In this article Moss, Leone, and DiPillo examine how elementary teachers can improve student understanding of expository text through reading and writing of information trade books. They describe three ways teachers can involve children in such text: a) reading and writing about information trade books, b) reading and creating innovations on information trade books, and c) reading and writing retellings of information trade books.

Jason and Jamie, fifth graders at Highland Park Elementary School in Grove City, Ohio, pore over Joanna Cole’s *A Snake’s Body* (1981). They point at a section of text, laugh, and read the text again. They jump up from their seats, making a beeline for the closest available adult. Jason pulls on her sleeve, totally oblivious to the fact that she is a complete stranger. He points again to the text and announces triumphantly, “Snakes used to have feet!”

Dan, a second grader, is fascinated with outer space. During sustained silent reading time, he is engrossed in Franklyn Branley’s *Planets in Our Solar System* (1988). His passion for this topic does not end with SSR; it spills over into the rest of the day. At recess, his teacher overhears him telling his friends about the temperature on Mars. During center time, she observes him sharing a photograph of an asteroid with his reading partner, Mike. Finally, at the end of the day, the children are working on letters to their pen pals. Dan is still so intrigued by his recently acquired knowledge that he must share it—and share it he does, only this time in a letter to his newly-assigned pen pal.

Dear Jimmy,
I am 8 years old. My name is Dan. I have 1 brother, his name is Tony, Jr. My stepdad works. My mom watches me wen I get home. Did you know that there is another universe?
Your pen pal,
Dan

Jason and Dan, like most youngsters, are amazed by the world around them and the kaleidoscopic images it provides. Yet, all too often, we teachers fail to capitalize upon the fascination that facts hold for youngsters like these. We fill our classrooms with a plethora of stories—fairy tales, fantasies, and realistic tales—ignoring the excitement for reading that information books might ignite.

If today’s students are to survive in the “Information Age,” it is imperative that they develop greater familiarity with and understanding of expository text. Recent estimates indicate that available information is doubling every 5 years (Wurman, 1989). Yet, most youngsters find it difficult to locate information independently from a single textbook (Dreher & Sammons, 1994), let alone select, analyze, and
synthesize information from multiple resources. As Littlefair (1993) notes:

Despite all the debate about the initial teaching and learning of reading, little attention seems to be paid to how children are to be assisted to become competent independent readers of a variety of texts. We seem to assume that as children progress through the primary school and middle school, they transfer their ability to read narrative into competent reading of non-narrative, upon which much of their further education and capacity to deal with adult life will depend. (p. 127)

**If today's students are to survive in the “Information Age,” it is imperative that they develop greater familiarity with and understanding of expository text.**

While we applaud teachers' increasing use of trade books for literacy instruction (Campbell, Donahue, Reese, & Phillips, 1996), their literature of choice is most often story. In fact, nearly two-thirds of fourth graders interviewed during the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress reported not reading information trade books at school (Campbell, Kapinus, & Beatty, 1995). Moreover, a recent survey of teacher read-aloud practices in 537 elementary classrooms nationwide indicated that none of the most-frequently read titles at any grade level were information books (Hoffman, Roser, & Battle, 1993). Perhaps most distressing of all, most of the new literature-based reading programs continue to emphasize narrative at the expense of exposition (Moss, 1997).

There are many advantages to using children's nonfiction trade books in the classroom, not the least of which is that they contain well-written exposition. Today's nonfiction books are ideal for exposing even the youngest children to expository structures; they are attractive, interesting, and up-to-date. In addition, they can facilitate children's understanding of a wide range of topics, thereby providing an important complement to content area textbooks. However, if children are to become truly literate, they need opportunities to read and write in response to expository texts. Children like Jason and Jamie seldom experience writing opportunities that take advantage of their interest in information. Teachers persist in the perennial story writing assignment, rather than affording children opportunities to explore other forms. As Daniels (1990) states:

The writing curriculum experienced by many American students as they go up through the grades is essentially story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, story, term paper. This collision with the dreaded term paper assignment is the most dramatic, most worried over and perhaps most emblematic demonstration of the "expository gap" in the curriculum.

