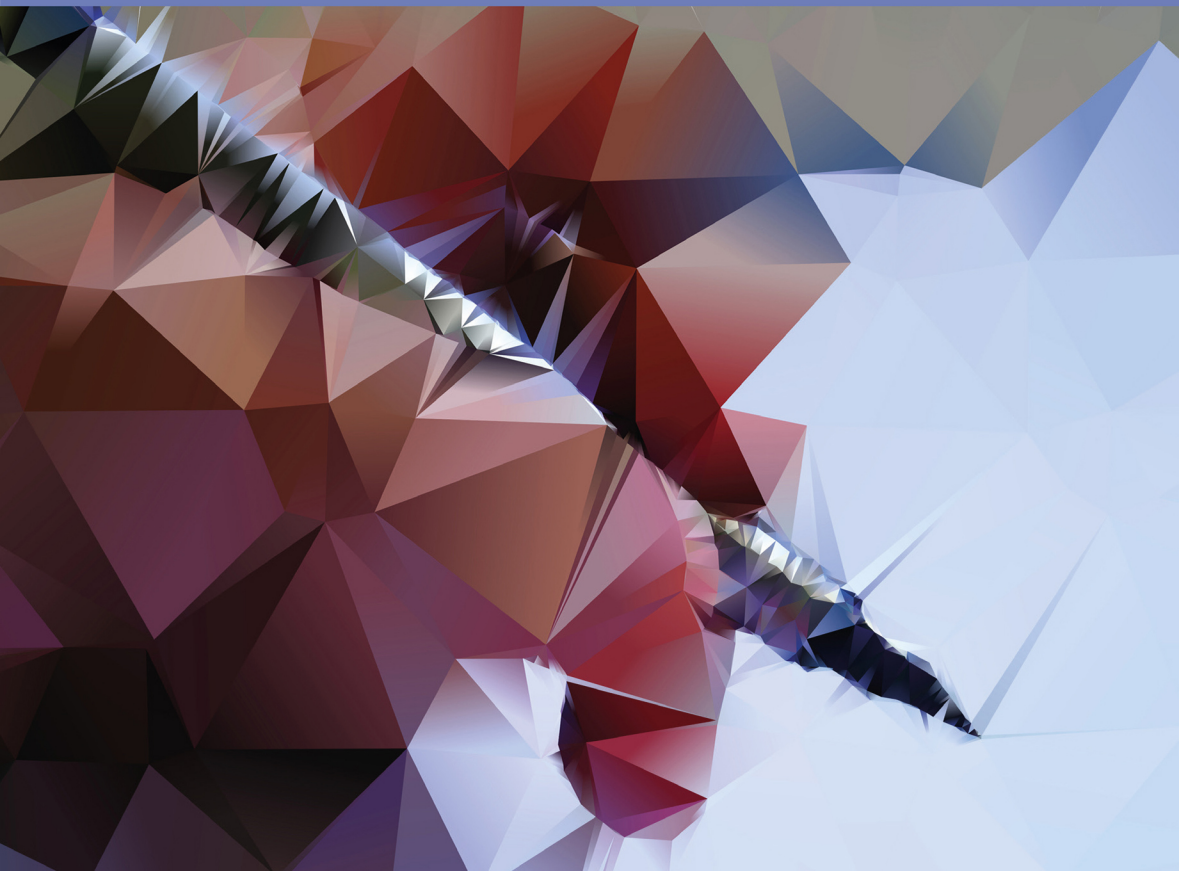# DEMYSTIFYING ACADEMIC WRITING

## GENRES, MOVES, SKILLS, AND STRATEGIES

Zhihui Fang

# Demystifying Academic Writing

Informative, insightful, and accessible, this book is designed to enhance the capacity of graduate and undergraduate students, as well as early career scholars, to write for academic purposes. Fang describes key genres of academic writing, common rhetorical moves associated with each genre, essential skills needed to write the genres, and linguistic resources and strategies that are functional and effective for performing these moves and skills.

