Supporting Informational Writing in the Elementary Grades

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As students progress from kindergarten to fifth grade, their writing of information reports will grow in competence and sophistication if teachers adopt a varied, purposeful instructional framework.

Rosalita Morales's fourth-grade class has been studying information reports for the last several weeks, in part to improve students' reading comprehension but mostly to improve their own writing. They've been listening to Ms. Morales read aloud from Seymour Simon's books, such as *Mountains* and *Weather*, and they've been reading information books on their own. Presently, they are studying linguistic features in information reports, the uses of grammar or vocabulary that uniquely mark a particular genre.

Today the class is busily participating in a Features Hunt. Ms. Morales has divided the students into five groups, each assigned to locate examples of particular linguistic features. The first group will hunt for general nouns, the second for linking verbs, the third for action verbs, the fourth for technical vocabulary, and the fifth for instances of the timeless present (see Pappas, 2006). When they are finished, the students will reassemble jigsaw-style to share their findings.

Many teachers, like Ms. Morales, continually seek to improve their students' nonfiction writing abilities. Some teachers have developed a conferencing strategy of asking students to tell more about a particular point or event, but we believe that research can inform teachers on improving students' writing of that special nonfiction genre known as the information report. The information report—a way of using language to provide factual information about a topic—is a particularly important genre both in education and in the larger society (e.g., Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Pappas, 2006).

In elementary classrooms, the information report genre takes many forms—content area textbooks, information books, and magazine and encyclopedia articles. This genre is also commonly requested for writing assignments and appears on many state writing assessments. Although there has been growing stress on using information books in elementary schools over the past decade (e.g., Donovan & Smolkin, 2002a, 2006; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Gill, 2009; Moss, 2004; Pappas, 1993, 2006; Saul & Dieckman, 2005; Smolkin & Donovan, 2001), there has been relatively little research on information writing development to support teachers' efforts in this area. As we have read others' research and writing (e.g., Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Dorfman & Cappelli, 2009; Dreher, 2003; Kamberelis, 1998; Kletzien & Dreher, 2004; Tower, 2002) and reflected on our own research (Bradley & Donovan, 2010; Donovan, 2001; Donovan & Smolkin, 2002b), we've recognized this as an area where teachers can use additional guidance.

Our research indicates that students' writing progresses along various continua toward a mature form. Along the way, students produce increasingly more complex approximations (e.g., Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Donovan & Smolkin, 2002a). Our studies of students and their writing supply unique insights into these intermediate forms of young authors' information writing. From them, we have created a framework of development and instruction to enable teachers to provide enhanced support for the structural and linguistic aspects of students' informational report writing.

This article introduces our developmental framework, provides examples of student texts from across the elementary grades (some from Ms. Morales's

The Reading Teacher, 64(6), pp. 406–416
DOI:10.1598/RT.64.6.2

ISSN: 0034-0561 print / 1936-2714 online

students), and discusses ways teachers might scaffold each student's composition to a greater level of complexity.

A Framework of Students' Information Report Writing Development

From our study of K–5 students' information writing, we have created a continuum of development, which describes the intermediate forms (developmental categories) of students' information reports. Students' information reports typically fall into one of eight categories. These categories are provided in Table 1, each accompanied by a description and student examples. We selected these particular compositions to provide exemplars of the categories, but there are certainly situations where students combine categories within a single text.

As might be expected in a study that examines students' writing from kindergarten through fifth grades, students' compositions display many levels of spelling development. Our stance is that students' attention to genre and related features is present from preschool forward, long before spellings become conventional.

Categories 1 and 2: Labels and Fact Statements

Labels identify aspects of a picture the student has drawn; generally, these are written in present tense. Although typically one sentence in length ("This is a girl in the grass and flowers."), labels may also consist of a single word ("girl") or may contain multiple sentences ("This is a flower. This is me and my mom and my dad and my sister.").