A predictable outcome of this unbalanced curriculum is that today's students write much better stories than they write reports, arguments, or essays. The average American school child, from the primary grades upward, can churn out remarkably fluent, elaborated, and engaging chronological narratives of fiction or personal experience. When it comes to tasks of persuasion, information, explanation, description, or analysis, however, the same child is far less fluent and experienced. (p. 107)

Thus, in American classrooms, narrative literacy continues to eclipse information literacy at precisely the time when the ability to read and write exposition is, arguably, becoming more critical in our society. The purpose of this article is to suggest three ways elementary teachers can connect the reading and writing of expository text using information trade books. These include having children: a) read and write about such texts; b) read and produce innovations on such text; and, c) read and write retellings of expository texts. By reading and writing in response to the expository text found in information trade books, children will increase their facility with such texts. Even more important, children will develop deeper understandings of the forms and functions of exposition, a critical component to comprehending non-narrative material.

**While even preschoolers exhibit an intuitive knowledge of story . . . many older children lack awareness of common expository text structures.**

**BACKGROUND**

For many years, literacy teachers and researchers have assumed that narrative is primary—that children not only enjoy but need experiences with story (Pappas, 1993). While even preschoolers exhibit an intuitive knowledge of story structure (Stein & Glenn, 1979), many older children lack awareness of common expository text structures (Englert & Hiebert, 1984) and identify expository material as more difficult to read than narratives (Alvermann & Boothby, 1982; Langer, 1985).

At least two possible reasons for children's difficulty with exposition have been postulated. First, young children lack early exposure to exposition, largely because, until recently, there were few information books written for young children (Langer, 1985). Second, children's classroom exposure to well-written expository text is limited. Content area textbooks, for example, are often criticized for obscure, incoherent writing coupled with confusing organization (Anderson, Armbruster,
Information trade books can help to fill the need for clearly written exposition that even the youngest readers can understand. Written by authors experienced in making the most complex concepts comprehensible, they offer children the opportunity to explore the real world. Writing in response to information texts, moreover, can provide an even more powerful means for enhancing children's understanding of expository texts.

**Reading/Writing Connections**

Research clearly indicates the value and importance of linking reading and writing experiences in the classroom. When children read and write about what they have read, engagement with text is enhanced, recall of key ideas improves, and thinking about text deepens (Tierney & Shanahan, 1996). While research exploring the reading-writing relationship is in its infancy, studies generally confirm the value of asking children to respond to exposition by writing about such texts, by creating text-based innovations, and through writing retellings. For example, writing about expository text prompts learners to elaborate upon and manipulate ideas, as well as gain insight into the author's craft (Moss & Leal, 1994; Farest, Miller, & Fewin, 1995).

As they read expository text, good readers sense text organization and search for relationships among pieces of information (Meyer, 1985), use text organization for their own recall (McGee, 1982), and readily recognize and produce written examples of different types of text structures (Langer, 1985; Englert & Hiebert, 1984). Thus, teaching children common expository text structures such as description, sequence, comparison/contrast, cause and effect, and problem/solution (Raphael, Kirschner, & Englert, 1988; McGee & Richgels, 1985) and how to create visual representations of these structures (Armbruster & Anderson, 1980) facilitates comprehension of text, which aids in both reading and writing.

Text construction and reconstruction activities such as retellings, for example, help readers develop reading flexibility; knowledge of text forms and conventions, and the processes involved in text construction. When students share written retellings, they “read, reread and reread again” and engage with text much more intensely than at other times (Brown & Cambourne, 1987, p. 11).

Thus, by broadening children's exposure to expository text types, we heighten children's awareness of how such texts are created (Littlefair, 1992) and their understanding of why and when to use them. Over time, children develop the ability to read such texts as writers, and begin to search for ideas they can use in their own writing. In this way children broaden the forms of writing they create and become empowered to create their own texts based upon their understanding of these models (Green, 1992; Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 1990).

