

## Can Text be too Friendly?

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In order to make text attractive and accessible to readers, writers may add supporting or facilitating information. In texts of the *characteristic* topic type, this supporting information may include narrative accounts, questions to the reader, and the use of examples. The use of narrative accounts may disguise the topic type and make it difficult for the reader to realise what the text is trying to convey. Examples may be unknown to the reader, may result in the use of unfamiliar vocabulary not directly related to the topic, and confuse the particular with the general. Awareness of topic type may help overcome some of these difficulties.

### INTRODUCTION

If students have to read the following text what would they be expected to learn and remember?

#### The Reef Heron

If we were to hide with field-glasses behind a handy clump of reeds on a tidal mud-flat or a rocky shore, sooner or later we would almost certainly see a reef heron, or blue heron, as it is sometimes called.

It is taller than the gulls, and its feathers are battleship grey. It stands as still as a stuffed bird in a museum; but if we watch carefully we see that every minute or so it moves a pace or two forward to keep up with the retreating tide . . .

(School Publications, 1970)

We argue that there are two types of information in this text: (a) the essential content which the writer wishes the reader to assimilate, and (b) extra information which is used, among other functions, to make the text more interesting and thus facilitate the transfer of the essential content. In this particular text, the essential content, called from now on Central Information is:

A reef heron is sometimes called a blue heron  
It is taller than the gulls  
Its feathers are battleship grey  
It stands very still

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Every minute or so it moves a pace or two forward to keep up with the retreating tide

[It can be found] on tidal mud-flats or a rocky shore

The extra information, which we shall refer to as Facilitating includes:

We would see a heron if we were to hide with field-classes behind a handy clump of reeds

. . . sooner or later [we would] almost certainly [see] . . . etc.

This distinction between Central and Facilitating Information is not the same as the common distinction between Main and Supporting Ideas (cf. Baumann 1986), since both main and supporting ideas may be central, in our terms. It has more to do with the distinction between what Meyer (1975) calls Content and Signalling information, though our conception of Facilitating information is broader.

While at times it may be difficult to establish the criteria for making the distinction, it seems to us an intuitively satisfying one. We assume that in the text above, the author's aim is to instruct as to the attributes of the reef heron, and the presence of these attributes in the text is comparatively easy to establish. Any other information can then be assigned to the Facilitating category. Moreover, as will be seen later, the presence of Central Information remains constant in texts of this kind, whereas the presence or absence of Facilitating Information seems to depend on the age of the audience.

Most often facilitating information has a positive effect on the interaction between the reader and the text. It can have this positive effect by increasing the meaningfulness of the text by helping the reader relate it to past experience, by clarifying possibly obscure or unfamiliar points, and by attracting the reader by making the text like a narrative. Occasionally, however, the attempt to make a text more friendly can have a negative effect on comprehending or learning from the text. For example, facilitating information in a text may distract the reader into thinking that what needs to be remembered from the text are the narrative events rather than the non-narrative informative content.

To see how this might happen we examine texts which all exemplify a common topic type. We will look at the supporting information in a set of *characteristics* texts to see the different kinds of supporting information, and the effects that it may have. This article suggests that awareness of the topic type of a text will allow learners to distinguish what is important and what is not and therefore not be confused or misled by a too friendly text.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS TOPIC TYPE

The texts used in this study belonged to the *characteristics* topic type (Johns and Davies, 1983). Texts of this type describe what something is like. They may, for example, describe a particular bird or animal, a place, object or substance. The constituents of the characteristics topic type are as follows:

**defining features or attributes** > tests or measures of + data + exemplar or group.

This representation indicates that **defining features or attributes** are obligatory, while the other constituents are optional.

The characteristics topic type was chosen for this study because it is very common across a range of disciplines (Kay, 1991), and is particularly common in the material written for children which, as we shall show, tends to contain much facilitating information. The type is also rather loosely organized, which perhaps allows the use of a range of facilitating information.

The following text, from a New Zealand School Journal (Melser, 1975) is an example of the type of text used in this study:

Dugongs are sea-cows. They live in warm seas in different parts of the world. They feed on the sea-grasses growing in the shallow waters off the coast.

