Teaching the Non-Fiction Explanatory Text Structure

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Why Teach Non-Fiction Explanatory Texts Structure?

Although students can often grasp the concept of sequencing events quickly, they often forget to explain the how and why of the topic. When teaching the non-fiction explanatory text structure, it's important to draw students' attention to the cause and effect in addition to the sequencing. Explicitly teaching students about this text structure will ensure their success in reading and writing.
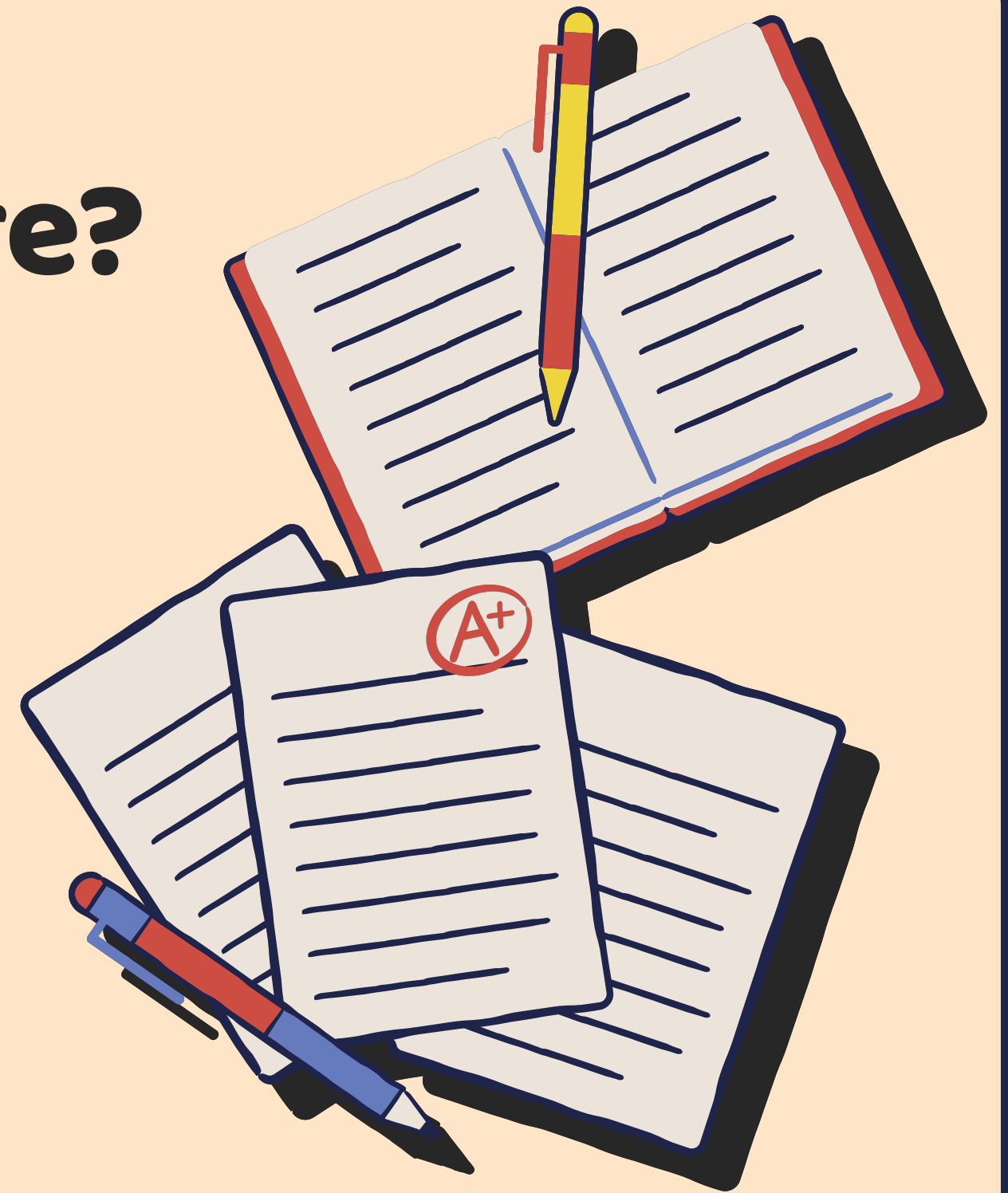
Writing Non-Fiction Explanatory

Writing about an explanatory text on a topic requires summarizing and rephrasing what was read. They have to understand the academic language used in the text but also write it at their level of academic writing.