**Laying the Groundwork**

Children need a rich variety of experiences with the exposition found in information trade books. Therefore, teachers must lay the groundwork for these experiences by immersing children in the many high-quality information trade books available today. In this section we will briefly outline guidelines and resources for selecting information books, suggestions for using information trade books in the classroom, and strategies for sensitizing children to typical expository text structures.

**Selecting Information Trade Books**

If children are to become familiar with well-written exposition, they must have up-to-date information trade books available in the classroom. Such books should constitute approximately one-fourth to one-half of the classroom library collection at every grade level. Information books selected should address a wide range of topics and encompass many different levels of difficulty.

Book selections should be made on the basis of the “five A’s”: a) the authority of the author; b) the accuracy of text content; c) the appropriateness of the book for children; d) the literary artistry; and e) the appearance of the book (see Moss, 1994). Resources such as EyeOpeners II (Kobrin, 1995) provide brief synopses of and teaching ideas for hundreds of high-quality information texts.

It is well to note that informational books need not be exclusively expository in nature; more and more titles blur the lines between two or more genres or combine narrative and exposition in unique and creative ways. Notable examples include the Magic School Bus books and the Read to Wonder series by Candlewick Press. These books can provide an introduction to expository text for younger readers, as well as provide opportunities for rich discussions about how authors combine various types of text within a single work and how readers might approach the reading of such texts.

**Exploring Information Texts in the Classroom**

Children of all ages need many opportunities to interact with information texts. First, they must hear excellent in-
formation trade books read aloud (see Moss, 1995). One simple way to incorporate such oral reading is to pair information selections with “tried and true” fictional ones. For example, after hearing Charlotte’s Web (White, 1952), children might enjoy hearing The Lady and the Spider (McNulty, 1986). Or, after hearing Babe, the Gallant Pig (King-Smith, 1983), they might better appreciate All Pigs are Beautiful (King-Smith, 1995), a delightful information text by the same author. After reading Gary Paulsen’s (1993) Nightjohn to a sixth- or seventh-grade class, a teacher might enhance and extend student understanding of slavery by reading Christmas at the Big House, Christmas at the Quarters (McKissack & McKissack, 1994).

Teachers can structure a variety of situations that help to create a need for student engagement with expository text. First, they may use classroom novels as a springboard to the exploration of information. For example, the historical fiction title A Family Apart (Nixon, 1987), provides a compelling portrait of six children from New York City who are sent West on orphan trains because their mother can no longer support them. As children read this book, they will likely find themselves wondering: How many children went West on the trains? How often were they adopted? Were they ever reunited with their parents? Such questions create a real need to know and naturally lead to the use of nonfiction titles such as Orphan Train Rider (Warren, 1996), which describes what happened to the more than 200,000 orphaned or abandoned children who boarded these trains from 1854–1929 by recounting the experiences of one boy and his brothers.

In addition, teachers can encourage students’ use of information texts that complement textbook treatment of particular content-area topics. After reading a sixth-grade social studies chapter on explorers, for example, a teacher might have students become experts on particular explorers. Small groups of students could read a variety of information titles such as Explorers Who Got Lost (Sansevere-Dreher, 1994), The Incredible Journey of Lewis and Clark (Blumberg, 1987), or To Space and Back (Ride & Okie, 1986) and then share their expertise with the entire class.

Finally, teachers can deepen children’s involvement with information trade books by making such texts part of thematic study. Karen Grindall, a fifth-grade teacher at Portage Path Elementary in Akron, Ohio, used Exploring the Titanic (Ballard, 1988) as a core book for a fifth-grade whole class study of American life at the turn of the century. Students read and discussed the book in small and large groups. The knowledge they gained was applied in a variety of dramatic simulations allowing them to experience what life aboard the Titanic was like in first-, second-, and third-class berths. They conducted research about the ship’s passengers and each student later assumed the identity of one individual who actually sailed on the ship. They then wrote about their experiences from their passenger’s point of view.