Fact statements consist of a clause or sentence that exceeds the pointing aspects of labeling by including the genre-specific features of present tense ("T-ball is good fun."; "bears take good care") or specialized vocabulary (*volcanoes*, *cubs*). They differ from labels in that students have employed either present tense to state information ("I know horses eat hay.") or the timeless present tense to present general factual information about the general class of the topic presented in the picture ("Dinosaurs are dead.").

PAUSE AND PONDER

- In what way is students' information report writing developmental?
- What are some key linguistic features in information reports?
- How can we support students' information report writing growth?
- How can information books support writing growth?

The fact statement "Some snakes are poisonous" describes the general class. Had the student written "These are snakes," we would consider the text a label. This distinction between labels and fact statements is important; statements embody the basic linguistic features of timeless present and general class. In some cases, we must consider the student's picture to determine whether a text is a label or a fact statement. When the text is "I can play soccer" and the picture displays the student playing soccer, we consider the text a label. If the picture instead portrays a more general soccer scene, such as players in their positions on a field, we consider the text a fact statement, a possible prelude to a longer informational piece.

To further clarify the labels/fact statements distinction, it can be helpful for teachers to look at information books themselves, particularly those written for emergent readers. Robinson's (1996) *Designs*, for example, has a color photograph of a snake on each page, accompanied by a label of the pattern the pictured snake depicts, such as "Zigzags" (p. 1) or "bright hearts" (p. 5). Fact statements can also be seen in Canizares and Chanko's (1998) Science Emergent Reader *Water*, which reads "A river is water" (n.p.) and "Rain is water" (n.p.). Information books like these can serve as models or mentor texts for students' own writing, reinforcing reading/writing connections early in students' reading careers.

Information book captions also contain labels and fact statements. Labels may identify either a visual representation or particular aspects within the visual representation, and fact statements may be used to provide additional information. Gail Gibbons's use of labels within her books is particularly effective.

Categories 3 and 4: Fact Lists and Couplets

Texts beyond the single clause (or simple sentence) can be organized in one of two ways. Fact lists, collections of statements connected by topic and the pronoun they, are easily reordered without losing any

Table 1
Examples of Students' Information Report Compositions at Different Levels of the Continuum

Category	Description	Examples of student text
Category 1: Labels	A word or sentence written in present tense used to identify aspects of a picture	This is a girl in the grass and flowers. (kindergarten girl) This is a picture of my dog. (first-grade girl)
Category 2: Fact statements	Clause or sentence going beyond labeling by including genre-specific features, present tense, and some specialized vocabulary; may introduce a topic	T-ball is fun. (kindergarten boy) Mama bears take good care of baby cubs. (kindergarten boy) Dinosaurs are dead. (kindergarten boy) Volcanoes are dangerous and hot. (first-grade girl)
Category 3: Fact list	Two or more present tense clauses related to a single topic for which order of presentation is unimportant	They like to swim in pools and they like to nibble on your finger and they don't fly that good and they like to splash and that's all. (kindergarten girl) "Spiders" Spiders lay eggs. Spiders make webs. Spiders use thread. (kindergarten girl) "Dogs" Some dogs chase cats. Dogs can be ordinary. Some dogs can be hunt dogs. Some dogs turn over to let you rub and scratch their stomach. Baby dogs need their mother to take care of them. Dogs are yellow, black, white, and brown. My dogs are Pit, German Shepherd, and Chow. Some dogs are wild. Dogs need toys to play with. (fourth-grade boy)
Category 4: Couplet	Two or more present tense clauses for which order is important; these include clauses with relationships, such as question/answer, statement/reason, and statement/example	Trucks go by motors that makes them go fast. (first-grade boy) Do you know where turtles swim? They swim in the ocean under the sea The end. (second-grade girl) "Jungles" Jungles have a lot of good animals. There are bears, tigers, monkeys, and gorillas. (first-grade boy)
Category 5: Fact list collection	Two or more attribute lists are created for subtopics of a larger topic; no order exists within or between the lists; generally only descriptions of attributes and characteristics are provided	"Farm Animals" Pigs are slippery. Pigs eat slops. They oink. Cows give milk. They eat grass. Some are brown. Sheeps give wool. They go baa. Some are brown. (second-grade girl)

