



COMMENTS *from Evelyn*

PRACTICING THE BASICS: Organization and Transformation of Knowledge

by Evelyn Maycumber

On a recent brisk day, I walked the greens at the TPC, the Tournament Players Championship golf course located in Ponte Vedra, Florida, near St. Augustine. The day was a practice round. The top players of the world were all over the course. I was awed to see players, such as Fred Couples, on the practice driving range hitting ball after ball after ball. Watching Vejay Singh practice positioning putt after putt, as a novice would do. Likewise just a few days ago, near the Gainesville Airport, I battled traffic to join thousands as the community welcomed home the victorious Gator basketball team following their victory at the Final Four in Indianapolis. Catching the joyous exuberance of the University of Florida students, the team members at the microphone blasted their responses to deafening cheers. The words of the coach, Billy Donovan, spoke of the number one team in the U.S.'s dedication to the **game plan** and diligence in **practice**. He paid homage to the sacrifice of staff, players, and support personnel. I see many connections between my recent observations of vibrant leaders in sports and CRISS-trained classroom teachers leading students along the path to independent learning. For sure, both experience hurdles. For our teachers and students, one of the largest is the ever present need for practice of the basics.

Many teachers voice frustration when they work with students, especially struggling readers. How do I get students to organize and learn the content information? My students do not know what step to take next; they shut down when the going gets tough. What keeps golfers and basketball players going when the going gets tough? Well, could it be because they have tasted success? Like them, when students taste even small successes, they have the courage to face more difficult tasks.

So what are the small successes we can give students to energize and motivate them toward greater accomplishments with more difficult text? What are the basics in learning?

Following are several key ways teachers can help students succeed by teaching them the basics. Each of these ways is based upon solid research and is appropriate for gifted students, struggling readers, and second language learners.

1. **Help students organize by clarifying the relationship between text-structure and strategy use.** Here are some suggestions.

What should students practice time and time again until they can automatically make the “free throw,” the “lay up,” or the “3 pointer” of making meaning of difficult text? –transformation & organization! And what is our role as a teacher? One part is teaching strategies for transforming information and another part is supporting students as they create their own ways of organizing information. In Chapter 6 of the CRISS manual, 3rd edition, “Organizing for Learning,” we are encouraged to keep in mind both the structure of the text in question and the purpose of the task at hand (p. 117). Here, then, are two basics, (1) **what is the organizational pattern of the text I am reading?** And (2) **what is the purpose and goal of the task I am to perform?** As in golf and basketball, learners must have a target to shoot for.

Observing in a high school recently, I noticed most teachers did not mention either of those two critical elements. In some classes, however, teachers did clearly articulate the task at hand. I heard statements like these, “In the next five pages, we are looking for a way a resolution becomes a bill. We want to know the sequence of the steps in this process and what can go wrong along the way,” or “Your task is to find the Power 1 in each paragraph and write a question about it.” Just like the coaches and players in the two sports noted above, teachers must assess over and over again that the basics are in place for their students. Providing clear statements about the purpose of each task and guiding students to appropriate transforming structures can’t help but lead students to success. Staying consistent with this process and giving students lots of opportunities to apply it is like the hours of practice spent in free throw shots that lead to winning in critical basketball games. The most effective teachers do not skip the basics and, like the players at the TPC, they go over them again and again.

Text Structure	Strategy
Well structured expository text main ideas clearly stated	Two-column notes
Scattered information throughout expository text	Concept Mapping with Power Notes
Analyzing problems Untangling expository text	Conclusion-Support Problem-Solution Process Notes Compare-Contrast Frames
Character study for narrative and some social studies/ science texts	Content Frames with headings such as: Character/Personality Traits Supportive Actions/ Text to illustrate above

(Created from text in the CRISS manual, 3rd edition, Chapter 6, beginning on page 117)

2. **Have conversations about process strategies** following instruction and implementation of the above chart with appropriate text.
 - Have students record in journals/learning logs their use of strategies with various text structures. Then discuss how students used the strategies to organize content for learning.
 - Spend time talking with students about their progress in learning, and help them decide what course of action to take next.
3. **Hold students accountable for decisions they make regarding learning during the goal-setting process.**
 - Have students write summaries of the target goals of their “study buddy” and the process path used by their partner to reach those goals.
 - Form triads where each student has a role: writer/paraphraser, summarizer, reporter/charter. Use these roles to keep tabs on the progress of students toward their learning goals.
4. **Model each phase of the learning process**—especially for struggling readers. Remember, students need appropriate text materials where comprehension is feasible for them. Using a too difficult text will negate the usefulness of any strategy. It is better to search for a lower level text dealing with the same topic.
5. **Increase your own understanding of how various strategies clarify text.** Here are some suggestions.
 - Re-read Chapter 6 in the CRISS manual, 3rd edition.
 - Keep your own personal journal of strategies you use successfully to clarify and understand text. You might want to reread the major text used in your content area focusing on understanding and retaining the information. Utilize the strategies you plan to teach—are they appropriate and do they work?
 - Model for your students by talking aloud as you read and apply strategies to your content text. As part of your modeling, don’t forget to test your comprehension by summarizing your learning and by taking the assessment.
 - Read articles, texts, and other sources of information relating to comprehension instruction and strategy instruction.