**Strategies for Understanding Exposition**

Children need more than exposure to exposition. They need to develop understanding of this form. Nevertheless, if children are to develop understanding of exposition, teachers must show children how expository text works and how it differs from narrative text. This is best accomplished through demonstrations and discussions of the features found in information trade books.

For example, Bea Rebenack uses The Book of Animal Records (Drew, 1989), a big book, as part of a shared reading experience to illustrate the characteristics of information text with her third graders. She first reads the book aloud to her students. After that, she goes through the text again, pointing out its organizational structure. She then discusses how children might use the various locational devices such as tables of contents, indices, glossaries, and headings to help them search for specific information. Finally, Bea points out the visual information, including charts, graphs, and maps, that accompanies the text. As children become more comfortable with this form she uses the following questions, adapted from Green (1992), to guide her teaching:

**Predictions:**

What kind of book is this?  
How do you know?  
What kind of information do you expect to find?  
What kinds of illustrations do you expect to find?

**Reading the text:**

What do the headings and subheadings tell me?  
What parts of the book help me find information?  
How do I read the diagrams (or maps, graphs, timelines)?

**Locational devices:**

What is the table of contents for? When and how is it used?  
What are the page numbers for?  
Why are the pages numbered?  
What is the index for? When and how do I use it?  
Do all information books have contents and indices?  
Why? Why not?

Eventually, Bea involves her students in comparing a fictional text with a factual one, encouraging them to discuss the differences between the two using the following questions:

Do we read information books the same way as stories? Why? Why not?  
What do information books have that stories do not?  
What do storybooks have that information books do not?  
Why are they different?
As children develop some understanding of the differences between the two genres, teachers can begin to point out examples of the various expository text structures such as main idea/detail, description, sequence, comparison/contrast, cause and effect, and problem/solution as they appear in specific texts. Information picture books can be most useful for exposing children to such structures (see Tompkins, 1994).

The use of webbing can be an important strategy for sensitizing children to the main idea/detail structure. Lisa Freeman's fourth graders, for example, used *Sunken Treasure* (Gibbons, 1988) as a core title during their study of oceans. After reading this title, she and her students constructed a web (see Figure 1) reflecting the topical organization of the text, using each text heading for one of the “main idea circles.” Students then worked in teams to complete the web, adding details to each of the main ideas. These webs were later used by her students as they wrote retellings of the text.

**WRITING ABOUT INFORMATION TEXTS**

As children become immersed in information texts and begin to understand their structures, writing becomes a natural means for extending their experiences with this genre. Asking children to write about expository text allows children to reflect upon what they have learned from a text and to raise questions about the text as well as reflect upon the ways in which their thinking about a given topic has changed.

Many elementary teachers involve students in writing journal responses to fiction. Journals can be used for recording responses to information texts as well. While children
may focus upon their feelings about particular characters or events when journaling about a fictional trade book, they may respond to the people, places, or things that form the topics of information trade books. Teachers may use prompts including questions, visual stimuli, or situations to focus children’s responses to information trade books, or they may invite children to respond to their reading in a more open-ended way.

For young children, responses to information literature may combine visual descriptions with verbal ones.

In Figure 2, a first grader responded to Millicent Selsam’s (1992) *How Kittens Grow* after hearing the book read aloud and then browsing through it with a friend during DEAR time. She wrote about her feelings about the book and built connections between her own life and the information in the book.

Older students might maintain response journals over the course of reading a longer information book. Julia Simmer’s class at Crestview Elementary, for example, read *Shh! We’re Writing the Constitution* (Fritz, 1987) as part of a fifth-grade thematic study of the American Revolution. At strategic points, students recorded open-ended responses to the book, while on other occasions they responded to specific questions posed by their teacher. In Figure 3, a fifth-grade boy expressed his appreciation for the amusing illustrations. In Figure 4, a student reflected upon how it might have felt to help write the Constitution. In Figure 5, a student articulated his reasons for preferring this trade book to the social studies text. This young critic noted the author’s knack for including fascinating facts that make history...
human: “It gives you the facts you wouldn’t find in a social studies book. Like the man who ate the mummy finger.”