Fang's functional linguistic approach to academic writing enables readers to do so much more than write grammatically well-formed sentences. It leverages writing as a process of designing meaning to position language choices as the central focus, illuminating how language is a creative resource for presenting information, developing argument, embedding perspectives, engaging audience, and structuring text across genres and disciplines. Covering reading responses, book reviews, literature reviews, argumentative essays, empirical research articles, grant proposals, and more, this text is an all-in-one resource for building a successful career in academic writing and scholarly publishing.

Each chapter features crafts for effective communication, authentic writing examples, practical applications, and reflective questions. Fang complements these features with self-assessment tools for writers and tips for empowering writers. Assuming no technical knowledge, this text is ideal for both non-native and native English speakers, and suitable for courses in academic writing, rhetoric and composition, and language/literacy education.

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# Demystifying Academic Writing

Genres, Moves, Skills, and Strategies

Zhihui Fang

# Contents (Brief)

# Contents (Detailed)

# Author Biography

**Zhihui Fang** (Ph.D., Purdue University) is the Irving & Rose Fien Endowed Professor of Education at the University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA. He has published widely in the areas of language and literacy education, English teacher education, and functional linguistics in education. His latest book, *Using Functional Grammar in English Literacy Teaching and Learning*, was published in 2020 by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (Beijing, China). He can be reached at <zfang@coe.ufl.edu>.

# Preface

This book is designed to enhance the capacity of graduate and undergraduate students, as well as early career scholars, to write for academic purposes. It describes key academic genres (or text types) you are expected to write in college and beyond, common rhetorical moves associated with each genre, essential skills needed to write these genres, and linguistic resources and strategies for instantiating these moves and skills. It also presents evidence-based guidelines and tips for building a successful career in academic writing and scholarly publishing.

The underlying assumption of the book is that much of the writing difficulty experienced by students and scholars, especially those for whom English is an additional (e.g., second or foreign) language, stems from their struggle with language. In this book, language is conceived of not as a set of prescriptive rules and grammatical conventions to be followed but as an interlocking system of lexical and grammatical options for making meaning. Thus, one salient feature of this book is a functional focus on how language is used as a creative resource for presenting information, developing argument, infusing points of view, engaging readers, incorporating other people's ideas and voices, organizing discourse, and addressing audience needs in genre-specific ways. As such, the book is more about how to make language choices that are functional, appropriate, and effective for the particular writing task at hand than about how to write grammatically well-formed sentences.

Another feature of the book is that it uses many authentic writing samples to illustrate the rhetorical moves and linguistic features of different academic genres and the skills, resources, and strategies needed for writing these genres. These samples are drawn from a wide range of disciplines in colleges such as liberal arts and sciences, engineering, law, education, business, design and construction, journalism and communications, medicine, health sciences, and fine arts. The book also suggests activities in each chapter that encourage readers to reflect on and apply the key points and insights discussed in relation to their own individual needs and disciplinary contexts. With a focus on genre-specific

writing crafts (e.g., moves, skills, resources, and strategies) that are generalizable across disciplines, the book is relevant and useful to students and scholars from all academic backgrounds.

The discussion of writing necessitates the use of a metalanguage—a language for talking about language and text—in the same way that discussion about geometry requires the use of specialist terms such as *vertex*, *diameter*, and *rhombus*. Using a metalanguage promotes more effective explanation of crafts in writing. I drew primarily on the traditional grammar terminology (e.g., *noun*, *verb*, *preposition*, *clause*) for the metalanguage so as to facilitate access. While these metalinguistic terms are used throughout the book, the presumably less familiar ones (e.g., *appositive*, *non-finite clause*, *nominalization*) are defined and exemplified at the outset of the book (see Tables 2.2 and 2.3), where they are first mentioned. They are further explained and exemplified in places where they become relevant again later in the book.