(*continued*)

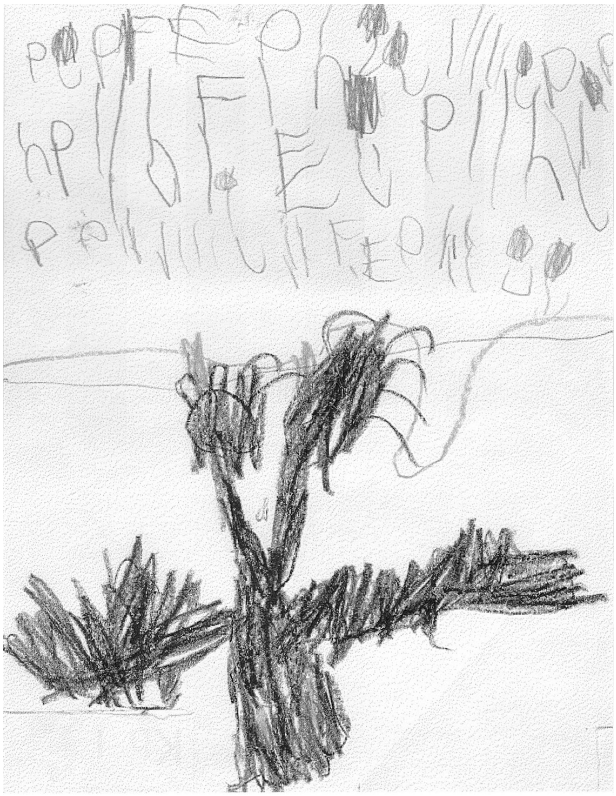
Table 1 (Continued)
Examples of Students' Information Report Compositions at Different Levels of the Continuum

Category	Description	Examples of student text
Category 6: Couplet collection	A collection of two related statements (simple couplets) serving as subtopics, which begin to include more supporting evidence and explanations	"Hot Air Balloons" They have special shapes. There are many shapes like T-Rex, a stork, and a shoe. Some balloons are all red. Some balloons are all colors of the rainbow. Balloons go up early in the morning. They go up when it is cold and we wear coats. The balloons glow at night. The burner shines in the dark. (second-grade girl)
Category 7: Single and unordered paragraphs	Paragraphs that introduce a topic and subtopics, with subtopics in paragraph form consisting of three or more connected sentences; could be rearranged without disruption to the overall meaning	"Dolphins" There is lots to know about dolphins. Dolphins swim with their flippers and their fins. A dolphins flippers are like your hands, Their fins are on their backs. They also swim with their tails. A dolphins tail is like your feet. It has two sides. The dolphin waves it around so it will help it swim. Dolphins also have a blow hole so they can breath. The blow hole is on a dolphins back. Dolphins are friendly animals. They live in pods with other dolphins. And they like people, too. Some dolphins ride along with ships. I like dolphins. Do you? (fourth-grade boy)
Category 8: Ordered paragraphs	Paragraphs that are slightly more complex than unordered paragraphs and cannot be rearranged without altering meaning unless through the use of connecting words and loose connections across paragraphs	"Balloons" Balloons are really neat. I'm talking about hot air balloons. They are made out of nylon. They can be special shapes or regular balloon shapes. First, you fill the balloon up with a big fan. A tarp is put underneath the balloon to roll it out. Many people have to work together. Then, it is neat riding up in a balloon. I have been up in a balloon and my dad is a person in a chase crew. When I am in the air, I can see him riding far below me. At the end, the balloon is put in a big bag when the ride is finished. When it is finished it is still filled with air. You jump or roll on the balloon to get the air out. (fourth-grade girl)

meaning (see examples in Table 1). Figure 1 is also a fact list—its letter strings are rearrangements of its kindergarten author's first name; the typed text was recorded when he read his composition aloud. This student's list of fact statements describing characteristic events of bats ("bats eat...bats sleep at day, they come out at night") could easily be reordered without losing any meaning. Looking more closely at this text, we can see linguistic features that are characteristic of the information report genre. Cohesion—how ideas are linked across a text and within sentences and paragraphs—is maintained in this text through repeated naming of the topic, bats, and the use of the pronoun *they*. Timeless present and action verbs, both linguistic markers of informational texts, are used to present this factual information about the characteristic events of bats' lives.

