Shopping for Text Structure

Let's face it. Convincing young writers that their nonfiction writing can benefit from experimenting with different text structures isn't easy. The last thing kids want to do is revise a piece of writing four or five times, each time using a different text structure.

And who can blame them? I'm not crazy about it either. But unlike young writers, I have a powerful tool that spurs me on—experience. I know that trying on different structures is worth the time and effort. I know from experience that it works.

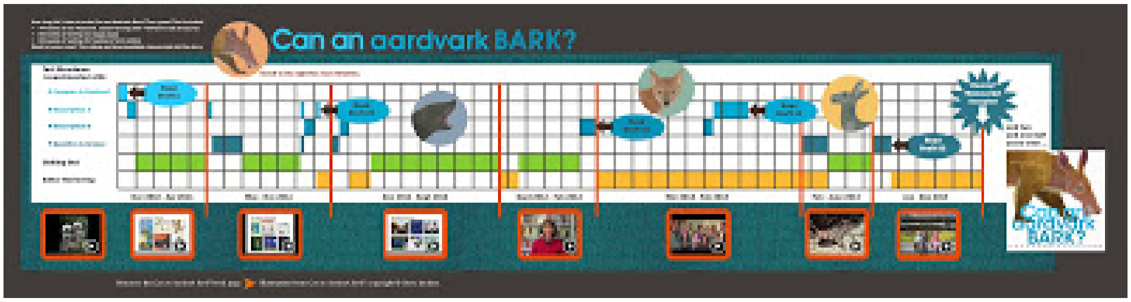
Since gaining that experience takes time and patience and persistence, I've been looking for a way to convince students to keep on trying. Here's an analogy that I think could help. What if we encouraged students to go shopping for structure?

When we shop for pants, we usually know what purpose we want them to serve. Are they for playing sports? Relaxing around the house? Going to a fancy party?

Keeping their purpose in mind allows us to eliminate some pants pretty quickly. We can also rule out pants if they're the wrong size or a color we don't like. But at a certain point, we have to try on a few pairs of pants to see how they fit. We might not like spending time in the store's cramped dressing room, but we accept that it's a necessary part of the process.

The same is true for selecting a nonfiction text structure. When writers consider their purpose for writing, identify their audience, and decide exactly what they're most excited to share with readers, they can quickly eliminate some text structures. For example, a sequence structure won't work if the topic lacks a time element or natural order. A compare & contrast structure only works if the author is discussing or evaluating two different objects, creatures, or ideas.

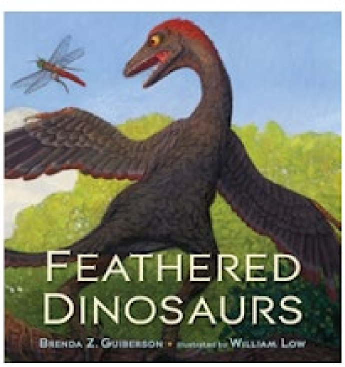
But like shopping for a pair of pants, at a certain point, a nonfiction writer probably has to try on a couple of different text structures to see which one is the best fit. We might not like physically writing out multiple drafts, but we need to accept that it's a necessary part of the process.

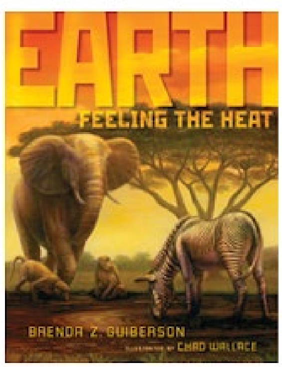


As you can see in this **online revision timeline**, when I was writing *Can an Aardvark Bark?*, I experimented with four different text structures before finally deciding that a question and answer structure would work best.

According to Caldecott Honor-winning author-illustrator Steve Jenkins, “the text structure for a book usually emerges as I’m doing research, making notes, and writing early drafts of a manuscript.” But sometimes the perfect structure is obvious from the start.

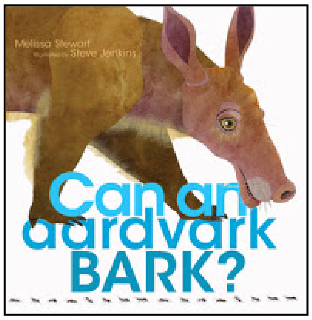
“*Never Smile at a Monkey: And 17 Other Important Things to Remember* was inspired by that phrase popping into my head when I read that macaques sometimes react violently to a human smile (a display of teeth),” recalls Jenkins. “From the beginning, I knew that I’d base the book on a series of similar admonitions (never clutch a cane toad, never cuddle a cub, never touch a tang).” Because Jenkins planned to discuss many different creatures, he knew immediately that he’d be writing a list book.





According to award-winning author Brenda Z. Guiberson, “every topic can be approached in numerous different ways.” Before writers can settle on a text structure, they must “figure out what they most want to say, and then pick the approach that says it best.”

Guiberson knew that *Feathered Dinosaurs* “would be a list book from the very beginning,” but “it took a long time, and several false starts,” to find the right structure for *Earth: Feeling the Heat*. “I was trying to say too much about a complicated global issue,” Guiberson explains. “Finally I decided to stick with specific details and let the situations speak for themselves. Then it became a cause-and-effect book.”



Just like professional writers, young writers should understand that "trying on" different text structures is an authentic part of the drafting process. I know this is a big ask because the last thing kids want to do is revise a piece of writing four or five times just to see what happens. That's why I'm hoping this "shopping for pants" analogy and *Can an Aardvark Bark?* revision timeline will help.