The book combines focused discussion of common academic genres with detailed description of essential skills, resources, and strategies for academic writing through careful selection and insightful analysis of model samples. It consists of 12 chapters (divided into three sections) and 2 appendices. Section I includes four chapters (Chapters 1–4) that unpack academic writing. Chapter 1 defines and exemplifies academic writing, suggesting that there are as many different kinds of academic writing as there are tasks for different academic purposes. Chapter 2 discusses and exemplifies some of the key linguistic features of academic writing that make it at once academic and challenging. It suggests that academic writing exists on a stylistic continuum along the dimensions of generality, density, technicality, abstraction, explicitness, authoritativeness, conventionality, formality, connectivity, precision, tentativeness, rigor, and responsibility.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe the essential skills needed to write for academic purposes and the linguistic resources and strategies that are functional and effective for performing these skills. These skills include how to situate what you want to say within the broader context of the field; how to paraphrase, summarize, synthesize, evaluate, quote, and source what other people have said on the same topic in an angle that fits your purposes and needs; how to agree or disagree with what others have said in a substantive but considerate way; how to explain a phenomenon or articulate a rationale for an action; how to describe a thing or a process; how to define a concept briefly or in an expanded way; how to incorporate examples to support claims, clarify explanation, or enrich description; how to evaluate claims, knowledge, or evidence; how to classify and categorize things; how to compare and contrast different but related things; how to integrate the visuals (e.g., diagrams, tables, graphs, pictures) and the linguistic prose in a seamless fashion; how to acknowledge and respond to opposing or alternative viewpoints in a way that bolsters your argument; how

to make recommendations in a measured and non-hortatory style; and how to construct a cohesive text where sentences and paragraphs are tightly woven.

Section II consists of six chapters (Chapters 5–10) that describe common rhetorical moves, as well as effective linguistic resources and strategies, for writing key academic genres that are often assigned and highly valued in the academic community. These genres include reading responses, book reviews, literature reviews, argumentative essays, empirical research articles, and grant proposals. They can be considered the staples of academic writing. Each chapter also provides and annotates model writing samples to illustrate the key points made in the chapter.

Section III encompasses two chapters (Chapters 11 and 12). Chapter 11 presents ideas and strategies for building capacity and sustaining success in academic writing. The last chapter (Chapter 12) provides a brief overview of the publication process and manuscript review criteria. It also shares a handful of tips for beating the odds and increasing the chances of getting published.

As a whole, the book offers students and scholars in higher education and other settings an informative, insightful, and accessible volume that prepares them to successfully undertake the writing tasks commonly found in academic and disciplinary contexts. Most of the materials presented in the book have been piloted in an academic writing course that I designed and taught for the past decade at my own institution, an American university with an exceptionally diverse student/scholar body and an extraordinarily broad range of academic disciplines. The course has attracted native and non-native speakers of English from a variety of academic disciplines across the campus. I hope you, too, will find this book relevant, accessible, and helpful.

I am grateful to the graduate and undergraduate students, as well as the international visiting scholars, with whom I have had the privilege of working over the past two decades. They are the inspiration for this book. I am especially indebted to the students and scholars who have given me permission to use their writing as examples in this book. I also acknowledge, with gratitude, the support from the University of Florida, which awarded me a sabbatical year (2019–2020) that enabled the completion of this book. Finally, I thank Karen Adler of Routledge for her insights and guidance during the conception and writing of this book and for her professionalism in shepherding the book through the publication process.

# Section I
# Unpacking Academic Writing

# 1
# What Is Academic Writing?

## Importance of Academic Writing

Academic writing is ubiquitous in school and beyond. It is a means of producing, codifying, transmitting, evaluating, renovating, teaching, and learning knowledge and ideology in academic disciplines. Being able to write academically is widely recognized as essential to disciplinary learning and critical for academic success. Control over academic writing gives students and scholars capital, power, and agency in knowledge building, disciplinary practices, identity formation, social positioning, and career advancement.

