

# TEKS TERMINOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING MODES OF DISCOURSE



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**Abstract:** As state and national curriculum standards continue to change, it is important for teachers to develop a common set of definitions for terms that appear in those standards. This column describes the four modes of discourse—narrative, descriptive, exposition, and persuasion—and links them to a variety of genres students can write in to compose authentic texts. In addition, the connection to author’s purpose is discussed. Sharing a common set of definitions lessens the confusion teachers face when implementing the standards.

**Keywords:** TEKS, modes, author’s purpose, genre

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The modes of discourse have a complicated history dating as far back as the 1820s. Use of the modes peaked in the 1950s in freshman composition courses and, based on textbook subject matter for those courses, has decreased ever since (Connors, 1981). Even though modes are an antiquated form of rhetoric theory, they are still prevalent in the TEKS (see Table 1) and the Common Core State Standards, as well as the current STAAR requirements. Because of their presence in current standards and assessments across the country, it is important for K-12 educators to understand what the different modes of discourse are and what emphasis should be placed on the difference between the modes. This column discusses the four modes as created by Alexander Bain in 1866 (Harned, 1985) (see Table 2), why the modes can be confusing to teach, and how they connect to author’s purpose.

## Mode Confusion and Author’s Purpose

Teachers search for texts that match their standards and texts on assessments. In their search, they struggle to find texts exhibiting all the features of one mode and none from the others. In current publications, authors frequently use multiple modes within one text, utilizing the structures that most effectively convey their purpose. Two examples of texts using multiple modes include *Knut: How One Polar Bear Captivated the World* (Hatkoﬀ, Hatkoﬀ, Hatkoﬀ,



Figure 1. 2016 example of eighth grade STAAR reading passage. This figure illustrates how an assessment text can utilize more than one mode to achieve the author’s purpose.

& Uhlich, 2007) and *Belly Up* by Stuart Gibbs (2011). The first is classified as juvenile literature by the Library of Congress, but it weaves expository and persuasive features throughout the narrative. The second is classified as a novel, yet the main character delivers exposition regarding his mother's research on gorillas. Authentic texts tend to blend modes according to the author's purpose (Brooks & Hubbard, 1905; Scott & Denny, 1909; Tanner, 1917), which can make teaching the modes to students quite difficult. In the TEKS, the lines between the modes appear rigid, but in authentic literature those lines can easily become blurred (Brooks & Hubbard, 1905).

Specific focus on text structures sometimes further muddies the waters. Teachers search for texts that follow specific patterns—sequential, cause and effect, problem and solution—yet find most expository texts use several of these techniques in tandem (Culham, 2016) with narrative anecdotes and description phrases or sentences.

Note this example in Figure 1. Clearly, the dominant mode is expository, but the author marshals several techniques to reach the purpose to “explain how scientists have tried to understand déjà vu but have yet to come to a definite conclusion” (TEA, 2016). The author has chosen to structure the third paragraph in an expository mode using a classic cause and effect approach. Paragraph four uses descriptive techniques to explain structures in the brain that might have caused the familiarity of déjà vu, while the fifth paragraph uses a sequential narrative approach to tell the story of how the researchers conducted their experiment.

Britton's question about using modes as an effective technique for teaching students to write seems to fit with literary analysis as well: Modes appear to not only be misunderstood, but also outdated frames for thinking about text (Britton, 1975). Modes don't live in the wild as pure forms, but as multidimensional discourses evolved from author's purpose. Kinneavy (1973) explained, “No theory of modes of discourse ever pretends that the modes do not overlap. In actuality, it is impossible to have pure narration, etc. However in a given discourse there will often be . . . [a] ‘dominant’ mode.” Yet,

Mode	Grade Level	TEK
Narrative	3 <sup>rd</sup>	(6) Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Theme and Genre. Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about theme and genre in different cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding. Students are expected to: (A) identify moral lessons as themes in well-known fables, legends, myths, or stories; and (B) compare different versions of the same story in traditional and contemporary folktales with respect to their characters, settings, and plot.
Narrative & Poetry	3 <sup>rd</sup>	(18) Writing/Literary Texts. Students write literary texts to express their ideas and feelings about real or imagined people, events, and ideas. Students are expected to: (A) write imaginative stories that build the plot to a climax and contain details about the characters and setting; and (B) write poems that convey sensory details using the conventions of poetry (e.g., rhyme, meter, patterns of verse).
Descriptive Narrative Poetry	6 <sup>th</sup>	(15) Writing/Literary Texts. Students write literary texts to express their ideas and feelings about real or imagined people, events, and ideas. Students are expected to: (A) write imaginative stories that include: (ii) a specific, believable setting created through the use of sensory details; and (B) write poems using: (i) poetic techniques (e.g., alliteration, onomatopoeia); (ii) figurative language (e.g., similes, metaphors); and
Expository	English I	(15) Writing/Expository and Procedural Texts. Students write expository and procedural or work-related texts to communicate ideas and information to specific audiences for specific purposes. Students are expected to: (A) write an analytical essay of sufficient length that includes: (i) effective introductory and concluding paragraphs and a variety of sentence structures; (ii) rhetorical devices, and transitions between paragraphs; (iii) a controlling idea or thesis; (iv) an organizing structure appropriate to purpose, audience, and context; and (v) relevant information and valid inferences; (B) write procedural or work-related documents (e.g., instructions, e-mails, correspondence, memos, project plans) that include: (i) organized and accurately conveyed information; and (ii) reader-friendly formatting techniques; (C) write an interpretative response to an expository or a literary text (e.g., essay or review) that: (i) extends beyond a summary and literal analysis; (ii) addresses the writing skills for an analytical essay and provides evidence from the text using embedded quotations; and (iii) analyzes the aesthetic effects of an author's use of stylistic or rhetorical devices; and
Persuasive	English III	(16) Writing/Persuasive Texts. Students write persuasive texts to influence the attitudes or actions of a specific audience on specific issues. Students are expected to write an argumentative essay (e.g., evaluative essays, proposals) to the appropriate audience that includes: (A) a clear thesis or position based on logical reasons supported by precise and relevant evidence, including facts, expert opinions, quotations, and/or expressions of commonly accepted beliefs; (B) accurate and honest representation of divergent views (i.e., in the author's own words and not out of context); (C) an organizing structure appropriate to the purpose, audience, and context; (D) information on the complete range of relevant perspectives; (E) demonstrated consideration of the validity and reliability of all primary and secondary sources used; and (F) language attentively crafted to move a disinterested or opposed audience, using specific rhetorical devices to back up assertions (e.g., appeals to logic, emotions, ethical beliefs).