Alternatively, students could write about a process they watched. However, this would eliminate the process of first analysing academic language.

First, Introduce the Text

Choose a text that is the appropriate level and content for the students. It should be slightly about their current level of understanding but not so far above that they can't understand it.

Let students know that the text structure is non-fiction explanatory. This means the topic is real, since it's non-fiction, and the purpose of the text is to explain the how or why of something.
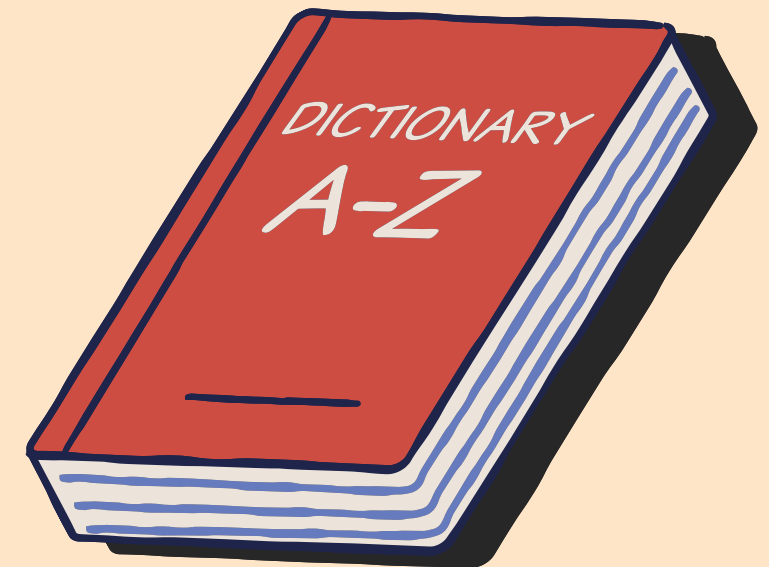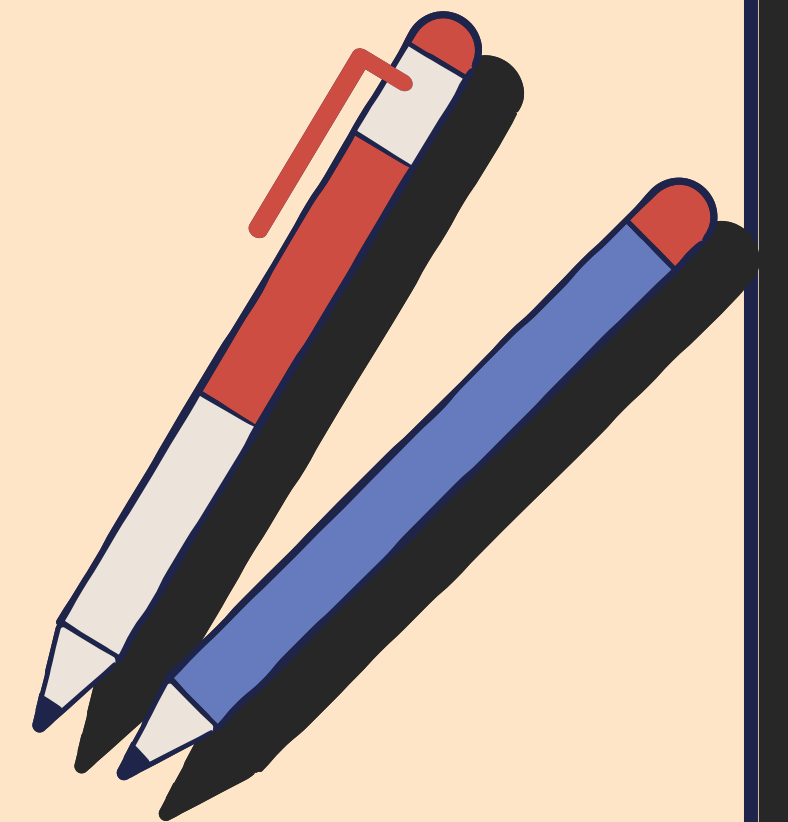
Discuss Cause and Effect Signal Words

Students will be looking and listening for signal words for the cause and effect pairs that are in the text. They will have their own copy of the text to annotate but they will be listening to the teacher read it. When they hear or see a cause, they write "C" above it. They write "E" for the effects.