Given the high stakes nature of academic writing, it is no wonder that students and aspiring scholars like you may have misconceptions about it. In fact, many inexperienced writers think that academic writing involves saying smart things in a convoluted, rigid way. They believe that academic writing presents an unnecessary barrier to academic learning and disciplinary socialization. They resign themselves to the notion that academic writing can only be done by people with sharp intelligence. They both revere and fear academic writing. Their veneration likely stems from the observation that academic writing is usually done by disciplinary experts and often required in the process of school learning and disciplinary practices. Their trepidation probably comes from the challenges they experience in striving to write in a style that is consistent with academic expectations but often sounds unfamiliar and feels alienating.

## Defining Academic Writing

What is academic writing then? Simply put, academic writing is the writing done for academic purposes. It is entering into a conversation with others (Graff & Birkenstein, 2018). However, the way this conversation is constructed is different from how conversation in your everyday life is constructed. In other words, writing for academic purposes is different from writing for the

purpose of everyday social interactions with friends and family members. Yes, academic writing involves expressing your ideas, but those ideas need to be presented as a response to some other person or group, and they also need to be carefully elaborated, well supported, logically sequenced, rigorously reasoned, and tightly woven together.

Moreover, academic writing is not monolithic, meaning that there is more than one kind, or genre, of academic writing. In academic settings, we write for many different purposes. We write letters, memorandums, reading responses, argumentative essays, technical reports, research articles, literature reviews, lab reports, grant proposals, conference abstracts, policy briefs, PowerPoint presentations, commentaries, book reviews, editorials, blogs, emails, and many other text types. Each of these kinds of academic writing has its own purpose, organizational structure, and linguistic features. Consider, for example, the following seven samples of academic writing from various sources (see Table 1.1).

**Table 1.1** Academic Writing Samples

| Text 1-1:<br><br>Abstract of an Article in an Engineering Research Journal | Rebuilding and maintaining the nation's highway infrastructure will require very large capital outlays for many years to come. While the expenditures involved in the maintenance and construction of highway facilities are large, current methods of pavement design used in common engineering practice do not routinely take advantage of design optimization methodologies. This paper presents an optimization formulation for mechanistic-empirical pavement design that minimizes life-cycle costs associated with the construction and maintenance of flexible pavements. Sensitivity analysis is performed on the model to understand how the optimal design changes with respect to variations in the critical design inputs. Using typical values for the costs associated with the construction of each pavement layer and the reconstruction of failed pavement sections, it is determined that extended-life flexible pavements may provide significant life-cycle cost savings despite their higher initial construction cost. However, perpetual pavements that control critical strains to levels near the fatigue and endurance limits for the hot mix asphalt (HMA) and subgrade soil should be designed only when traffic levels are sufficiently high to warrant them or when sufficient uncertainty exists in the mean values of design input probability distributions. Optimization studies performed under uncertainty have showed that designs for extended-life pavements are robust with respect to physical variability in material properties, but are significantly impacted by a lack of knowledge of probability distributions. (McDonald & Madanat, 2012, p. 706) |
|---|---|

