



ONE COMMON STRUCTURE OF INQUIRY-DRIVEN TEXT

Much of what we read in academic and professional contexts could be considered inquiry-driven text. It addresses some sort of question. Inquiry-driven text often follows a common four-component structure. This structure might be explicit, but it is often *implicit* – that is, not necessarily clearly indicated in the text itself. Even when the writer does not explicitly signal the structural elements of a narrative of inquiry that are described here, an active reader can often identify this structure and its components.

To discern this structure, it helps to recognize that text is not only as something that a reader reads but also something that a writer wrote. The writer set out to address some question or puzzle that interested the writer and that the writer thought would interest you. The writer was motivated to explore or examine it in some detail and was intent on communicating the results of that exploration to you, the reader. That is how the particular text came about. And that is why you are likely to find the following components – whether implicit or explicit – in the structure of an inquiry-driven text:

- 1. THE OBSERVATIONS HELD IN TENSION IN THE WRITER'S MIND**
- 2. THE WRITER'S UNRESOLVED AND GUIDING/GOVERNING QUESTION**
- 3. THE SUPPORTING/SUBORDINATE QUESTIONS EXPLORED BY THE WRITER**
- 4. THE WRITER'S ANSWER TO THE GUIDING/GOVERNING QUESTION**

These four elements create what we might call a **narrative of inquiry**:

Once upon a time . . .

The writer notices some apparent discrepancy, surprise, contradiction, puzzle, mystery, problem, oversight, or confusion, something didn't make sense to the writer, and that the writer thinks would not make sense to you.

"Huh?" the writer says. "What's going on here? How are we to understand this?"

The writer sets out to investigate that question by addressing a number of smaller questions.

The writer arrives at some answer to the main question or makes some headway toward an answer.

The end.

You will find it worth your time to try to identify these aspects of text. Doing so will help you get an overview of a text, articulate good questions with which to read, distinguish between the main point and the details and remember details in the context of the main point, summarize the text in your own words, and make useful notes.

1. THE OBSERVATIONS HELD IN TENSION IN THE WRITER'S MIND

The author was motivated to examine this topic in the first place because he/she experienced a tension between contradictory ideas or incompatible observations and was interested in resolving the tension. The author noticed some apparent discrepancy, surprise, contradiction, something that pointed to an apparent puzzle, mystery, problem, confusion, oversight, or mess, something that didn't make sense to the writer, and that the writer thought would not make sense to you.

Rich sites: To find the observations held in tension in the writer's mind, try skimming the beginning of the piece. The writer typically wants you to know what initially puzzled them so that you can follow the writer's thinking as they explore the topic. Sometimes the title of a piece itself communicates the puzzle that the writer began with. The preface or introduction and the first few paragraphs of the body of the text are also good places to look. Sometimes the internal organization of the piece reflects the initial tension: for example, each side of an issue might be addressed in a separate section with its own heading.

Indicators to skim and scan for: "But. . . ." "On the one hand, on the other hand" "One would think . . . and yet" "Which fails to account for" "Before...but now" "Here . . . but there" "Seems insufficient until we consider"

2. THE UNRESOLVED AND GUIDING/GOVERNING QUESTION

From the observations held in tension in the writer's mind follows an unresolved question. The question is unresolved in the sense that, when the writer began the investigation, the writer did not yet know the answer to the question. The question is guiding or governing in the sense that it guided or governed the writer's efforts in writing the piece and guides or governs the structure of the text. The main point of the text is the writer's answer to the guiding/governing question, the writer's summation of the headway the writer made in addressing the question.

Rich sites: To identify the guiding/governing question of the piece, skim the introduction or preface; scan the chapter headings or section titles; sometimes the last few paragraphs or the concluding section will also review the unresolved question that the piece was meant to address.

Indicators to skim and scan for: "?" (a question mark) "So how are we to explain" "Why" "The real question is" "What we must determine is"

3. THE SUPPORTING/SUBORDINATE QUESTIONS EXPLORED BY THE WRITER

To address the unresolved and guiding question, a writer typically explores a number of smaller questions. Supporting/subordinate questions often relate to the background or historical context; examples and illustrations; the component parts of an issue; arguments and counter-arguments; method and procedure; evidence and data. It is through the exploration of supporting/subordinate questions that the writer makes headway towards resolving the unresolved and guiding question.

Rich sites: Supporting/subordinate questions are often to be found implicit in the body of the text. Try turning each chapter title or sub-heading *into* a question.

Indicators to skim and scan for: "For example" "Some background" "One must first understand" "A possible counter-example is" "There is evidence to suggest"

4. THE WRITER'S ANSWER TO THE GUIDING/GOVERNING QUESTION

The writer came to some sort of conclusion as a result of his/her exploration. The writer discovered something, learned something, came up with some answer to the guiding/governing question. This is the main point that the writer wishes to convey to you – what he/she concluded.

Rich sites: The logical place to look for a statement of the conclusion or the main point is in the final few paragraphs or a "summary" section. But writers often state their conclusions up front as well, in the introduction or opening paragraphs. Chapter titles or section heading can also reveal the writer's conclusions, or at least indicate where these are to be found in the text.

Indicators to skim and scan for: "We can conclude that" "Therefore..." "In summary" "The best explanation seems to be" "Which explains" "So it is not . . . but . . . which accounts for" "What is clear is that"