

# Compare, Contrast, Comprehend: Using Compare–Contrast Text Structures With ELLs in K–3 Classrooms

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Understanding text structures can benefit young learners, especially English-language learners.

It is a brisk October day in Chicago during my first year of teaching. I (Jennifer, second author) am seated at a small table in the back of the classroom, surrounded by the members of my on-level guided reading group. The six second-grade students in the group are getting ready to read a short nonfiction trade book about spiders that is a required text in our regular reading series. The book uses a straightforward compare–contrast text structure to present information about spiders, comparing and contrasting them first with insects and then with other arachnids, like scorpions. My goal in the lesson is to help children to both gain new knowledge about spiders and to understand the compare–contrast text structure that the book uses.

The children (all names are pseudonyms) speak to one another quietly in Spanish as they take out their reading logs and pencils. They begin to study the cover of the book, which features a large color photo of a spider in its web.

“Eww, arañas! [Eww, spiders!]” Lourdes whispers.

“Oh, I know. Spiders are gross!” her friend Daniela replies.

“Why do you hate spiders? Why do you think they are gross?” I ask the girls.

“‘Cause they are scary and yucky!” Daniela squeaks, shuddering.

“They on the wall in my room sometimes,” Lourdes says softly.

Benjamin chimes in and says, “Halloween!”

“Good thinking! You’re right.” I say. “We see spiders inside our houses and in other buildings sometimes. We also see spiders in decorations for Halloween.”

I ask the group what else they know about spiders. Several students share ideas about spiders being scary and creepy. I probe for more information about where spiders live, what they eat, and whether there are different kinds of spiders. I realize quickly that my students do not have the kinds of background knowledge about spiders that I expected them to have. We create a K-W-L chart on a piece of chart paper, making a short list of the things that we already know about spiders and a longer list of the things that we want to know. I then direct students to open the book and to read the first two pages. On these first two pages, the authors of the book compare and contrast the physical characteristics of spiders and insects. The first page describes these physical similarities and differences, and the second page presents labeled diagrams of a spider and an ant. When students have finished reading these pages, I ask them to talk about what they have read.

“All right, who can tell me one thing that they learned about spiders?” I ask.

The students are silent. Finally, Julio ventures, “Spiders are insects?” I return to the text, pointing to the two diagrams and saying, “Look, these diagrams can help us learn about spiders and insects.” We discuss the two diagrams, and students are able to point out and talk about the physical features of the spider and the ant. Then, I ask, “So, how are spiders and

insects different?” The students are silent once again. Finally, Daniela tentatively says, “The spider is big and the ant is little?” Julio whispers, “Spiders can bite you, but ants don’t bite you?” I ask “How are spiders and insects the same?” Lourdes looks down at the book and says “bugs.” “They are both bugs?” I ask. She nods. “Is that right?” I ask, looking at the group. “Are they both bugs?” The other students remain silent. The lunch bell rings, and the students line up and file out of the classroom, looking confused.

## What Went Wrong in This Lesson?

Why were the students unable to compare and contrast spiders and insects? The students in this group were considered on-level readers based on district and state-mandated assessments, were not receiving any supplemental support or instruction in reading outside of their regular mainstream classroom, and were able to read many of the narrative selections in the school’s adopted reading program without difficulty. Why did they struggle with this text? We believe that there were three main reasons. First, the students were most likely confused because they, like many other young learners, were unfamiliar with this informational text’s compare–contrast structure (Englert & Hiebert, 1984) and were not sure how to interpret the information about spiders and insects when it was presented in this format. Second, the students did not have a great deal of background knowledge about either of the two things (spiders and insects) that were being compared and contrasted. Third, the students in this group, like many students in Jennifer’s second-grade class, were English-language learners (ELLs), and had gaps in their English vocabulary—they literally may not have had the necessary vocabulary at their disposal in English to understand or express what they were reading or thinking during the lesson.

In this article, we will explore ways to address these three issues when using the compare-contrast text structure with ELL students in the primary grades. Specifically, we will explain the following:

- How to teach students to identify the compare–contrast text structure, and to use this structure to support their comprehension.
- How to use compare–contrast texts to activate and extend students’ background knowledge.

## Reflection Questions

- Do you agree that compare/contrast structures have particular value to English-language learners? Why?
- How are the vocabulary learning needs of ELLs similar to English-speaking children from high poverty homes?

- How to use compare–contrast texts to help students expand and enrich their vocabulary.

We begin with a brief discussion of the unique needs of ELL students, describing how they can benefit from understanding text structures, and explaining why we have selected the compare–contrast text structure for use with ELL students. We then describe ways in which teachers can teach ELL students to identify and use the compare–contrast text structure to aid their comprehension.