| Text 1-2: Excerpt from a College Finance Textbook | Total interest expense is the sum of cash and non-cash interest expense, most notably the amortization of deferred financing fees, which is linked from an assumptions page (see Exhibit 5.54). The amortization of deferred financing fees, while technically not interest expense, is included in total interest expense as it is a financial charge. In a capital structure with a PIK instrument, the non-cash interest portion would also be included in total interest expense and added back to cash flow from operating activities on the cash flow statement. As shown in Exhibit 5.30, ValueCo has non-cash deferred financing fees of $12 million in 2013E. These fees are added to the 2013E cash interest expense of $246.6 million to sum to $258.6 million of total interest expense. (Rosenbaum & Pearl, 2013, pp. 265–266) |
|---|---|
| Text 1-3: Excerpt from a Legal Contract in a Call for Grant Proposals | Dispute Resolution. 12.1 At the option of the parties, they shall attempt in good faith to resolve any dispute arising out of or relating to this Agreement by negotiation between executives who have authority to settle the controversy and who are at a higher level of management than the persons with direct responsibility for administration of this Agreement. All offers, promises, conduct and statements, whether oral or written, made in the course of the negotiation by any of the parties, their agents, employees, experts and attorneys are confidential, privileged and inadmissible for any purpose, including impeachment, in arbitration or other proceeding involving the parties, provided evidence that is otherwise admissible or discoverable shall not be rendered inadmissible. (Delaware Department of Education, 2020, p. 48) |
| Text 1-4: Excerpt from an Edited Scholarly Yearbook | My empirical work around this topic has emerged from the designed experiments of which I have been a part. These designed spaces, what I term social design experiments (Gutierrez, 2005; Gutierrez & Vossoughi, 2010), are distinguished by sociocultural and proleptic views of learning in which learning is understood as the "organization for possible futures" (Gutierrez, 2008, p. 154). In these spaces, we design worlds that engage youth in expansive forms of learning that connect learning across relevant ecologies, principally peer and youth cultures, and academic and home communities "in ways that enable student to become designers of their own social futures" (Gutierrez, 2008, p. 156). A central component of this design has been the development of syncretic forms of expansive learning that leverage both everyday knowledge and school-based practices, including academic text structures, conventions, dispositions, and engagement with a range of texts fundamental to college-going, community-based and work-related literacies. (Gutierrez, 2014, p. 48) |

| Text 1-5:<br><br>Excerpt from an Academic Journal in Music | As we can see it in Example 1, the first two notes in the right hand are Db and Bb, whereas those in the left hand are E and G, together forming the diminished seventh chord of E-G-Bb-Db. Similarly, if we combine the following two notes in the right hand (F#-Eb) with those in the left hand (A-C), we get another diminished seventh chord (A-C-Eb-F#). The combination of the two chords results in the octatonic collection of A-Bb-C-Db-Eb-E-F#-G. The rest of the descending passage is just a repetition of this same collection. At the same time, the lines unfold the minor seventh tetrachords (right hand: Db-Bb-F#-Eb and G-E-C-A; left hand: E-G-A-C and Bb-Db-Eb-F#) in each hand. (Tooth, 2016, p. 155) |
|---|---|
| Text 1-6:<br><br>A Campus Email Memo to Undergraduate Students | March 19, 2019<br><br>Dear Emory Students,<br><br>In light of the challenges and uncertainties posed by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), Emory University has reached the difficult decision to indefinitely suspend all university-sponsored international travel including Summer 2020 study abroad programs.<br><br>I know that you must be very disappointed and frustrated. As so many aspects of our lives change, I know this is likely just one of the ways your academic plans have been disrupted. We hope that by making the decision now to cancel Summer 2020 study abroad programs, you will have more time to reassess your academic plan.<br><br>Our decision to cancel Summer 2020 study abroad programs means that no student will lose the $350 deposit, and all students will be refunded the $75 application fee. Your study abroad advisor will work with you individually should you have any questions about this process.<br><br>We know that your course planning may be impacted by this decision. We encourage you to look for suitable alternate plans through Emory online courses this summer. You may review the 2020 Summer course offerings in the Course Atlas or OPUS. Additional sections of online courses may be added to accommodate the capacity in high demand courses. Be sure to add yourself to the waitlist if an online course is currently full. Questions regarding online course offerings or enrollment may be directed to summerprograms@emory.edu. In addition, the Office of Undergraduate Education (OUE) advisors are aware of this situation and available to support you with your academic planning. |