Table 1. Examples of TEKS that correspond with the four modes of discourse

assessment paradigms and standards send teachers on a safari for a textual Dodo bird, an extinct form of discourse.

Modes can take on different slants depending on the author's purpose. These modes may appear as a rigid classification system, but in practice they should be fluid and can weave in and out of one another, borrowing elements as needed to achieve the author's purpose. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) advises the profession that “digital environments have added new modalities while constantly creating new publics, audiences, purposes, and invitations to compose” (NCTE, 2016, para 7). New forms of writing will continue to morph and evolve through new

Name of Mode	Description	Examples of Genres
Narrative	The purpose of the narrative mode is to tell a story which contains a clear, identifiable storyline and reflects the basic story elements of characterization, plot, setting, and theme. This writing mode uses sensory details to surprise, challenge, or entertain the reader as they “experience” the event (Culham, 2016).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• personal narrative</li> <li>• memoir</li> <li>• novels</li> <li>• short story</li> <li>• flash fiction</li> <li>• autobiography</li> <li>• biography</li> <li>• dramatic texts</li> <li>• narrative poetry</li> </ul>
Descriptive	The objective of this mode of writing is to vividly describe something—object, person, place, experience, emotion, situation, etc. The goal is to paint a clear image that evokes a sense of recognition and connection within the reader (Purdue OWL, 2013).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• journal writing</li> <li>• nature journals</li> <li>• character sketches</li> <li>• scientific experiment observations</li> <li>• found poems</li> <li>• lines or passages in the other modes of writing</li> </ul>
Exposition (Expository)	The expository mode is used to convey information or to explain an event, image, person, or thing. Effective expository writing should contain a main idea, supporting details and a conclusion. Expository texts should be used “to give directions, sequence steps, compare one thing to another, explain causes and effect, or describe problems and solutions” (Tompkins, 2017, p. 50).	<p><b>Informational</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• textbooks</li> <li>• news stories (not including opinion or editorial pieces)</li> <li>• scientific writing-lab report</li> <li>• FAQs</li> <li>• MLA- and APA-style research papers</li> <li>• resumes</li> <li>• reports</li> <li>• memos</li> </ul> <p><b>Procedural</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• recipes</li> <li>• furniture assembly directions</li> <li>• instruction manuals</li> <li>• how-to books, magazine articles, or newspaper columns</li> </ul> <p><b>Analytical</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• analytical essays may fall under this mode if they primarily use logic and reason to evaluate and explain a topic to the reader</li> </ul>
Persuasion (Persuasive)	The persuasive mode of writing asks students to investigate a topic by collecting, generating, and evaluating evidence. Afterwards, the writer must establish a position on the topic and then share personal reasons for their opinion in a concise manner. Facts, details, or examples should be used to convince someone to believe as you do. The writer should craft their essay for a particular audience and use persuasive strategies in their argument (Lane & Bernabei, 2001; Petit & Soto, 2002).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• editorial column</li> <li>• advertisements</li> <li>• book reviews</li> <li>• movie reviews</li> <li>• letter of recommendation</li> <li>• letter of complaint</li> <li>• cover letters.</li> <li>• an analytical essay may be persuasive if the writer uses diction and rhetorical devices to convince the reader of the writer’s point of view.</li> </ul>

Table 2. Descriptions and definitions of the four modes of discourse

literacies, blending the modes as needed. Teachers must be ready to respond with pedagogy and knowledge of variegated modes of writing that fit the diverse needs and purposes of students who will be writing for today and tomorrow.

### Finding a Solution: Focus on Author’s Purpose

The discrepancy between authentic texts and rigidly defined modes

of discourse present a challenge in writing pedagogy where teachers are expected to prepare a diverse set of writers how to write for diverse audiences and purposes. Instead of gearing the focus on the clear-cut lines of the modes, we encourage teachers to utilize a balanced literacy approach. By connecting reading strategies, such as Notice and Note (Beers & Probst, 2013), where students are taught to think critically about a text and the choices the author makes to achieve his or her purpose, with effective writing strategies,

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such as writing compositions that replicate texts used outside of the classroom (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2007), teachers can train students to critically analyze texts as writers (Bunn, 2011). Students can then use this analysis to generate authentic texts, utilizing examples of author's craft to achieve their intended purpose. Shifting the focus from stringent mode categories to how author's use elements of craft to achieve their purpose will more effectively prepare students for writing in their careers.

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