Couplets represent a second way that students organize multiple clauses or sentences. The term *couplets* suggests the relation between statements that is typical of this category; clauses are coupled together through order, related ideas, and types of

Figure 1
Kindergartner's Fact List on Bats



Bats eat bugs and bats sleep at day.
Bats eat mosquitoes and they can eat insects.
They come out at night. That's all.

cohesion more sophisticated than simple repetition of pronouns. Unlike fact lists, reordering the clauses or sentences of a couplet results in meaning changes; they cannot be rearranged without confounding the meaning. Consider the sentences of this couplet about jungles: "Jungles have a lot of good animals. There are bears, tigers, monkeys, and gorillas." In this text, cohesion is created lexically (at the word level) between sentences, as bears, tigers, monkeys and gorillas are all examples of the superordinate category "animals."

Table 1 (on page 408) displays a sophisticated couplet written by a second-grade girl. She engages her readers through the use of second person in a question format. She uses both pronominal (cohesion through pronouns) and lexical cohesion (*swim* is repeated in the two sentences). You can see as well that she has not yet quite mastered informational writing by her inclusion of the story element "The end."

Although topical knowledge may not differ in fact lists and couplets, the couplet represents a more coherent text, one that is easier for readers to follow. Couplets are readily found in information books for early readers and in captions in information books of all levels. Examples of labels, fact lists, and couplets are found throughout HarperCollins's Let's-Read-and-Find-Out Science 1 books.

Categories 5 and 6: Fact List Collection and Couplet Collection

Fact list collection and couplet collection represent compositions of greater breadth than fact list and

couplet; students have produced longer compositions containing more information but have not yet moved to a paragraph level.

Fact list collections, like fact lists, serve as repositories for knowledge about a topic. They differ from fact lists in that students add breadth to their compositions by including multiple subtopics (a typical result of a teacher suggesting the student add more). In "Farm Animals" (see Table 1 on page 408), the second grader presents information on multiple animals. For each, the descriptions of attributes and characteristic events are not linked; the order of sentences is readily changeable. Cohesion is, at best, pronominal, and the composition lacks a topic presentation (introduction to the topic, a typical feature of information books, is demonstrated below in our example from *Ants* [Berger & Berger, 2002]).

Couplet collections contain two or more couplets serving as subtopics. "Hot Air Balloons" (see Table 1 on page 409) is an example of a four-couplet composition. In terms of genre elements, these couplets include descriptions of attributes (shapes and colors) and characteristic events (when they go up). Cohesion is maintained across the text by repeated naming of the topic (balloons) as well as by the use of pronouns (they). Although order is important within the couplets (as explained above), the order between the couplets is not. Without reducing the coherence of these sentences for readers, the couplet "They have special shapes. There are many shapes like T-Rex, a stork, and a shoe." could easily follow, rather than precede, the couplet "Some balloons are all red. Some balloons are all colors of the rainbow."

Couplet collections are often found in information books for early readers. For example, Melvin Berger's and Gilda Berger's *Ants* begins with the topic presentation "Ants live together" (n.p.). This is followed by six couplets of related information with each sentence at the bottom of a full-color photograph. One two-page spread includes a photograph of ants collecting food on the left and a photograph of ants carrying food away on the right. The following related sentences are below the pictures: "Ants find food—together. Ants carry the food home—together" (n.p). Cohesion is maintained in this text lexically through repeated naming of the topic (ants) and the object of the ants' foraging (food). That the ants do the work together connects the couplet to the overarching topic of the book—"Ants live together." Other examples of couplet collections can be found in the National Geographic series Windows on Literacy.

Category 7: Single and Unordered Paragraphs

There are many definitions of paragraphs with little consensus as to key components. In our work, we have defined a paragraph as a sequence of three or more sentences supporting one clearly identifiable point. This helps us distinguish between collections and paragraphs.