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|---|---|
| | If you have any questions for the study abroad office, please reach out to your summer study abroad advisor. We wish you the best as you determine the next steps for your academic plan.<br><br>Sincerely,<br><br>xxx<br><br>Associate Dean, Office of International and Summer Programs |
| Text 1-7:<br><br>One Graduate Student's Reading Response to Course Readings | This week's articles tied in well with some of the discussions we had last week about the needs of struggling learners, because struggling learners are often from non-mainstream backgrounds, whether it's due to ethnic, socioeconomic, or cultural differences. As our country becomes more culturally diverse (or more accepting/accommodating of cultural differences that have existed for centuries) and academic standards become more standardized and rigorous, it is becoming more and more essential for educators to figure out how teach to a diverse community of students with varying abilities and needs. The first article seemed congruent with the books I have read on literacy learning for non-mainstream learners (and, you could argue, for all learners), that contextualizing literacy and giving students ownership of their literate life create more interested, empowered students. I enjoyed reading about Alfredo in the second article, it reminded me of some of the work that Dr. Coats has done with non-native speaking Mexican American children. She gave a talk in a course I took last semester and she emphasized that getting to know the family, their social practices, their lifestyles, etc. should drive pedagogy for "linguistically diverse learners". I was honestly thrilled to read John Baugh's article about the African American Vernacular. I am so sick of people treating those who speak AAVE and the language in general as less educated or inferior in some way. AAVE makes just as much sense as Standard American English, and many African Americans display amazingly creative language skills. If more educators were not only mindful but appreciative of the linguistic perspective that diverse students bring into the classroom, the classroom environment would be more inclusive and could foster relevant dialogue about literacy and language.<br><br>I also enjoyed reading about syntax, particularly because it is so controversial. I remember discussing syntax in an Introduction to Linguistics course that I took in undergrad and feeling challenged to explain why one structure is "better" than another, even though I implicitly knew which structure was more appropriate. |

| | I feel like I would most effectively teach syntax through exposure to literature and modeling. I am not sure I feel 100% confident in my ability to teach syntax after reading the chapter, but I do feel like I would possibly be better at identifying underlying issues in a student's writing and developing instructional strategies to help students understand the decision making process behind syntactic structure. Also, I am not sure I agree with the statement, "Clearly we do not learn to produce sentences by imitation or memorization because most of what we say is novel." I feel like one could argue that all our language practices are learned by modeling, mirroring, or whatever you want to call it. Can someone else perhaps shed light on what that sentence means? |
|---|---|

These writing samples differ not just in social purpose but also in the ways text is structured and language is used to achieve that purpose. They illustrate that academic writing exists on a stylistic continuum with many different varieties. The forms of academic writing vary across tasks, genres, disciplines, and contexts. Each of these forms has a specific purpose, is structured differently, and uses a distinct set of linguistic and other semiotic (e.g., symbol, diagram, picture) resources. As junior members of the academic community, you are expected to be able to read and write the kinds of texts, such as those presented in Table 1.1, that are integral to the social practices of disciplinary experts and inalienable from academic life.

## Envoi

Academic writing is an important tool for academic learning and disciplinary practices. Yet, many undergraduate and graduate students, as well as early career scholars, struggle with comprehending and composing academic and disciplinary texts. One major source of this struggle is language. In other words, it is unfamiliarity with the language patterns of academic genres, above and beyond a lack of deep understanding of the topics to be written about, that contributes principally to the difficulties that students and scholars like you experience in writing for academic purposes. In the next chapter, we will examine some of the key linguistic features that make academic writing at once academic and challenging.

## Reflection/Application Activities

1  Complete the survey in Appendix A to determine what your needs are for academic writing.

2 How would you define academic writing? Why is academic writing needed in academic learning or disciplinary practices? Do you think everyday writing is capable of fulfilling the same functions performed by academic writing in your discipline?

3 Select a sample of academic writing and a sample of everyday writing that address the same topic. Compare and contrast how language is used to present the topic across the two samples.

4 Reread the seven texts in Table 1.1. What linguistic features stand out in each text? To what degree do these features reflect disciplinary differences? In what ways do they reflect the different purposes of the texts?

5 Collect five to seven pieces of writing you encounter in your academic life. Examine their language patterns (words, sentences, text structure, visuals) and discuss with your peers the similarities and differences in the ways language is used in these samples. Can you provide a rationale for any similarity or difference in language use across these samples?

