the INFORMED SLP

The well-written paragraph at the end of the rainbow

We SLPs have an important role to play in teaching literacy skills, and we know that many of our students have significant challenges in this area. This is often related to deficits in their ability to acquire language structure, and we've discussed studies on how we can help out with interventions that incorporate visual elements and explicit instruction on text structure.

This month we have a new and vibrant intervention to add to your written-language toolbox, courtesy of Ewoldt & Byrne. In their intervention study, **10–11-year-olds with dyslexia** improved their ability to write and identify elements of **expository paragraphs** after just 10 lessons designed to be delivered in about 30 minutes each.

Quick caveat up front:

This study was super-small (five participants) and had to be adapted last-minute for virtual instruction due to that whole COVID thing, which introduced problems like technology malfunctions and lost homework (ugh, I'm getting remote-learning flashbacks). Despite that, (a) the principles behind the intervention have support in the research, and (b) the intervention is intuitive and easy to use, especially since **the authors provide a detailed implementation guide including lesson plans, graphic organizers, and assessment materials,** available under "Supporting Information" if you click over to the original article and scroll down.

How it works:

Expository writing is a type of nonfiction designed to objectively explain a concept to the reader (as opposed to, say, convince them of the author's opinion). A few types of sentences are required to create paragraphs that do this well, which Ewoldt & Bryne have defined and color-coded like so:

Sentence type	Description	Color
Topic sentence	Tells you the big main idea. There should only be one in a paragraph.	blue
Detail sentence	Gives specific information about the main idea. Answers a "what" question.	yellow
Explanation sentence	Gives more information about a detail. Answers a "why" or "how" question.	pink
Conclusion sentence	Says the main idea again, but in different words than the topic sentence. Lets you know the paragraph is ending.	blue

We'd start by explaining these sentence types to our students, using examples from already-written paragraphs, and move on to having students identify the sentence types themselves. Bonus—this part involves not one, but *three* different colored highlighters, which are universally acclaimed as The Most Fun

Writing Utensil among the elementary schoolers I work with. After that, we provide scaffolding and support while our students brainstorm ideas for their own expository writing, slot those ideas into a **graphic organizer** (also color-coded, of course), and work from that to generate a paragraph. Rinse and repeat the writing process with a new prompt, but be aware that your students may feel compelled to highlight the paragraph they just wrote before they can move on. *If You Give a Kid a Highlighter...*

To supplement the amazing resources (did we mention *scripted lesson plans*?) that the scientists provided, this review includes a printable version of the explanatory table above and a blank graphic organizer you can use with your students. Download them here.

Why it works:

It's not clear from this study that color-coding is necessarily a crucial element of the intervention. There is, however, evidence that babies learn to recognize colors and attune to information they convey very early in development, and other studies have shown that color cues can boost performance on working memory, visuospatial, and organization tasks in students with learning disabilities. It seems like a safe bet that color can help many kids organize their writing as well.

On the other hand, color-coding *isn't* going to help a student with a visual impairment like colorblindness, for instance, and even for some people with standard vision this style of organizing just doesn't click. The authors point out that the intervention's **positive effects may be credited to a "systematic link" that allows students to identify elements as they appeared in each step of the writing process,** rather than the colors themselves. A previous study also found positive effects from a similar intervention that coded sentence types with letters, for instance. So go ahead and color-code, if that works for you and your student. If it doesn't, no worries! Consistent use of any kind of cue to differentiate sentence types can help.

Ewoldt, K. B., & Byrne, S. R. (2023). Colour-cued paragraph writing instruction for students with learning disabilities. *Dyslexia.* https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1732
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