## Why Is Learning About Text Structure Important for Young ELL Students?

Even though ELL students bring a wealth of cultural and linguistic knowledge with them to school, research has shown that these students tend to lag behind their monolingual English-speaking peers in their levels of academic achievement (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). As discussed in the 2006 Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanahan, 2006), there is growing evidence that ELL students are often able to perform at or even above the level of their English-speaking peers in the areas of spelling and word recognition, but tend to struggle more in the areas of reading vocabulary and comprehension. In response to the discrepancy between monolingual English-speaking students and ELL students’ reading comprehension, several researchers have developed programs with the goal of boosting ELL students’ reading comprehension achievement (Echevarria et al., 2006; Klingner & Vaughn, 1996). Although these

programs focus on numerous important skills and strategies to help facilitate English reading comprehension for ELL students, they do not emphasize an essential element of comprehending English text: the structure of the text.

### ***How Does Learning About Text Structure Help Young Students?***

Why is it so important for young learners to understand the specific structures of informational texts? Research has shown that early experiences with and instruction in the use of informational texts support

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students' comprehension of these types of texts (Kletzien & Dreher, 2004; Williams et al., 2005) and can help prepare young students for future interactions with informational texts. When students do not have these early experiences with informational text, they may be more likely to struggle when they encounter such texts in the later grades. Unfortunately, many children in the early grades are exposed to very little informational text. Duke (2000) found that first-grade students attending schools that served low-income families re-

ceived even less exposure to informational texts than those in higher-income areas. In fact, in half of the classrooms in low-income schools that Duke visited, no informational texts were used at all.

At the level of rhetorical structure, informational texts differ from narrative texts in important ways (Weaver & Kintsch, 1991). Several different types of rhetorical structures are used in informational texts, such as cause-effect, problem-solution, and compare-contrast. These structures are significantly different from the rhetorical structure that is generally used in narrative texts. The number and variety of the rhetorical structures used in informational texts can create challenges for readers, particularly if they have not received explicit instruction in how to recognize and learn from these different structures.

## **Why Teach ELL Students the Compare-Contrast Text Structure?**

Although we believe that young ELL students would benefit from instruction related to many different expository text structures, we have chosen to focus on the compare-contrast structure for two reasons. First, research has suggested that, of the most common expository text structures, the compare-contrast structure may be one of the more difficult for students to navigate (e.g., Englert & Hiebert, 1984; Raphael, Englert, & Kirschner, 1986). Second, after young learners have a basic understanding of the compare-contrast text structure, teachers can use compare-contrast texts to help bridge the gap between what students already know (their background knowledge, their previous experiences with texts, and their cultural and linguistic backgrounds) and the new content teachers are presenting. By selecting texts in which information that is somehow tied to students' background is compared with new ideas, teachers can create opportunities for students to make meaningful connections between the new information and the "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) they bring from their own lives and experiences. We will describe what this type of lesson might look like, and how texts might be selected for such lessons. First, however, we will describe how to provide explicit instruction in the identification and use of the compare-contrast structure for ELL students in the primary grades.

## **Text Structure, Background Knowledge, and Vocabulary Acquisition**

### ***How to Teach Young Students to Identify and Use the Compare-Contrast Text Structure***

As we have described, one of the issues that young students often face when attempting to comprehend compare-contrast texts is that they are unfamiliar with this type of structure itself—they do not understand that they are being asked to recognize the similarities or differences between two or more things. Explicit instruction and teacher modeling are needed to show students how these texts work, and

to demonstrate strategies that they can use as they interact with these texts on their own.

One way to provide this kind of explicit instruction and modeling is to conduct a series of carefully organized lessons. For example, Singer and Donlan (1989) have explicated a method of providing instruction in reading strategies in which teachers model or demonstrate a strategy or process, then provide students with opportunities for guided practice, and finally allow students to practice the strategy or process on their own. Using this type of organization for instruction, a lesson introducing students to the compare–contrast structure might contain the following steps:

1. The teacher conducts a brief think-aloud activity, modeling the thinking that he or she does when reading a compare–contrast text. The teacher also records the similarities and differences between the things being compared and contrasted using a graphic organizer such as a Venn diagram. The students' role in this first think-aloud activity is to watch and listen to the model that the teacher provides. The teacher also points out features of the compare–contrast text structure itself, and creates a list of words or phrases in the text that students can look for to help them understand that they are being asked to compare and contrast two or more different things or ideas.
2. The teacher engages the students in a second think-aloud activity. At this stage, the teacher involves students by asking direct questions about the things or ideas that are being compared and contrasted in the text, and then supports students as they complete a graphic organizer either in small groups or as a class.
3. The teacher provides students with the opportunity to practice reading compare–contrast texts, either in small groups or individually. Students are instructed to use the same strategies modeled by the teacher during the think-aloud activities, and are given a graphic organizer to help them record and think about the similarities and differences between the things or ideas that are being compared and contrasted in the text.