Two-column journals represent another interesting means whereby older children can record and respond to expository information. In two-column journals, children note text-based information of interest to them on the left side of a page. This may include recording notes or phrases directly from the text or rewording text information in their own words. On the right side they record personal feelings about the information. Figure 6 illustrates how a fourth grader, who read *My Visit to the Aquarium* (Aliki, 1993) independently, completed a two-column journal after his teacher demonstrated its use.

Other written responses to information texts may involve asking children to record interesting facts acquired as they answer their own questions during inquiry projects. As part of such a project, children at Heminger School in Akron located information about particular animals from magazines, newspapers, and trade books such as the *Eyewitness* Junior series. In Figure 7, entitled “Fun Facts about Pythons,” a third grader listed interesting information he learned, as well as inferred, from his reading, including his astute observation that “I can train a dog, but I cannot train a snake.”

For young children, responses to information literature may combine visual descriptions with verbal ones.

Second graders in Bea Rebenack’s class at Southeast Primary School in Ravenna, Ohio, explored the world of insects; they read *Ant Cities* (Dorros, 1987) as a core title and several other related trade books in small groups. After much discussion of ants’ habits, children used construction paper covered with clear contact paper to create transparent representations of ants’ underground activities. In addition, they created captions describing their visuals. In Figure 8, Stephanie visually depicts ants as they move through tunnels performing their daily tasks.

**Figure 6.** Fourth Grader’s Two-column Journal Response to *My Visit to the Aquarium* (Aliki, 1993)
CREATING TEXT INNOVATIONS USING EXPOSITION

A second way to link reading and writing through information trade books is by creating innovations on such texts. This strategy involves reading a pattern book to the class, helping children identify the pattern within the text structure, and engaging them in imitation of this pattern in their own writing. By patterning their own work after that of a known book, children’s early written efforts at exposition are scaffolded. This allows them to explore new structures for their writing in a secure, non-threatening way.

The Important Book (Brown, 1949) can serve as a model for information writing in many content areas. Each paragraph of this book states an important characteristic, or main idea, about a common object. This trait is followed by supporting details which further enhance the description of the object and concludes with a restatement of the main idea. Mrs. Huzicka’s sixth-grade science class at St. Christine School utilized this textual structure during their review of an ocean unit. The teacher read the model to the class, instructing them to listen carefully for the pattern. After identifying the textual frame, “the important thing about __________ is __________,” the children formed writing groups and were assigned one or two pages of their science text (Mallinson et al., 1993) for review. They next identified the main idea of the pages and inserted it into the textual frame. Supporting details followed and the writing concluded with a restatement of the main idea. Two examples from those children’s work follow:

The important thing about the intertidal zone is that it is a zone of great change. The conditions of the intertidal zone change because of high and low tides. Many different organisms live in the intertidal zone. You can find tide pools there. But the important thing about the intertidal zone is that it is a zone of great change.

The important thing about animals of the rocky shores is that the animals must withstand the force of strong waves. Barnacles give off glue that cements them to the rocks. The limpet stays down with its strong foot. Mussels attach themselves to rocks by a group of threads. Other animals hide in seaweed that clings to the rocks. But the important thing about animals of the rocky shores is that the animals must withstand the force of strong waves.

The children added illustrations to complement their writing and compiled a class book as a culminating unit activity.
Information “ABC books” provide another excellent model for text innovations since children are often exposed to alphabet books at an early age. The textual structure, then, is comfortable and easily understood. Such books are easy to compile and offer a format with which children of all ability levels can experience success. Jerry Pallotta’s information alphabet books exemplify the possibilities of this format. Mrs. Huzicka made several of these books available to her sixth-grade class, including The Ocean Alphabet Book (Pallotta, 1986) and The Yucky Reptile Book (Pallotta, 1989). After perusing these books, the children discussed the details the books presented and the research necessary to write them. Their teacher then assigned groups of children three letters of the alphabet. She instructed the children to explore their science text (Mallinson et al., 1993) and other classroom resources for key vocabulary and concepts which related to their letters. The children used the information they gathered to write pages for their class alphabet book. Samples of their work included:

A is for adaptation. Adaptation is a trait that helps an organism survive in its environment. Animals in the ocean need their adaptations to fight the conditions where they live. For example, the limpet adapts to living on the rocky shore by clamping on to a rock with its strong foot.

