# Tools for Instruction

# Analyze Paragraph Structure

Although readers are taught to identify text structures in an informational text—cause and effect or sequence, for example—they may not understand that paragraphs are also structured for a particular purpose. Just as paragraphs work together to build a strong and cohesive argument, sentences within a paragraph are organized to effectively develop and refine a key concept. Understanding paragraph structure helps students better summarize key ideas, which improves overall comprehension. Use modeling and practice with students' content-area texts to help them understand how sentences in a paragraph are related. Then build upon their understanding by reinforcing the role of specific paragraphs within a longer text.

## Step by Step    30–45 minutes

### 1 Explain paragraph structure in informational text.

- Introduce paragraph structure with an oral exercise. For example, say, *Pretend you want to convince the principal to let eighth graders set up a student lounge. What would you say?*

- Have students work together to construct the argument. Guide them to state their position and then to provide several reasons in support. Record and display their ideas.

- Connect students' argument to paragraph structure. Repeat the position and say, *You have just given several reasons to support this argument. Together, your statements communicated an important idea. When we read informational texts, we should notice that paragraphs are structured in a similar way. A paragraph is a group of related sentences that develop a key idea. The way the sentences are organized is called* paragraph structure.

- Discuss the order of students' supporting reasons, including whether the most compelling reason came first or last. Explain that recognizing these elements of paragraph structure helps students to be critical readers.

### 2 Model analyzing paragraph structure.

- Distribute and display an informational passage with a standard pattern of organization. Display the first paragraph, and read it aloud as students follow along. Then establish the main idea. For example, say, *This paragraph is mostly about the amount of sleep people need.*

- Return to the text and model annotating the display copy as you analyze the role of each sentence. For instance, you might underline the main idea and number each detail. Have students do the same on their copies.

> *Sometimes the main idea is directly stated in the first sentence, called a topic sentence. Does the first sentence tell me the main idea? Yes: everyone needs sleep. But how much sleep does everyone need? I notice that the sentences after the main idea all have numbers; the paragraph tells us how much sleep different people need. This one tells me infants need a lot of sleep—up to 18 hours. Does that detail help explain the main idea? Yes.*

- Review the role of each sentence in the paragraph as it relates to the key concept. For instance, say, *I see how the supporting sentences start with how much sleep infants need, which is the most, and then they go down to how much sleep adults need, which is the least. Do you think this was the best way to organize these ideas? Why?*

- Remind students that not all paragraphs have the same structure. In some paragraphs, the last sentence contains the main idea. In other paragraphs, the main idea is unstated and readers need to figure out how the details are related.

**3** Provide guided practice with analyzing paragraph structure.

- Display the next paragraph in the passage, and read it aloud as students follow along. Prompt them to tell what the paragraph is mostly about.
- Guide students in analyzing the role of each sentence. Encourage them to answer the following questions in complete sentences and repeat the related academic vocabulary in their answers.

> *Does one sentence tell the main idea, or what all the other sentences are about? If so, which one?*
> *How does the second [third, fourth] sentence relate to the first sentence?*
> *Do the supporting reasons or details work in order of least important to most, or most important to least? Is this the most effective organization?*

**Support Special Education Students**  For students who have difficulty recognizing connections among sentences in a paragraph, consider using concept maps as a pre-reading strategy. Map the key ideas and details students will encounter in their reading, and pre-teach important vocabulary and relationships.

**4** Provide independent practice with analyzing paragraph structure.

- Use current texts to provide frequent and repeated practice with paragraph structure.
- Provide prompts as needed to help students understand the role of particular sentences in developing the key concept.

**Connect to Writing**  Have students write a paragraph that develops a key concept. Suggest topics that engage students' interests, including those that allow them to develop an argument. Encourage students to use what they know about how sentences are related to write well-structured paragraphs.

## Check for Understanding

| If you observe… | Then try… |
|---|---|
| difficulty recognizing patterns of organization in a paragraph | having students manipulate sentences to reconstruct a paragraph from a current text. Copy each sentence on a strip of paper. Use questions to draw attention to the arrangement of sentences and how together, the sentences develop an idea. *Which sentence should come first: _____ or _____? Why? Does this sentence come before or after _____? How do you know?* |
| difficulty relating details in paragraphs to key concepts | turning main idea sentences into questions. Work with students to identify how each sentence helps answer the question. Discuss how the sentences work together to develop one key concept. |