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## 2
# Linguistic Features of Academic Writing[*]

## Introduction

What is it about academic writing that makes it sound academic and at the same time presents challenges for novice writers? To answer this question, let's compare the two informational texts in Table 2.1.

Text 2-1 is an excerpt from an American middle school textbook (Horton et al., 2000, p. 579) and presumably written by a science expert. Text 2-2 is written by an American high school student whose first language is English in response to an explicit request to assume the role of a scientist author and write authoritatively about a familiar animal of personal interest. Both texts belong to the genre commonly recognized as report, presenting factual information about fish or alligators.

One major difference between the two pieces of writing has to do with the way information is structured. Text 2-1, where sentences are numbered for ease of reference, starts with a general statement that classifies fish as ectotherms (first sentence). This is then followed by a series of statements that clearly describe different body parts of fish (e.g., *gills*, *fins*, *scales*) and how they work. Each sentence in the text is linked to the other in some logical way. For example, sentence #2 begins with and says something about *gills*, a concept that is introduced in sentence #1. Sentences #3–5 continue the discussion of blood flow, a concept that is first mentioned in sentence #2. Similarly, sentence #7 (second paragraph) begins with and says something about *fins*, a concept introduced in sentence #6. Sentences #8–10 provide more information about how fins work. The third paragraph (sentences #11–13) says something about *scales*, with sentence #11 introducing the concept, sentence #12 defining the concept, and sentence #13 distilling what is presented in sentence #12 into *these protective plates* and then saying some more about it. This way of structuring information,

**Table 2.1** Two Sample Informational Texts

| Text 2-1 | [1] Fish are ectotherms that live in water and use gills to get oxygen. [2] Gills are fleshy filaments that are filled with tiny blood vessels. [3] The heart of the fish pumps blood to the gills. [4] As blood passes through the gills, it picks up oxygen from water that is passing over the gills. [5] Carbon dioxide is released from blood into the water. |
|---|---|
| | [6] Most fish have fins. [7] Fins are fanlike structures used for steering, balancing, and moving. [8] Usually, they are paired. [9] Those on the top and bottom stabilize the fish. [10] Those on the side steer and move the fish. |
| | [11] Scales are another common characteristic of fish, although not all fish have scales. [12] Scales are hard, thin, overlapping plates that cover the skin. [13] These protective plates are made of a bony material. |
| Text 2-2 | Alligators are almost like a really big lizard. I have been observing these incredible species for a couple months now. You have no idea how fascinating alligators and crocodiles are. I have some incredible pictures showing some information about alligators. |
| | Alligators are amphibious, they live on both land and water. They like to swim a lot, and usually stick just their head out. You could mistake their head for a log or tree if you didn't look hard. |
| | Alligators have lots and lots of teeth. A lot of their teeth hang out of their mouths like fangs. Their body is covered in scales, like a pattern almost. Alligators have webbed feet, from my research, I think that they have webbed feet to help them swim better. |
| | Alligators eat things like fish and other critters in the water and outside of the water. They are fierce creatures and can attack humans. I have heard stories of alligators drowning humans and biting them. If you ever turn from an alligator they are very fast so you need to run in zig-zags and confuse them. |
| | After all my months of research, I have learned so much about this awesome animal. What I have written is just a little of what I have learned. Alligators are so cool to research, I would recommend you researching them. There is still so much more I need to learn about alligators, they are such a mystery. |

illustrated more visually in Figure 2.1, facilitates presentation and elaboration of content, contributing to a tightly knit structure.

By some contrast, the information in Text 2-2 is presented in a much less tightly knit structure. Although the text consists of five paragraphs, with the first paragraph serving as an introduction to the topic and the last paragraph

1. Fish                     are ectotherms that live in water and use *gills* to get oxygen.

2. *Gills*                  are fleshy filaments that are filled with tiny *blood vessels*.

3. *The heart* of the fish      pumps *blood* to the gills.

4a. As *blood*              passes through the gills,

4b. *it*                    picks up **oxygen** from water that is passing over the gills.