C is for camouflage, an adaptation that helps an animal blend in with its environment. A flounder blends in with the ocean bottom so it cannot be seen by sharks and other dangerous fish.

Since some of the letters were more difficult than others, Mrs. Huzicka challenged the students to engage in library research to locate additional information. Entries for the letters W and X follow:

W is for wrasse, a small fish. It has small stripes on him to attract other fish. The wrasse cleans the inside of a fish by feeding off the animals parasites. The wrasse is often mistaken for the blenny.

X is for xylem, a woody tissue found in more complex plants. It is a vessel that allows water and inorganic salts to be brought from the soil into the plant. It also provides mechanical support for the stem. The xylem lies very closely to the phloem in the stem. Some of the first plants to develop xylem were ferns and conifers.

How a Book Is Made (Aliki, 1986) and How Is A Crayon Made? (Charles, 1988) provide powerful models for sequential writing. The latter book details the step-by-step process of making crayons. It includes wonderfully vivid facts about a common school supply, such as: “If all the regular size crayons made in the United States last year were laid end-to-end around the equator, they would circle the globe four and a half times” (p. 1). Linda Miller, fourth grade teacher at St. Christine School, demonstrated this text, using it as a model for writing directions. She read it to her class and facilitated a discussion on the important “signal words” Charles utilized to indicate sequence: first, next, then, now, while, etc. She then instructed the students to choose a topic for which they would write a set of directions, incorporating the signal words. The children chose a variety of subjects, including how to make a sandwich, set a table, make a paper crane, make a crayon rubbing, and grow a garden. The following example illustrates one fourth grader’s directions on how to make a snowman:

Step 1. First make 3 snowballs and roll them in snow. Make one big, one medium, and one small.

Step 2. Then put the biggest snowball on the bottom, the medium in the middle, and the small at the top.

Step 3. Next put 2 rocks at the top of the smallest snowball. Then put 4 rocks down the middle. Next put a carrot under the two rocks. Put the hat on top of the smallest snowball.

Step 4. Put the scarf in between the middle and the top snowball.

Step 5. Last put the 2 sticks in the middle of the medium snowball and put the gloves on the sticks.

CREATING WRITTEN RETELLINGS OF EXPOSITORY TEXT

Written retellings are a third way to link reading and writing through information trade books. Written retellings allow children to play an active role in reconstructing expository texts. They require children to restructure materials they have read into their own form, a process requiring a clear understanding of text content. They allow us to see how well as how much information children retain after reading or listening to a text. In addition, they give us insights about children’s sensitivity to genre and their ability to organize information. Moreover, they allow children to record their thoughts about the connections between their own lives and the information trade books they are reading (Moss & Leal, 1994).

Written retellings allow children to play an active role in reconstructing expository texts.

Written retellings of expository texts are best used with children in grades three and up, although some younger children may have success with this strategy as well. Brown and Cambourne (1987) recommend the following steps for involving children in written retellings of expository text:
1. For several days prior to retelling, students should be immersed in study of the topic of the text that will be retold. This can involve shared book experiences, sustained silent reading, and/or brainstorming of information learned.

2. The teacher distributes the expository text to be retold, folded so that only the title shows.

3. Students write a sentence or two indicating what they think the text will be about. In step three, students predict words that might be found in the selection. They then share their predictions with one another.

4. At this point, the teacher reads the text aloud as students follow along. Students re-read the text as many times as they wish, jotting notes or creating visual organizers. They then write their retellings.

5. After they have written their retellings, students share their retellings with one another. They compare their work with one another, discussing similarities and differences in their work. They may also evaluate their retellings using a checklist or rubric.

Using the steps outlined above, Karen McCuen, a first-grade teacher, involved her children in written retellings of *How Do Plants Get Food* (Goldish, 1989). Samples of two different students’ retellings of this text provide us with “windows” whereby we can see how each child processes the same information differently.

