organizational structures. This can begin with putting information into various categories and developing headings and sub-headings for those categories. To experiment with structure, students can move these headings around to determine how different methods of organization affect the logic and focus of their piece.

The graphics below highlights key steps in the informational writing process.
Grades 6-8 Informational Writing Process

- Pre-write all prior knowledge on a topic and develop an inquiry question
- Research using multiple sources to determine a controlling idea
- Categorize information and select details, facts, examples
- Analyze the information
- Experiment with organization to reflect the controlling idea
- Revise and edit the draft for clarity of content, strength of analysis, and organization
- Share text with the reader

- Grades 6-8 Informational Writing Process
Grades 9-12 Informational Writing Process

Bibliography