A good book for conducting this type of explicit lesson is *What's the Difference? 10 Animal Look-Alikes*

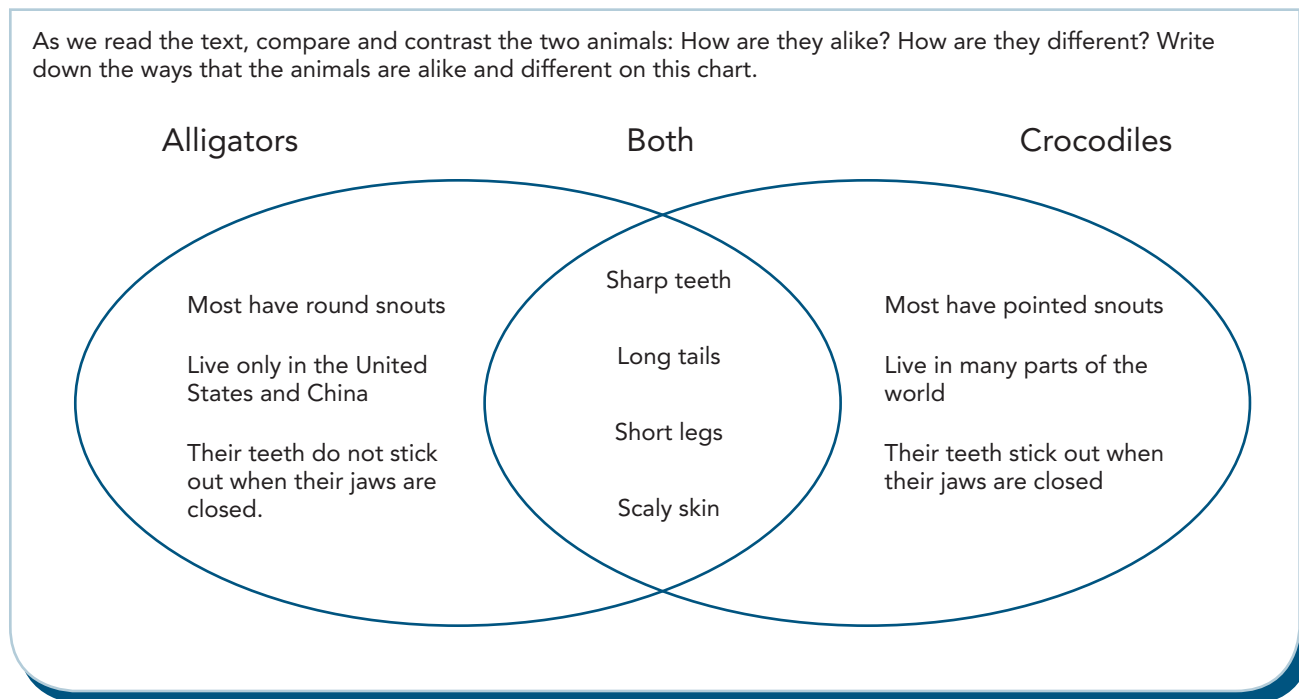
by Judy Diehl and David Plumb (2000). This book provides 10 simple, compare–contrast passages about pairs of animals that are similar in appearance (such as alligators and crocodiles). A sample of what a compare–contrast lesson using this book might look like is included in the following vignette.

Teacher: [placing the chart in Figure 1 on the overhead projector or other projection device, and holding up *What's the Difference?* (Diehl & Plumb, 2000) for the class to see] Today we are going to read a book about pairs of animals that look a lot alike, but are actually different types of animals. As we read, we are going to keep track of the ways that the animals are alike, and the ways that they are different. We are going to *compare* and *contrast* the two types of animals as we read. We will use charts like this [teacher points to Figure 1] to help us compare and contrast these animals.

For the first part of this lesson, your job is to watch and listen very carefully. I am going to show you what I do and what I think about when I compare and contrast. [Teacher reads the first paragraph of the book.] Wow! I've just learned that both crocodiles and alligators have short legs, sharp teeth, and scaly skin. I am going to write these three ways that alligators and crocodiles are alike on my chart, right here where it says "both." I know that these are characteristics that both of these animals have, and that make alligators and crocodiles alike. Now I am going to keep reading. As I read, I am going to see if I can learn more ways that alligators and crocodiles are alike, and ways that they are different. [Teacher reads the rest of the selection about alligators and crocodiles, continuing to model his or her thinking and to demonstrate the use of the chart.]