Plants have three parts. They are roots, leaves, and a stem. Plants need water and light and air. The water goes to the roots then it carries the water to the leaves. On the bottom of a leaf is a hole so they can breathe. Green plants help make food. If there is not light the plant will die. If the plants have no water they will die. If the plants have no air they will die. Plants need three things or else they will die.

We need plants and plants need us.

This child has clearly integrated the information provided in the text, relating the concepts of light, air, and water to the three parts of the plant: roots, leaves, and stems. In her final sentence, she goes beyond the text to make the important observation that we need plants and plants need us, but does not elaborate on this information.

Still another child completed the following retelling of the same book:

Roots are like straws they drink up food and deliver it to the leaves. Seeds make beautiful flowers. The only way you’re going to get a nice flower is by taking care of it by doing these plant steps: first you have to water it. Then put it by the window and let the air in. Leaves have holes in them to bring in the air and that’s all.

This child’s retelling is much less sophisticated than the first one, but it does capture much of the essence of the text. The child is less aware of the parts of the plant, and has not integrated his information about these parts and the plant’s needs. Nevertheless, this child clearly recognizes the need of plants for air and water, but does not directly indicate the need for light. He does, however, personalize this information, noting that “the only way you’re going to get a nice flower is by taking care of it doing these plant steps.”

Written retellings can also provide teachers with valuable information about children’s development in understanding expository text. As part of a dissertation study, Leone (1994) examined third and fifth graders’ ability to complete written retellings of Gail Gibbons’s (1993) *Pirates* after hearing it read aloud. Although children were not given the opportunity to re-read the text, one-third of the third graders and two-thirds of the fifth graders were able to adequately complete a written retelling of this information text. Consider, for example, this fifth grader’s effort:

The pirates are known as the robbers of the high seas because they would get on the ship and rob it and then make the captains and crew walk the plank and then set the ship on fire. They’ve been roaming the seas as soon as people set sail to travel new worlds and oceans. Stories about pirates came from letters diaries and logs. Once pirates captured Julius Caesar until a ransom was paid. These pirates were so powerful that they banded together to steal goods and cargo. They were very greedy. The pirates ships were smaller and faster than galleons. The ships were also well armed. When pirates attacked they fired large cannonballs. They are two types of pirates—buccaneers and privateers. (Leone, 1994, pp. 117–118)

This written retelling reveals much about this student’s understanding of this text. He clearly comprehends the text’s organization and sequence, and capably recalls main ideas and details. Moreover, he reveals his feelings about the subjects of the text, noting that they were “very greedy.”

Analysis of a third grader’s retelling of the same text reveals a much less sophisticated understanding of this text. This student clearly grasps a number of the facts included in the book, especially those relating to particular examples of individual pirates. However, he has far less comprehension of the main concepts of the text than does the fifth grader. Moreover, he exhibits little understanding of the structure of the text and is able only to string a series of facts together. This example illustrates the need for teachers to scaffold children’s understanding of the relationships between ideas in such text, whether through discussion, visual organizers, or other strategies.

I remembered some pirates: Black Beard, Kaptn Kid, Bloody Sword and Captin Hook. I remember that they made their maps really fancy so people couldn’t find their trea-
CONCLUSION

According to Hiebert (1990), “The challenge for whole language advocates is to progressively increase students’ use of expository material as they acquire fluency in reading, thereby providing more diverse contexts for problem solving and critical thinking” (p. 63). While the move toward literature-based classrooms has clearly encouraged teachers to involve students in writing responses to real books, those books continue to be narrative in nature. The use of information trade books in the classroom can help teachers meet the challenge of increasing student use of expository material at the same time that they capitalize upon children’s fascination with facts. Moreover, inviting children to write in response to such books can help develop the problem-solving and critical thinking skills essential to students’ survival in the Information Age. By involving children in reading and writing about information trade books, teachers can help to ensure that today’s children are prepared for the literacy demands of the world of tomorrow.

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