Returning to "Farm Animals" in Category 5 (see Table 1 on page 408), although each collection has three sentences ("Pigs are slippery. Pigs eat slops. They oink."), there is no clearly identifiable point to the collection, other than that all sentences address pigs. Each represents a possible paragraph to be developed—one dealing with tactile sensations for those working with pigs, another on the foods pigs eat, and a final paragraph on sounds pigs produce.

In contrast, looking at "Hot Air Balloons" in Category 6, the couplets noted do have clearly identifiable subtopics—a description of balloon shapes, a description of balloon colors, and so on. Still, each is only a couplet, lacking a third sentence. When we contrast these two compositions with "Dolphins" in Category 7, we can see that each multisentenced paragraph addresses a particular attribute of the dolphin (fins and flippers—paragraph 1; tails—paragraph 2; blow holes—paragraph 3) or its characteristic behaviors (paragraph 4). All four of these represent subtopics for the larger topic, dolphins.

Looking more closely at the first paragraph, "Dolphins" begins with a topic presentation. Its paragraphs describe attributes of the dolphin's body as well as characteristic events in which dolphins engage. The composition contains technical language throughout—*fins*, *flippers*, *blowholes*, and *pods*. Its cohesion is achieved in multiple ways; here, in addition to pronominal cohesion (*they*, *their*, *it*), we also see lexical cohesion and cohesion through logical connectors (*so*). Additionally, various terms appear multiple times—*dolphins*, *fins*, *flippers*, *tails*, *blowholes*—establishing chains of coclassification.

Unordered paragraphs differ from the final category, ordered paragraphs, in that subtopic paragraphs can easily be rearranged without meaning disruption. In many well-written compositions, paragraph order is not critical. In fact, many information

books on general topics, such as weather or animals, include unordered paragraphs. This is a frequent structure of today's visually enhanced informational picture books (Gill, 2009). For example, in Mack's (2004) DK Eye Wonder book *Weather*, 21 subtopics are each covered in a two-page spread. Numerous picture captions and short text paragraphs explain or describe the picture on the spread; all paragraphs are related to a single subtopic but could be read in any order on the page.

Category 8: Ordered Paragraphs

The final category is ordered paragraphs. As noted previously, the key distinction is that paragraph order in Category 8 must be preserved for the writer's meaning to be preserved. Changing the paragraph order has a negative impact on its comprehensibility. Such compositions also often have additional cohesive devices across paragraphs.

In "Balloons," after a paragraph of descriptive attributes, readers are taken through the sequence of filling, riding in, and emptying a hot air balloon. The paragraphs themselves are clearly ordered; time connectives (*first*, *then*, *at the end*) show that these paragraphs must appear in exactly this order. The student comfortably uses technical vocabulary (*chase crew*, *tarp*). Overall, her composition clearly approximates the mature form's structure and linguistic feature use.

Good models of ordered paragraphs in appealing information books are found in work by authors such as Aliki, Judy Hawes, Charles Micucci, Kate Scarborough, and Kathleen Zoehfeld, and in Stage 2 and 3 books in the HarperCollins's Let's-Read-and-Find-Out Science series.