6. **Practice over and over what the research tells us.** We know a lot about what works and why in comprehension instruction. Many of the organizing strategies guide students to identify the main idea within a passage or an article.
7. **Develop a game plan for understanding the structure of important ideas in specific texts.** Deal with only one strategy at a time. The following model for expository text deals with comparison and contrast that leads to deep understanding of main ideas. Comparing and contrasting is one of the basic skills often utilized superficially. Note in the chart at the top of page 8 that this is especially valuable for untangling expository text. See also CRISS manual, 3rd edition, pages 96-103. Additional modeling examples for compare and contrast may be created using weather reports, local news, television programs, or local school issues.

EXAMPLE

A weather forecast for March 30, 2006

1. Las Vegas, Nevada; Elevation 2,028 ft.; Low 45°(F), High 78°(F)
2. Williams, Arizona (Grand Canyon); Elevation 6,752 ft.; Low 38°(F), High 64°(F)

Student Purpose: Our purpose today is to learn how to compare and contrast information. We begin with a weather forecast found in a Las Vegas, Nevada, newspaper. Remember, we have been studying the land formations in that area. This activity relates to that study.

Key questions:

- **What are the noted differences?** They are located in different states. There is a major difference in elevation. All the temperatures are different. Only one location is near the Grand Canyon. The names of the cities are different. The high and low temperatures in Williams are cooler on this date.
- **Can we list their differences by category?** Location, elevation, low temperature, high temperature, proximity to Grand Canyon, names.
- **What are the ways these cities are alike or similar?** They are in the Western part of the U.S., both are above sea level, identical information is listed, both are tourist attractions.
- **What additional information do we need of each of these cities to do a more in depth weather comparison?** How near are they to each other? I need an explanation of the difference in elevation. Could we look at weather patterns? What are temperatures in other years on this date? I remember some things about this area of the U.S. being a desert—what about wind? What about the humidity?
- **Are some of these questions really other categories we can add?** Weather patterns, weather history, impact of geography, humidity

Additional guidance: What are our best resources for finding this additional information? Let's collect, then share the information we find.

Now, let's organize our combined information and look at the gaps or extraneous information we might have. Then we can move forward with our understandings.

Transformation strategy: In the past, we have used several organizers/frames for comparison and contrast. For this task, I suggest we use one that has space for an abundance of information. You may fill in the graphic with words or phrases. (The following graphic is modified from the chart found on page 101 of the CRISS manual.)

Research tells us that transformation of knowledge (putting information in another form) is critical for retention. With the information now recorded in the graphic, students can easily put it in written form using complete sentences. Initially, I suggest modeling with complete sentences in a Writing Template (CRISS manual, p. 175). If some students can “see” the desired end, let them go ahead and write.

We are comparing the weather in two western cities by noting the differences and similarities in several weather-related categories. Give students the following sentence, which they may later transform giving it their own voice. *“Why is the weather in two western cities less than 100 miles apart more different than it is alike?”* Students may continue with, *“Well, Las Vegas, Nevada, and Williams, Arizona, have many differences which impact their weather. First . . . Next . . .”* and so on. *“On the other hand, there are some weather traits the two cities share. For example . . . In addition . . .”* When students have included all the information from their graphic organizers, peer editing-partners may check their work. If this is the students’ first writing activity, it might be a good idea to have partners co-author the piece.

The next step is to re-examine the way the information is sequenced and grouped together. For CRISS teachers whose students use Power Thinking, this means asking the following questions: Are all of the Power 2s related to the Power 1? Are all of the Power 3s and 4s related to the Power 2s? Do not skip this step. Like the sequencing of steps in solving math problems or in completing science experiments, it is a critical component. Gifted students often have a problem doing this step, as they tend to skip over the minor details—especially as young learners unaware of the importance of details and congruence. Creating this mindfulness of detail and congruence (Langer, 1989) is a nice gift we can give our students.

The final project may include a variety of pieces: Two-Column Notes incorporating the key questions and researched answers, compare and contrast notes, a written summary including paraphrasing and elaboration, and a creative travel brochure (RAFT, pages 186-189). These assessment pieces also require a game plan and practice. In a strategic classroom little is left to chance in instruction.

Finally, a note about standardized tests. Remember, our topic is teaching organization and transformation of knowledge in order to learn concepts in depth. When our purpose is changed to understanding and responding to the compare and contrast questions on a standardized test, we might alter our instructions in the following way.

Last week we studied the weather forecasts of two cities in the western part of the United State. We went in search of additional information to enhance our understanding. Today, we are going to experience another way to respond to a compare and contrast task, when we encounter it on a standardized test. In that situation, we will use only the information provided with the test. We will not go anywhere else to make our comparison. Even if we know a lot about one of the topics, we will only organize and write about the information in the selection given to us. We can call this our PLAN B and use it when we take standardized tests.

CONTRAST and COMPARE GUIDE

1.

2.

↙ HOW DIFFERENT? ↘

1	<i>With regard to . . .</i>	2

↙ HOW SIMILAR? ↘

<i>With regard to . . .</i>	1 & 2	

Additional Information Needed:

The teaching of organization, transformation of knowledge, is one sure way to help our students hit the target of learning. This instruction is like the basics of golf and basketball and is a major component in teaching students how to learn.

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