To find these, students should look for the **signal words**. They include:

cause, led to, because, due to the fact, produce, in order to, the reason why, if/then, so.

Discuss Cause and Effect Signal Words

Listening will allow students to hear the proper intonation for academic language as well as the proper pronunciations for domain specific words (Tier 3 words).

Before reading, discuss any text features or illustrations included in the text.

After reading, discuss the causes and effects together at the end. Have students contribute to the discussion using their own words to describe the causes and effects they found in the text. Having students contribute to the discussion will give them practice using academic language.
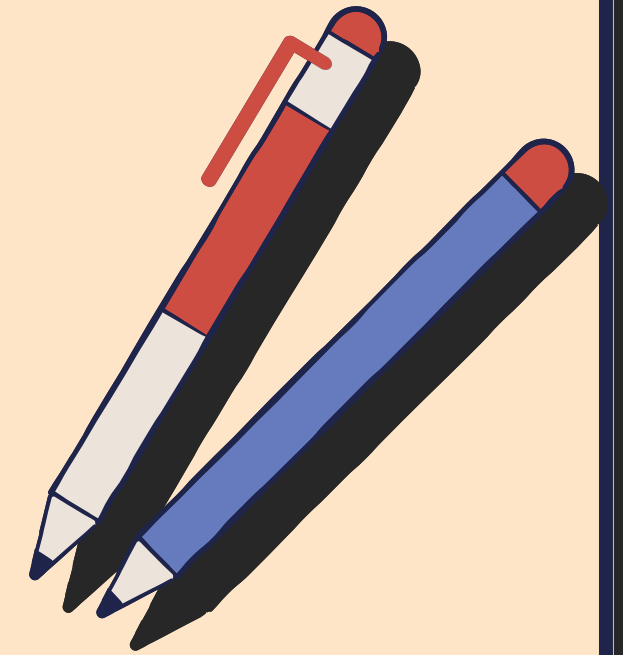
Next, Students Read

During the next lesson, have students read the annotated text themselves. This will give them a chance to review the text as well as practice reading the academic language. Depending on the length of the text, students can take turns reading it aloud or silently read it on their own.

Present Tense

Ask students if they notice what tense the text is written in

A general feature of non-fiction explanatory texts is that they are written in the present tense. Although what is being written about has already happened, because it is explaining a non-fiction how or why that could be repeated, the present tense is used. (e.g. The heat causes the ice to melt)

Make a Plan

Before students write a non-fiction explanatory text, they need to complete a planning page. For this text structure, they can either create a flow chart that shows the sequence of events or a chart that shows the cause-and-effect pairs. This can be decided based on the specific text, however, having students chart the causes and effects will remind them to explain the how or why in their writing.

**The next step is for students to write a draft.**
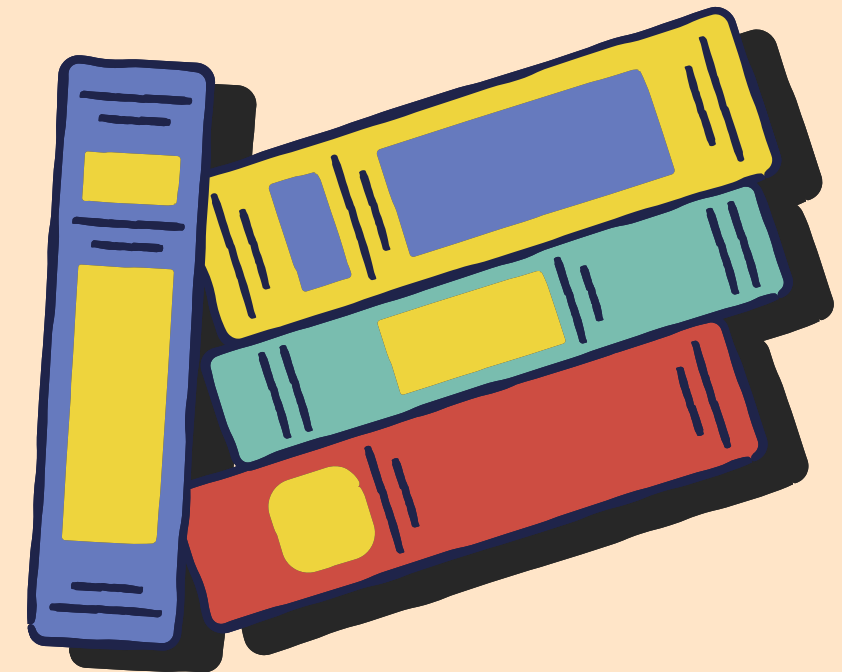
Topic Sentence & Bring it Back

Depending on the level of writing the students are working at, review the expectations for their opening paragraphs or topic sentences. They need to hook the reader and provide insight into what they are writing about.