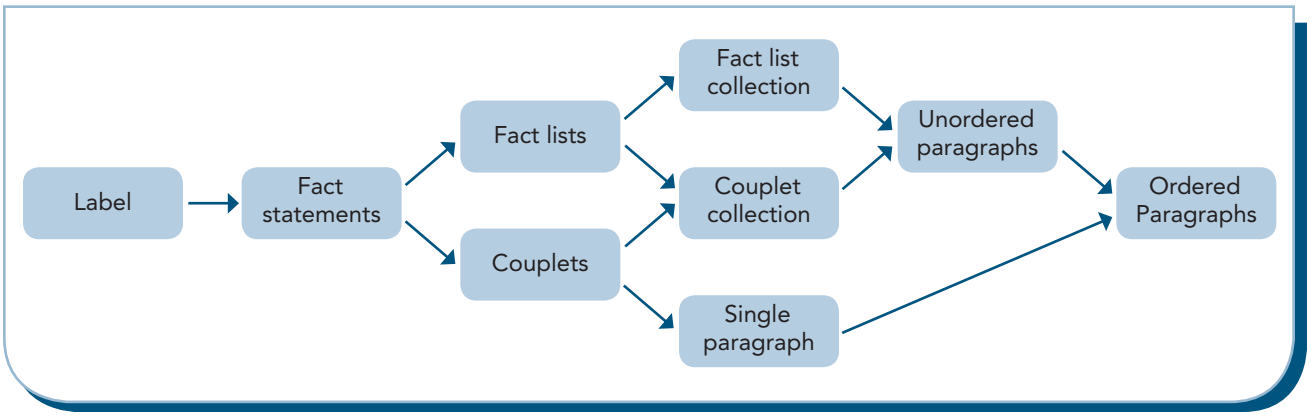
Scaffolding Students' Information Report Writing

This brings us to the point we addressed at the beginning of this article. What should teachers do to scaffold individual compositions? We believe that recognizing students' purpose for writing, considering available models, and consulting the continuum in Table 1 can inform many instructional decisions.

For example, once you have identified a text as falling within a certain category, you can talk with the student about the purpose for writing, think about models the student might be trying to emulate, and then identify a more complex level and the features to which the student's attention might best be directed. In this way, teachers can provide incremental support as indicated by the arrows in Figure 2.

Using Figure 2, we can see that if students have produced a label, they should be supported to move to genre-specific fact statements. If students are already producing fact statements, they can be supported in the composition of fact lists or couplets. Students producing fact lists can be scaffolded to compose fact list collections or couplet collections. A composition at the level of couplet can be scaffolded to single paragraph or couplet collection.

Figure 2
Paths of Support for Information Writing Development



In the following sections we provide examples of students' texts at different levels and discuss how we would support our young authors' efforts.

From Label to Fact Statement

If a student has produced the label "This is a bird," we can encourage that student to produce a fact statement by first acknowledging the picture—"That is a great bird. I see she is on a nest in a tree"—and then suggesting that the student use information book language to give information (i.e., "Can you make your writing sound like an information book? Try thinking of a sentence that starts, 'Birds...'"). Students who have listened to and discussed many information books will easily produce class-related information.

In our "talk like a book" activity, students act as science reporters, generating information about a picture related to a topic while approximating the talk of teachers, books, or visiting scientists. This activity is easily incorporated at the end of information book read-alouds during units of study. Such experiences easily enable students to expand labels into fact statements and expand compositions to "Birds make nests" or "Birds live in trees." This move to fact statements enables students to compose even more complex texts, providing they have background information on characteristic attributes and events.

From Fact Statement to Fact List or Couplet

When young students are producing fact statements, they are often at a point in their writing development when the physical act of recording thoughts on paper constrains their output (e.g., Jones & Christensen, 1999; Torrance & Galbraith, 2006). Prompting for additional information will often get these young writers going again. However, how teachers talk with students can determine whether they add other but unrelated facts on the topic for a fact list or whether they add more information related to the original fact statement (moving to the linguistically more complex couplet).

For example, if the author has produced the fact statement "Volcanoes are dangerous and hot," a teacher could ask, "What else do you know about volcanoes?" This would support a move to a fact list, in which the text might include the following four unordered statements: "Volcanoes are dangerous and hot. Volcanoes shoot magma. Volcanoes shoot ash everywhere. Volcanoes are in mountains." Alternatively, we can support the move to a couplet by asking questions such as "*Why* are volcanoes dangerous?" which focus students on providing supporting evidence and including logical connectives. The student might suggest that volcanoes are dangerous "because magma can fry you." Adding this clause creates a couplet in which destructive effect is linked to a cause.

Both approaches will support students' information report writing growth. The couplet encourages students to link ideas, whereas the fact list encourages producing increased factual information on a single topic. These are both appropriate paths to pursue during conferences, and the decision will depend on teachers' knowledge of individual students' needs. If students have trouble with writing fluency, fact lists support getting ideas onto paper. However, when possible, we encourage supporting the move to couplets.