Teacher: I learned a lot about alligators and crocodiles from that passage. I noticed that the way the passage compared and contrasted alligators and crocodiles really helped me understand the ways that alligators and crocodiles are the same, and the ways that they are different. I also noticed that there were certain words and phrases that I saw

**Figure 1**  
**Compare–Contrast Chart for Teacher Modeling**



as I was reading that let me know that this was a compare and contrast passage. Let's go back to the passage now and see if we can find any words or phrases that let us know that the passage is comparing and contrasting two types of animals. [Teacher and students read through the passage again, and create a list of compare–contrast words and phrases that includes *both*, *similar*, *but*, *different*, *compare*, and *to tell apart*.]

Teacher: Excellent work! We will keep adding compare–contrast words and phrases to this list as we read today. Let's turn to another passage now, and see if we can find any compare–contrast words or phrases. [Teacher and students turn to the passage about butterflies and moths, and point out words and phrases that let them know that this is a compare–contrast passage. They add the phrase *instead of* to their list.] Now, let's get ready to read the passage together. [Teacher places Figure 2, the Venn diagram for butterflies and moths, on the projector.] This time, you are going to help me fill in

this chart as we read. We are going to use the chart to help us keep track of the ways in which butterflies and moths are similar, and the ways that they are different. [Teacher and students read the passage together and fill in the Venn diagram.]

Teacher: Now it is time for you to practice on your own. I am going to give each of your groups another compare–contrast passage. First, you will look through the passage to see if you can find any compare–contrast words and phrases. If you find any that are not already on our list, we will add them! Next, you will read the passage. As you read, you will use this Venn diagram [teacher places Figure 3 on the projector] to help you to keep track of the ways in which the two types of animals in the passage are the same, and the ways that they are different. Finally, your group will share what you have learned about the two types of animals with the class. [Students work in small groups, and share what they have learned.]

**Figure 2**  
**Compare–Contrast Chart for Guided Practice**

As we read the text, compare and contrast the two animals: How are they alike? How are they different? Write down the ways that the animals are alike and different on this chart.

Butterflies	Both	Moths
Are seen in the daytime	Lay eggs	Are seen in the night
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

**Figure 3**  
**Compare–Contrast Chart for Independent Practice**

As we read the text, compare and contrast the two animals: How are they alike? How are they different? Write down the ways that the animals are alike and different on this chart.

Animal 1 _____	Both	Animal 2 _____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Teacher: Now, let's review what we have learned today. What does it mean to compare and contrast something? What words or phrases can we look for when we read to help us know that we are reading a compare-contrast text? How can comparing and contrasting two different things help us to understand both of those things better?

### **How to Use Compare-Contrast Texts to Activate and Extend Students' Background Knowledge**

Once students have a basic understanding of compare-contrast text structures, teachers can select compare-contrast books that help students make connections between their background knowledge and experiences and the new content they are learning. These connections are particularly important for ELL students, who may bring different "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) to school than their native English-speaking peers, including different interests, experiences, and other types of background knowledge. Helping all students make connections between their own knowledge, interests, and experiences not only allows them to gain a deeper understanding of the new content, but also increases students' engagement and motivation (Jacobs, 2002).

Two books that could be used to help young students make these kinds of connections are *Are Trees Alive?* by Debbie S. Miller (2002) and *What's It Like to Be a Fish?* by Wendy Pfeffer (1996). In each of these books, students are asked to make connections between new content information (the structure of trees and the bodies of fish, respectively) and a familiar subject: their own bodies. In *Are Trees Alive?* the author uses simple language and detailed illustrations to help students learn about the parts of a tree by comparing them to parts of their bodies. For example, one page compares the sap in a tree to the blood in the human body, and asks students to look at the veins on the back of a leaf and then on the back of their own hands. In this way, students have the opportunity to make an immediate and concrete connection between what they are learning and themselves.

A third compare-contrast book that may be used to help students make connections between new content and their own experiences is *The Sun, the Wind,*

*and the Rain* by Lisa Westberg Peters (1990). In this book, Peters explains the difficult concept of the formation of a mountain by comparing and contrasting its formation with the building of a sand mountain by a young girl on the beach. Depending on students' prior experiences, this comparison may help them to make concrete connections between their own experiences building with sand and the formation of an actual mountain.