5. **Carbon dioxide**       is released from blood into the water.

6. Most fish                have *fins*.

7. *Fins*                   are fanlike structures used for steering, balancing, and moving.

8. Usually, *they*          are                    *paired.*

9. *Those on the top and bottom*      stabilize the fish.

10a. *Those on the side*        steer

10b. and [*those on the side*]      move the fish.

11a. **Scales**             are another common characteristic of fish,

11b. although not all fish      have **scales**.

12. **Scales**              are *hard, thin, overlapping plates that cover the skin.*
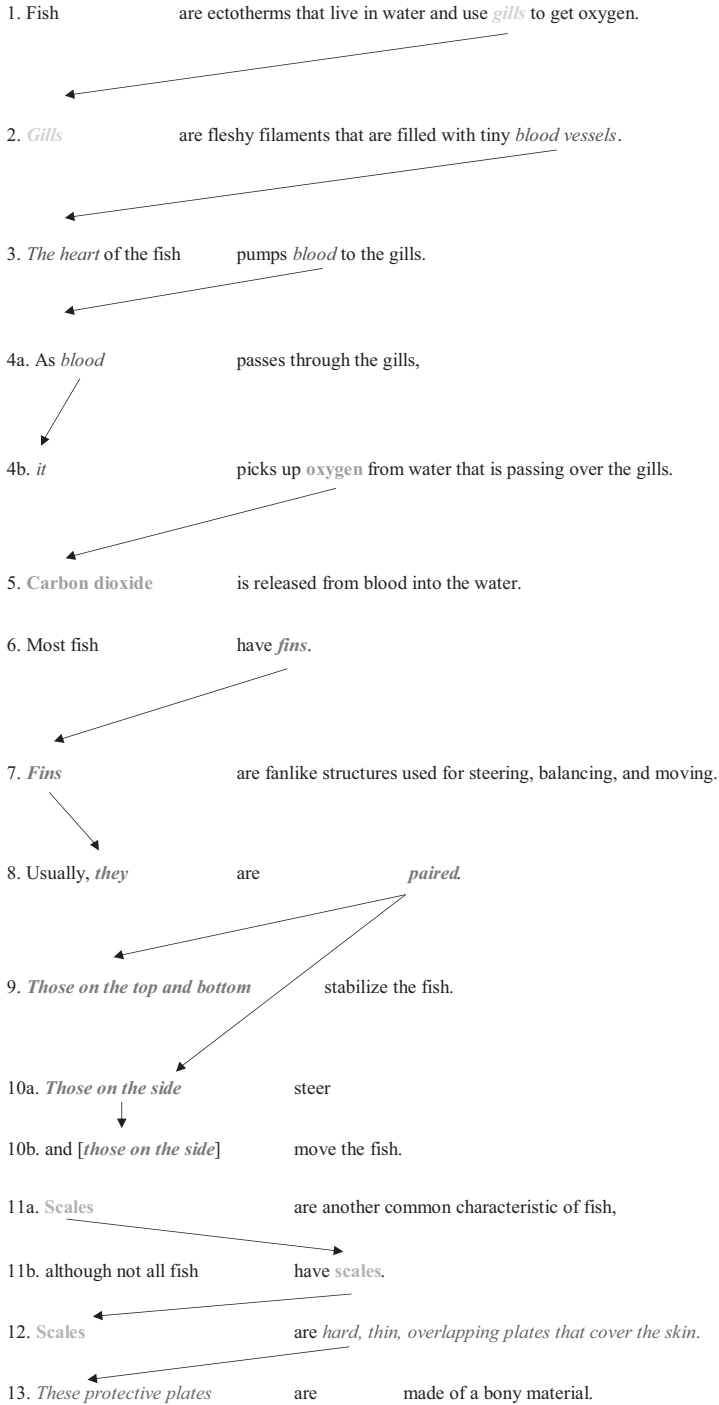
13. *These protective plates*      are           made of a bony material.

**Figure 2.1**  Information Structuring in Text 2-1