

Explanation toolkit

An explanation generally answers ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions and includes causes, reasons and justifications. The verb ‘explain’, however, is often loosely used to mean ‘report’, for example ‘Explain what you did’ generally means ‘tell me or describe what you did’ and may not have any reasons attached to it. Explanations are often similar in structure and purpose to information texts and sometimes sound more like instructions or directions than explanations, there is frequent overlap. The difference lies more in the purpose than in the organisation and structure of these texts i.e. shifting attention away from describing what to explaining why. The similarity between these text-types means that some tool-kit elements are common to both. Despite this however, the cognitive difference between describing and explaining is important and often challenging, especially for younger children. In preparation for writing explanations teachers need to invest time in discussion about reasons, motives, causes related to the topic. The logical and causal thinking and speaking required are an essential foundation for progress in many subjects of the curriculum throughout the school

Year 1 and 2: as in N/R +

Learn and retell simple explanatory texts with a three-part structure in sentences or short paragraphs. These may be based on:

- Real experiences or processes e.g. why bees are important. How our hamster escaped
- Familiar stories e.g. Little Red Hen
- Play and invention e.g. Why bananas are curly

The structure should comprise:

- A title which sets up expectations for the reader e.g. why we must look after our bees. Why wouldn't Little Red Hen share her bread?
- An opening that introduces reader to the topic and signals the purpose of the text e.g. Bees are important because they can make honey. They also help trees and plants to grow.
- An ordered list of events or reasons leading up to the outcome signalled in the title e.g. First, she asked all the animals to help plant the seeds but they all said, “No”, so she did it herself. Then she asked them to help
- A conclusion which follows from the reasons listed in section 2 and links back to the title e.g. First, she asked all the animals to help plant seeds but they all said, “No”, so she did it herself. Then she asked them to help...

Where appropriate, use generalising words e.g. most, many, some, few

Use conjunctions for:

- Time and sequence: then, before, when etc. first second etc. to sequence information leading towards the conclusion
- Cause and effect to link reasons/motives and conclusions: so, so that, because, in order to, that's why etc.

Use complete simple and compound sentences to give information clearly and objectively, with well-chosen adjectives to denote size, colour, behaviour etc.

Use prepositions to show position and direction: behind, above, towards etc.

Write in the present tense and usually 3rd person to give text an impersonal and objective voice

Use correct sentences punctuation

Year 3 and 4: as in Year 1/2 +

Explanation texts are sometimes hard to provide because explanations involve manipulating complex ideas. Suitable topics might include:

- Plants and animals e.g. What do plants need to grow? Why are foxes coming into our gardens? Why trees don't fall over.
- Health and diet e.g. Why are vegetables good for us?
- Staying safe e.g. How to treat a cut? What you need for healthy teeth and gums
- Familiar physical processes e.g. How does a kettle/a bicycle work?
- Simple more questions e.g. Why a character in a story should have told the truth
- Play and invention e.g. What rainbows don't wobble in the wind

Extend use of three-part text structure, boxing up the text:

- General statement to introduce the topic e.g. In the Autumn some birds migrate
- A series of logical steps explaining how or why something occurs e.g. because the days get shorter and there is less light
- Steps continue until the explanation is complete. End with a summary statement or memorable piece of information. As a result, Dinosaurs quickly became extinct along with about 50% of other animal species.

Interest the reader with:

- A title that captures the text e.g. The discovery of bubble gum; Why are dragons extinct?
- An exclamation e.g. Beware-foxes can bite!
- Questions e.g. Did you know that?
- Tempting turns of phrase e.g. Strange as it may seem, not many people know that, interestingly
- Add extra, interesting bits of information e.g. the first balloons were made from animal intestines.

Year 5 and 6: as in Year 3/4 +

The framework for explanatory writing introduced in Year 3 and 4 should be practised and consolidated in Year 5 and 6, with emphasis on explanatory writing across the curriculum for example in:

- Science, technology, geography explaining processes in the natural world e.g. Why do trees have bark? How are rainbows formed? Why does it get colder when you climb up a mountain?
- History and literature to explore motives and reasons e.g. Why didn't Edmund tell Lucy about meeting the White Witch?
- Play and invention e.g. Why dragons became extinct, How the elephant got its trunk?

Help readers to understand explanations through:

- Introductions that link to their experiences e.g. No doubt you will have seen a suspension bridge and its almost as likely you will have travelled over one
- Giving examples; Other mammals, such as flying squirrels and gliding possums, can only glide for short distances
- Inventing similes to illustrate points e.g. a tree's bark is like our skin, the cables of a suspension bridge are stretched under tension like a spring
- Possible use of diagrams, charts, illustrations or models.

Consolidate and extend the explanation text structure from Year 3 and 4 to include:

- Expanding the range of conjunctions and generalisers, particularly those showing cause and effect
- Use of provisional statements with words and phrases like usually, seem to be, tend to
- Opinions as well as facts e.g. Some people still believe that, it used to be thought that
- Technical vocabulary to add precision e.g. spine, compression, glucose -
- References to sources to evidence to add authority e.g. Most people now believe, however, last year, a new variety was discovered

Vary sentence structure, length and type e.g. - Complex sentences to combine information effectively; The outer bark keeps a tree from losing too much water, which could have happened easily in a plant so large

- Sentences with lists of three: pulleys are used on boats to hoist sails, in garages to life engines and in crane for shifting heavy weights
- Active and passive voices; suspension bridge have cables strung between tall towers from which a deck is hung (or suspended)

		- Conditional and hypothetical (if, then) sentences e.g. If trees lose (were to lose) their bark, they would die because, If Fleming hadn't accidentally noticed the mould, we might not have penicillin today
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