Additionally, students need to bring it back to the beginning at the end. If their topic sentence is a question, their closing paragraph should provide an answer to the question.
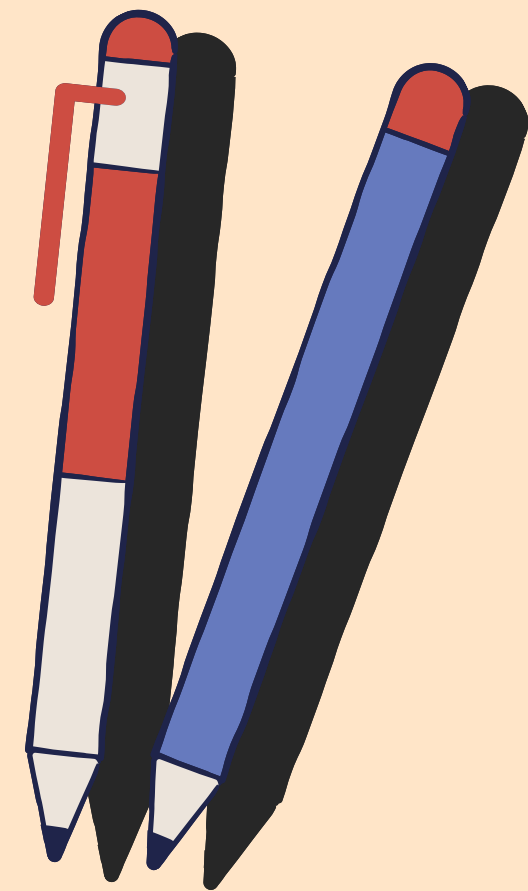
Missing Details?

If students' writing is lacking detail, this is something that can be easily fixed. When students get focused on the sequencing (first, then, next, finally) and the cause and effects, they often forget to add interesting details to keep their writing interesting. By having students writing their sentences on paper with gaps in between, they can go back and add one interesting sentence that adds to the sentence before.

For example, if a student wrote "Finally, the egg is cooked." they could add "Now you have a delicious breakfast to eat." as an interesting detail.
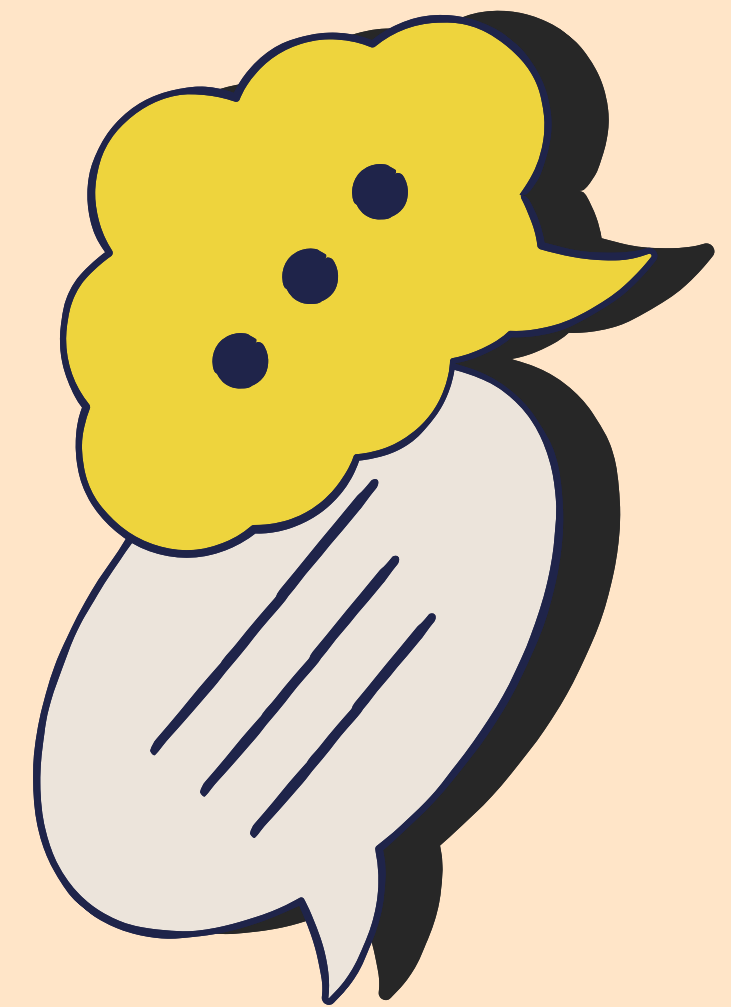
Diagram

An important text feature of non-fiction explanatory writing is a diagram. When students write about a process that has a sequence, they can illustrate a labeled flow chart to accompany their writing. This will help familiarize them with this text feature.

