

Forms of writing: Explanation

What is an explanation?

The purpose of an explanation is to answer a 'how' or 'why' question. An explanation can be included in other types of texts, such as an information report or a factual recount.

Types of explanations

People share explanations by talking, writing and using visual images and/or diagrams. For example, a television reporter may talk about why water restrictions have been introduced, or a friend may sketch a map to explain how to get to their house.

When explaining how something happens, the sequence of and relationship between events, actions or steps are shared. When explaining why something happens, causes and their effects are shared.

The purpose and context of explanations affect the language used and how complete or accurate the information needs to be. Some explanations are not intended to be true or accurate; a response to a joke such as 'Why did the chicken cross the road?' is meant to be entertaining. However, some explanations are intended to inform and need to be accurate, such as a scientific explanation about how a rainbow is formed. Some explanations are partially true because they are based on beliefs, personal opinions and ideas, or limited information. For example, a child may explain that 'Monkeys need tails to help them to swing in the trees' because they do not know that some monkeys do not have tails.

The trustworthiness of explanations also varies. Accurate factual explanations are based on information that comes from reliable sources, such as experts or trustworthy texts. As new information is discovered, explanations often change.

Structure of an explanation

An explanation usually has:

- a clear general statement about what will be explained (the topic)
- a sequence of related statements that explain the reasons, cause and effect or time sequence (order) and elaborate the explanation
- a concluding statement (optional).

Language features

The language used in an explanation includes:

- references to generalised participants
e.g. 'Scientists know...'; 'People use...'; 'Plants grow...'
- general and abstract nouns and noun groups
- pronouns
e.g. they, their, them

- technical language
e.g. temperature, omnivore
- simple present tense (e.g. rotates, climbs) and sometimes passive voice (e.g. is growing, are combining)
- action verbs
e.g. moves, changes, grows
- adverbial phrases
e.g. ...because the light bends as it passes through the prism
- text connectives to emphasise temporal relationships (e.g. before, after, first, then, finally following) and/or causal relationships (e.g. if ... then; when...; because of this...; so..., as a consequence)
- complex sentences.

Supporting students to write explanations

Oral sharing – involve students in explaining familiar events in their own words.

e.g. *Why do you play soccer? How do people know what time it is?*

Direct modelling – present examples of explanations, including multimodal texts. Talk explicitly about the structure and language of explanations as you read and create explanations.

Compare texts – compare explanations to other text types, such as a description or procedure. Identify explanations within other text types, such as part of a report.

Discuss text features explicitly – identify ways that visual, auditory, non-verbal and written texts are used to make explanations clear.

e.g. discuss the use of gestures, technical words, a glossary, labelled diagrams or flowcharts, images or time-lapse photography

Explore the relationships between questions and explanations – for example:

- generate questions of interest to students; invite students to suggest possible explanations and research or find out answers
e.g. ask a parent/librarian/expert or use the internet
- read or view explanations and identify questions that are answered by the explanations
e.g. *The author wrote 'Camels store fat in their humps' to answer the question 'why do camels have humps?'*
- present simple facts (the answer) and ask students to generate the how/why questions that relate to the facts.

Reconstruct text – rewrite a piece of factual text or organise jumbled sentences to create a question and explanation.

e.g. rewrite diary entries/observations or a factual recount to create an explanation

Jointly construct – work together to create clear spoken, written or visual explanations and talk out loud about the text features.

e.g. create explanations to questions such as: ‘Why do children and staff wear hats at lunch time?’; ‘How do we show others that we are listening?’; ‘Why do some plants grow faster/ more slowly?’

Independently construct – guide students to identify a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question, identify relevant facts (e.g. on a concept map), draft an explanation and review the draft to see if the question is answered or what additional information is needed.

Evaluate the explanation – check the structure and language features of the explanation, and ask others for feedback on how clear and helpful the explanation was.

Helpful strategies

Graphic organisers can be used by students to plan and record information needed to create an explanation.

Before and after concept map – Create two concept maps and record what is known about a topic or question before and after researching it.

- 1 Record the title ‘Before’ on a sheet of paper.
- 2 Record the question in the centre of the piece of paper.
- 3 Record information (around the question) that students already know. Use lines or arrows to link related information.
- 4 On a second piece of paper, record the title ‘After’.
- 5 Record the question in the centre of the second piece of paper.
- 6 Research or find out information to answer the question.
- 7 Record new information (around the question) discovered by researching the topic. Use lines or arrows to link related information.
- 8 Review the before and after concept maps and decide if the question can now be answered or what else needs to be found out.

Using diagrams – Diagrams such as flowcharts or lifecycles can be used to explain something clearly, particularly if the explanation involves a clear sequence of steps or a process. Diagrams help to show relationships across time or show the order of events/ actions/steps.

KWL chart – A KWL chart is used to record ‘What is known’, ‘What students want to find out’ and ‘What they have learned’ (after researching, conducting an experiment, etc).

- 1 Record a topic/question at the top of a sheet of paper.
- 2 Divide the rest of the page into three sections. Label the sections ‘Know’, ‘Want to know’ and ‘Learned’.
- 3 Before researching or learning about a topic, list what students already know (from prior experience or knowledge) in the ‘Know’ section.
- 4 List questions or ideas to explain what the students want to know or find out in the ‘Want to know’ section.
- 5 Choose a way to find out what they want to know.
e.g. by using texts or the internet, conducting an experiment or test, asking people they know or experts
- 6 Record what the students found out or learned in the ‘Learned’ section.
- 7 Check or confirm that the question has been answered and the information is relevant to the topic.

Related websites

- K-W-L-H Technique chart, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory
<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr1kwlh.htm>
- English online: Features of Text Forms – Explanations
http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/resources/resources/text_forms/explanations.html
- Board of Studies NSW – English K-6 modules
http://k6.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/files/english/k6engmodules_syl.pdf
- Department of Education, Tasmania: Targeting Text – A Guided Writing Project
<http://wwwfp.education.tas.gov.au/english/targeting.htm>