

**The Expository Pyramid and the Gradual Release of Responsibility Process
Mix Them Together and What Have You Got?
A Way Out of the Expository Writing Quagmire**

By Teresa Therriault

Expository writing. The report...the summary...the response to show that we understand and can make meaning from the informational texts we read. It stares us in the face. It's work. "How do I do it?" "What's expected?" "It's boring." "Do I have to?" "Can I draw the picture first?" We hear these laments from our students, but the same thoughts are often running through our own heads as well.

Finding ways to make expository writing come alive eludes some of us all the time and all of us some of the time. Brian Cambourne's *Conditions of Learning* (1988) tells us that engagement is key to learning. Creating situations where learners want to be involved, know that they can succeed and are willing to jump in and take risks is engagement. Having teachers who the students know care about them increases the likelihood of engagement. Dr. Cambourne's research tells us so, but we don't really need someone else to tell us that. We know from our own interactions with students and from our own experiences as learners.

But as teachers, we also know that just caring and providing a supportive environment are not sufficient to increase the likelihood that our teaching efforts will result in our students' learning. We need tools and a process that we can use to instruct students on how writers organize their ideas. How they get started. How they proceed. How they pull it together for use as an aid in their discussions, informal summaries or preparing reports around informational texts.

I've adapted an existing structure to assist writers to feel up to the task of expository writing. In fact, it has turned many reluctant writers into writers who are not ready to stop when time is short. It's a simple tool. Simple is usually best.

Its forerunner, Brenda Waldo's Story Pyramid, has been used after reading a piece of fiction in many of our classrooms. The following probably looks familiar.

1. Name the main character
2. Two words describing main character
3. Three words describing setting
4. Four words stating the problem
5. Five words describing one event
6. Six words describing second event
7. Seven words describing third event
8. Eight words describing solution

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

So let's take a look at my adaptation entitled The Expository Pyramid.

With intermediate level students, I'd be using the term expository or whatever term they'll need to use in their educational setting. For primary learners, I would initially call it **The Fact Triangle**. We always want to go from the learners and their knowledge base. The tools and their names need to make sense to the users.

The first sample will be applied to the study of an animal. Most districts' life science standards include understanding of organisms' characteristics, behaviors and habitats. In addition, kids love to learn about animals that are of interest to them. Let's keep that engagement high by allowing choice of the animal being studied while addressing multiple content needs in language arts and science.

Background for teachers:

• **Rehearsal Time:** Prior to modeling the use of the Expository Pyramid tool, practice using it during your initial reading or during your reread of an informational text to record key information about your animal. (We wouldn't consider teaching students how to hold a tennis racket or use a drill if we hadn't first attempted to use the tool ourselves. Nothing prepares us to teach more than to have been the learner first.)

• **Necessary Resources:** Your "practice" text can be an adult level text or it can be nearer the reading level of some of your intermediate students (*Kids Discover, National Geographic, Weekly Readers, Time for Kids*). If you are working with emergent and early readers, and yes, even those fluent readers, you may want to read an expository big book or a read aloud book. National Geographic, Newbridge, Sundance, Rigby, and Wright Group all have solid expository selections. I'd probably select a book for my trial run that I could use for my modeled lesson.

Use an overhead projector with a single transparency, not the roll type. You will want to be able to access this initial "anchor activity" so that you and your students can use it as a guide for whole or small groups, pair or independent use, again and again. Using butcher paper will work just as well, if not better.

• **Implementation Process:** In the initial portion of this article, I stated what was already obvious. We not only need tools, like the Expository Pyramid, but we also need a process that allows us to present the information. To make the intangible, tangible. The implicit, explicit. We'll be using what Pearson and Gallagher (1983) called "the gradual release of responsibility approach" to teach students how to use the Expository Pyramid with informational texts. This gradual release of responsibility process is my guide to teach any lesson.

• **Introduction of tool/strategy:** Begin by letting the students know what they will learn. With your book and overhead or butcher paper, explain to the students that you want to show them how to use a writing tool that will help them organize their thoughts about factual books they read. Show them the pyramid and talk to them about the information you want to get out of your reading.

• **Model and think aloud:** Stop during your reading as you come to information that you want included in your pyramid and think out loud about why you've selected something or why you left something else out as you record the information.

Or, read the text first. Then using your pyramid as a guide, go back and select content that fits the requirements of the pyramid, continuing to think aloud your decisions.

• **Transition to guided practice:** After as many modeled, shared, or interactive writing experiences that are necessary, provide coaching as the students begin to apply the pyramid to their own books. You can coach kids who are working with the same book and pyramid in small teams, pairs or as individuals.

• **Independent Practice:** Give students opportunities for implementation with peers or on their own without your coaching.

• **Self-reflection and feedback:** Include discussion and/or written reflection on what the students learned, what challenges they still face, what pleases them about their writing.

So, let's take a look at how one Expository Pyramid on Sloths turned out.

1. Name of animal
2. Two words describing the animal
3. Three word describing its habitat
4. Four words describing one of its behaviors
5. Five words describing another of its behaviors
6. Six words describing another of its behaviors
7. Seven words describing another of its behaviors
8. Eight words describing your personal reflections about the animal

The Sloth

1. Sloth
2. Timid tree-dweller
3. Panama's tropical zone
4. Upside-down, toe hanging wonder
5. Protective coloration, green algae hues
6. Still, still, canopy life, munching lunch
7. Motionless mother, gripping firm, being firmly gripped
8. Marvelous design, forest queen, perfectly adapted, lovely, serene

• Add a few carefully placed punctuation marks and you have a piece of expository writing

- It shows clearly what the reader has gleaned from the text and from her own background knowledge. An Expository Pyramid offers a great assessment tool. You know what the learner knows and feels about the subject. What a summary of key facts!
- The learner has an aid for a group discussion or literature circle.
- If we look outside the box for more applications of this tool, we have an outline for a traditional written report. In an age of standards and accountability we can encourage the use of this tool as an organizational tool. Let's take a look at the Sloth Pyramid when used as an outline for a report.

The Sloth

An eerie feeling grips me each time I've stared into the eyes of a sloth. There seems to be an awareness there, beyond mere animal knowledge. It's hard for me to shake the feeling.

This amazing creature resides in Panama's tropical zone. She is a timid tree dweller who rarely leaves her lofty hide away. Hanging upside-down, clinging with her three-toed grasp is her life.

She's well adapted to her habitat. Algae grows on her fur from the continuous rain. The algae colors her in shades of green that protect her and her young from predators.

Just as the mother sloth clings to the branches of the tree tops, her baby must....

- Last, but far from least, it has also helped decrease the persistent, pesky problem of plagiarizing from resources. The writers can use the key words that they have already assimilated from their reading to write expository pieces. Their own voice can show in their writing.

This deceptively simple tool can be used in authentic ways to link the reading and writing of expository materials. It is a flexible tool, easily modified across content areas and students' needs. It's doable for learners at many stages along their literacy continuum. Its fun. Its engaging. We like the outcome and so do the writers. So don't be a sloth in this case. Scurry out and try this tool with your students on their next forage into the wonderful world of expository reading and writing. Enjoy!