Conclusion

By adapting these steps to the level of your students, students can develop an understanding of non-fiction explanatory text structures through listening, reading, speaking, and writing.
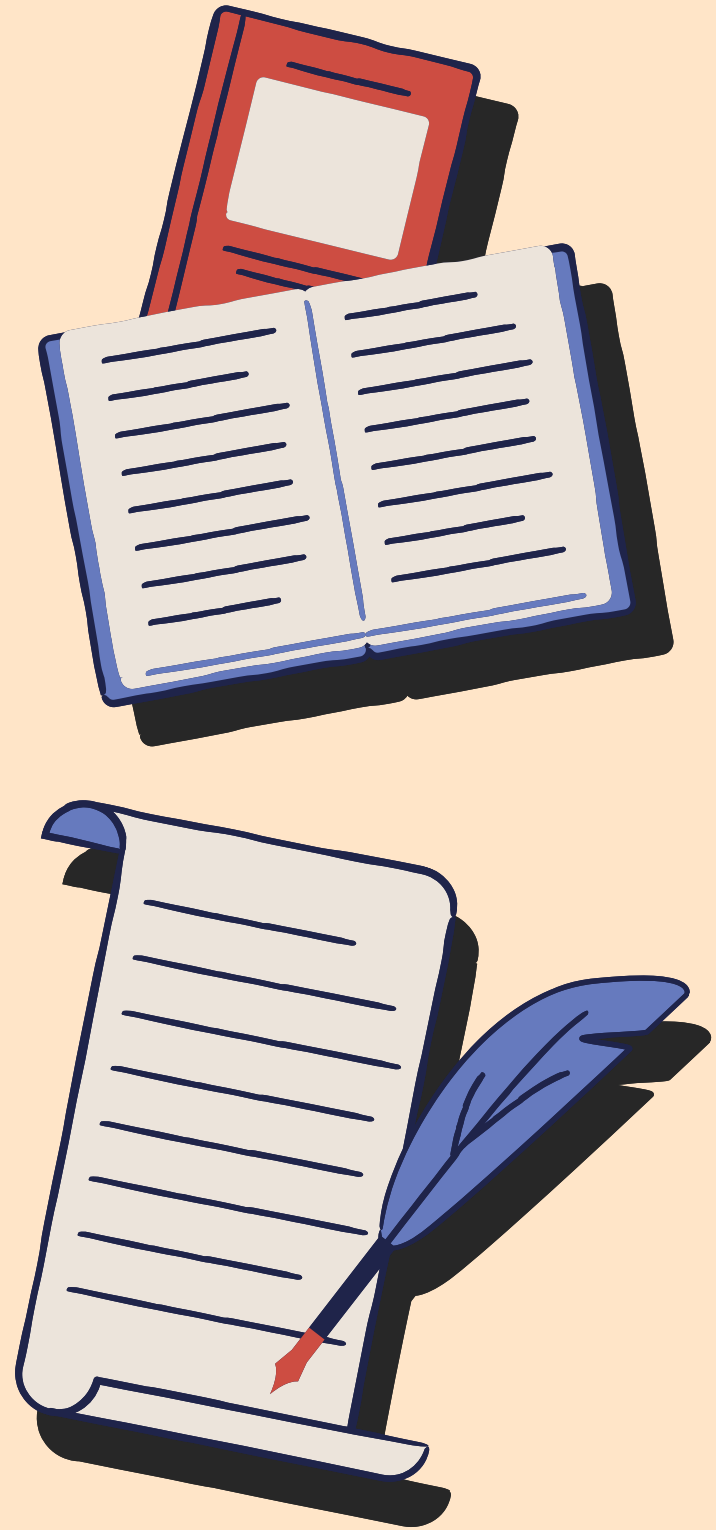
Thank you!

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