Guiding students to work with various connectors (e.g., *because*, *some*, *as a result*, *instead of*) supports reasoning and comprehension (Fang, 2006). Whichever path you choose, these moves will occur against a background of whole-class and small-group activities providing access to mature forms/models.

From Couplet to Couplet Collection or Single Paragraph

Couplets authors (who also may be physically constrained in their writing productivity) can likewise be supported in two different ways, and teachers must make a decision. For the author of "Jungles" (see Table 1 on page 408), a teacher could encourage the addition of supporting evidence for each statement, thus scaffolding the text to two couplets of information on different subtopics. After discussing whether bears live in jungles, the student can be encouraged to provide a second couplet with the question "What else do jungles have?" so that the revised text might read, "Jungles have a lot of good animals. There are tigers, monkeys, and gorillas. Jungles also have a lot of good plants. There are trees, vines, lichen, and flowers." Such a path can increase students' attention to the technical vocabulary attached to the topic.

Alternatively, a teacher could focus on the author's paragraph development, emphasizing the addition of information and linguistic features needed to create one cohesive paragraph. After the topic presentation has been composed, cohesion of ideas

is typically the point of difficulty. The teacher could support idea connection across sentences so the revised text might read, "There are a lot of good things in jungles. There are good animals in the jungle. There are tigers, monkeys, and gorillas. These animals need plants for food and shelter." Decisions must be made based on teachers' knowledge of the individual student, the student's topic content knowledge, and her or his writing history so as to provide continuously challenging support.

From Fact List to Fact List Collection or Couplet Collection

Students across the grades produce fact lists (Donovan, 2001; Donovan & Smolkin, 2002b). Some are merely two or three factual statements, whereas others contain two dozen or more. Such collections are especially apparent when handwriting and spelling are no longer great constraints but the author is not yet attending to information's organization.

For written pieces like "Dogs" (see Table 1 on page 408), supporting the student's move to a fact list collection requires the organization of ideas at the level of subtopic. When Ms. Morales worked with the student, she suggested that he cut his fact statements into strips, then sort these strips into subtopics of descriptive attributes (all facts describing dogs' physical characteristics), characteristic events (all facts describing how dogs live, behave, etc.), or any category comparisons (all facts describing how dogs differ from other animals). This approach promoted discussion of the structural and linguistic elements in information reports and scaffolded his composition to a more mature form.

"Dogs" could also have been scaffolded to a couplet collection by supporting the student's use of more sophisticated structural and linguistic features. We might have encouraged him to choose three or four of the eight disparate statements he had included in his fact list about dogs. Discussion about each statement could have focused on providing a second related statement that further described, explained, or provided evidence of the previous statement. This would help him create cohesion across the two fact statements as well as support his use of more sophisticated sentences, vocabulary, and organization. Figure 3 shows the revised text after teacher support (new sentences are underlined).

The student author of "Spiders" (see Table 1 on page 408) could be supported similarly to create couplet collections through follow-up questions to each sentence, such as "Why do spiders lay eggs?" Alternatively, we could support this student in producing a fact list collection. Because she is a kindergartener, we might choose to record her dictation or use her responses to determine what to model during the next minilesson for whole-group or small-group settings.

Figure 3
Student Example of Couplet Collection After Teacher-Scaffolded Support

"Dogs"

There are many different kinds of dogs. Some kinds are Pit Bull, German Shepherd, and Chow. Baby dogs need their mother for milk. The mother also protects them. Dogs can be ordinary pets. They can also be specially trained like hunting dogs. Dogs can be many colors. Some are yellow, black, white, and brown.

From Couplet Collection to Unorganized or Organized Paragraphs

When students have composed couplet collections, we can support them in working toward unorganized or organized paragraphs. Since the author of the couplet collection "Hot Air Balloons" (see Table 1 on page 409) is a second grader, her efforts are probably best scaffolded with attention to individual paragraphs. We would first advise her to include a topic presentation, and then turn her attention to elaborating each couplet and linking the ideas so that paragraphs are created.