A fully-grown dugong is about three metres long. It has a small head and small eyes. It has two flippers and a tail like a fish. Its lips are big and strong and are used to pull off leaves and stems and push them into its mouth. Its nostrils open when it pokes its head out of the water to breathe, and close again when it goes back underwater.

The male dugong has tusks which he uses to dig up roots and other food from the seabed. Dugongs are peaceful animals. They do not use their tusks to fight.

The dugong's calf is born underwater. Then the mother brings it up to the surface. For a few hours, she swims there with the baby on her back. Slowly, she goes underwater, until it has learned to swim. After that, the calf swims along beside her. She feeds it with milk from two teats under her flippers. Sometimes a mother dugong has twins.

Table 1 shows this text analysed as a **characteristics** text<sup>1</sup>.

Study of a wide range of examples of the characteristics topic type reveals the following features.

- 1 The example or group category can be the thing in general, a subcategory of the thing in general, or a particular case (in the *Dugongs* text, the discussion deals with dugongs in general, then the subcategories of fully-grown dugongs and male dugongs).

Table 1:

An Example of Text Analysis: Dugongs			
Example or Group	Features or Attributes	Tests or Measures	Data
Dugongs	are sea-cows		
	live in warm seas in different part of the world		
	feed on the sea-grasses growing in shallow waters off the coast.		
A fully-grown dugong	is about three metres long.		
	It has a big body, small head and small eyes. It has two flippers and a tail like a fish.		
	Its lips are big and strong		and are used to pull off leaves and stems and push them into its mouth.
	Its nostrils open when it pokes its head out of the water to breathe, and close again when it goes back underwater.		
The male dugong	has tusks		which he uses to dig up roots and other food from the sea-bed.
Dugongs	are peaceful animals.	They do not use their tusks to fight.	
			The dugong's calf is born underwater. Then the mother brings it up to the surface. For a few hours, she wims there with the baby on her back. Slowly, she goes underwater, until it has learned to swim. After that, the calf swims along beside her. She feeds it with milk from two teats under her flippers. Sometimes a mother dungong has twins. (Melser, 1975:35-36)

- 2 The features or attributes category can include defining features, physical structure information (particularly parts and properties), extra information, or generalizations.
- 3 The test or measures category is subordinate to the features or attributes category and is used to confirm a feature's existence. (In the *Dugongs* text, the "peaceful" attribute is confirmed.)
- 4 The data category is also subordinate to the features or attributes category and elaborates a stated or sometimes unstated feature. (In the *Dugongs* text, the unstated feature is "Dugongs give birth to and rear their young in a way which is different from other sea-mammals").

Often a characteristic topic type occurs in conjunction with another topic type. Gerald Durrell's books on his expeditions are striking examples of this, where state/situation text occurs with characteristics descriptions of specimens both as species and particular examples (Fountain and Nation, 1976).

### THE TEXTS

Many of the texts looked at in this study are taken from Parts 2 and 3 of the *New Zealand School Journal*. These journals are available to all New Zealand primary schools and contain factual articles, short stories, short plays and poems. Parts 2 and 3 are intended for eight- to eleven-year-old readers. They are written in a lively, informative manner with a careful concern for readability. They are intended primarily to be enjoyable and to attract children to reading.

Eighteen typical Characteristics texts were sampled from the *School Journal* Part 2 and Part 3 from the years 1968-1987. The selection criteria were:

- a. They had to be description texts which contained the Characteristics topic type. Those which were predominantly composed of other topic types, e.g. Physical Structure, were excluded.
- b. They had to be biological texts. Some Characteristics texts which were scientific in nature but were not concerned with biology were not selected. This was because as part of a broader study, they were to be compared with texts from sixth-form biology books.
- c. They had to have as the first priority an informative intention of describing something to readers. Texts which contained some Characteristics information but did not have this as their primary intention were excluded.
- d. The percentage of Characteristics information in prospective sample texts had to be higher than the percentage of the information of other topic types. Texts which contained Characteristics information, the percentage of which was lower than that of other information, were excluded.