From Unordered Paragraphs to Ordered Paragraphs

The unordered paragraph sample "Balloons" (see Table 1 on page 409) needed linguistic features to create stronger cohesive ties across the paragraphs. Figure 4 presents the child's original text followed by a teacher-scaffolded, more cohesive text that demonstrates mature use of linguistic and structural features. Such work is well within the capabilities of fourth graders whose teachers, like Ms. Morales, have combined information book experience with instruction about information reports' elements and features.

Figure 4
Student Example of Unordered Paragraphs Before and After Teacher-Scaffolded Support

Fourth grader's original composition

"Balloons"

Balloons are really neat. I'm talking about hot air balloons. They are made out of nylon. They can be special shapes or regular balloon shapes.

First, you fill the balloon up with a big fan. A tarp is put underneath the balloon to roll it out. Many people have to work together.

Then, it is neat riding up in a balloon. I have been up in a balloon and my dad is a person in a chase crew. When I am in the air, I can see him riding far below me.

At the end, the balloon is put in a big bag when the ride is finished. When it is finished it is still filled with air. You jump or roll on the balloon to get the air out.

Composition following teacher scaffolding

"Hot Air Balloons"

Hot air balloons are really neat. It is neat riding up in a balloon. I have been up in a balloon and my dad is a person in a chase crew. So I know about hot air balloons.

The envelope is made of nylon. They can be a regular shape or special shape. Some of the special shapes are T-Rex, the Old Woman's Shoe, and a stork. The regular shape is like a light bulb.

To get started the envelope must be filled with air. You use a big fan. A tarp is put underneath the envelope when it is rolled out. This keeps it clean and keeps it from getting damaged. The envelope is very big so many people must work together. The people that do this work are called the chase crew.

When the balloon lands and the flying is over, the envelope is stored in a big bag. Since the envelope is still filled with air you jump or roll on it to get the air out. Then the envelope and gondola, or basket, are put in the truck and stored until next time.

Maybe you'll get to take a hot air balloon ride sometime. It is fantastic!

This student now understands that improving the text's topic presentation and including more technical language will help her readers more easily follow her text. Changing the opening to "Hot air balloons are really neat" and moving the final sentences to the beginning allowed her to introduce the topic from a personal experience, thus increasing reader engagement. Encouraging the student's use of the technical term *envelope* increases her clarity across the text as she distinguishes the term *balloon* (the general

Take ACTION!

You can start supporting your students' informational writing today. Begin by extending your own understanding of the categories we've described.

1. Collect information report writing from your students. For each student, do the following: (1) categorize the text using Table 1 (see pages 408–409), (2) choose the next category level on the path (see Figure 2 on page 412) that makes the most sense for each student, and (3) plan how you will prompt the student to move to the next level.

2. Consider how many students are being moved to each category; plan how you will model writing at that level and which books you will use as models.

3. Share your students' writing and your instruction with your grade-level colleagues.

You can keep current your knowledge of information books that can support students' writing by checking out winners and runners-up for both the National Council of Teachers of English's Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children and the American Library Association's Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award.

Another great source for mentor texts is magazines. *Time for Kids* includes excellent writing on a range of social studies and science topics. The magazines *Click*, *Ask*, and *Muse* all feature exciting, age-appropriate science articles; *Appleseeds* and *Cobblestones* articles focus on age-appropriate social studies topics (all are offered by Cobblestone).

category) from *envelope* (the specific part of the balloon that holds the air).

The text could be further enhanced through visual representations, in this case perhaps a diagram of a balloon with identifying technical aspects. Having her draw and label a diagram would likely lead to enhanced written text, as she would probably think of many additional aspects she could include.

Some Final Thoughts

We believe that it is important for teachers, like Ms. Morales, to provide their students (of any age) a variety of experiences and opportunities to learn the genres expected for school and later success. Given the importance of the information report genre for school success, it is essential for teachers to understand elementary school students' writing development and to utilize a framework for instruction that is varied, purposeful, and, at times, quite explicit.

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