The three texts we have just described are all excellent resources for using the compare-contrast structure with young learners. Table 1 provides additional information about these texts, along with a detailed list of other compare-contrast books.

### **How to Use Compare-Contrast Texts to Expand and Enrich Young Students' Vocabulary Knowledge**

Although explicit vocabulary instruction is beneficial for all students, it is critical for ELL students to begin to "close the gap" in vocabulary knowledge that exists between them and their English-speaking peers (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; August & Shanahan, 2006; Carlo et al., 2004). Compare-contrast texts can be used to introduce and reinforce new and important vocabulary for young learners. Compare-contrast texts (as well as other informational texts) are often excellent sources of two particular types of vocabulary that are important for young students' literacy development. The first type is general academic vocabulary. This term has been defined and used differently by researchers and practitioners over time. Here, we are using it to describe words that students are unlikely to encounter in regular conversation with their peers, but that they are likely to find in many texts that they read in school in a variety of content areas (Hiebert & Lubliner, 2008). The second type of vocabulary is content-specific—words that are specific to the content being taught (and are unlikely to be encountered by students outside of readings or discussions about that particular content).

**Academic vocabulary.** Teachers can foster young students' general academic vocabulary development by drawing students' attention to the cueing words and phrases that are often included in compare-contrast texts, such as *unlike*, *similar to*, *resembles*, and *compared to*. Teachers can highlight these words

**Table 1**  
**Compare–Contrast Books for Use With Young Students**

**Books Organized Entirely Using the Compare–Contrast Structure**

Cummins, J. (2002). *Country kid, city kid*. New York: Henry Holt.

This upbeat book follows two children as they engage in everyday activities, comparing and contrasting their experiences and surroundings. The relatively simple language, the use of illustrations that support students' understanding of the text, and straightforward compare–contrast text structure make this book a great choice for teaching the compare–contrast structure to ELL students in the primary grades.

Diehl, J., & Plumb, D. (2000). *What's the difference? 10 animal look-alikes*. Toronto: Annick.

This book contains 10 compare–contrast passages about animals that are similar in appearance (such as tortoises and turtles). These passages are brief, clear examples of compare–contrast text structure, and lend themselves well to use in teacher modeling and guided practice with ELL students in the primary grades and beyond. Each passage is accompanied by colorful, detailed illustrations of the animal pairs that serve as an additional support for students as they compare and contrast the animal look-alikes.

Miller, D. (2002). *Are trees alive?* New York: Walker & Company.

This beautifully illustrated book explains how trees live and grow by drawing comparisons between trees and human beings, such as comparing a tree's bark to the reader's skin. These types of comparisons make this book a good choice for helping young ELL students to use the compare–contrast structure to make connections between themselves and the topic about which they are reading.

Peters, L.W. (1990). *The sun, the wind, and the rain*. New York: Henry Holt.

This book compares the formation and destruction of a mountain over millions of years to the building (and rebuilding) of a sand "mountain" by a child during a day at the beach. The book uses a very consistent, explicit compare–contrast text structure. At each stage of the development and destruction of the real mountain and the building of the sand mountain, the book presents side-by-side comparisons of the two mountains and the effect that time and weather have on each. This book could be used as a read-aloud to demonstrate compare–contrast text structure for very young ELL students, or as a guided reading text with ELL students in the upper primary grades.

Thomas, I. (2006). *Lion vs. tiger: Animals head to head*. Chicago: Raintree.

Lions and tigers "do battle" in this book, which compares and contrasts the two animals' strength, agility, and other attributes in order to determine which animal would "win" if they were to compete with one another. The attention-grabbing illustrations, paw-shaped text boxes with fun facts, and relatively simple language make this book a great choice for reluctant ELL students in the primary grades. This book is part of the *Animals Head to Head* series, which includes other animal match-ups such as *Alligator vs. Crocodile* and *Polar Bear vs. Grizzly Bear*.

**Books That Contain Good Examples of Compare–Contrast Text Structure**

Brimmer, L.D. (2004). *Subway: The story of tunnels, tubes, and tracks*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills.

The history and construction of mass transit systems in major cities around the world are described in this book. The book is not written in an explicit compare–contrast format, but the detailed descriptions of the different forms of transportation in the various cities lend themselves well to compare–contrast discussions and activities for ELL students in the upper primary and early middle grades.

Esbensen, B. (1994). *Baby whales drink milk*. New York: HarperTrophy.

Though this book is not written entirely in an explicit compare–contrast format, it explores the similarities and differences between whales and fish and between whales and other mammals. This book is a great choice for read-aloud activities with young ELL students, or guided reading activities with ELL students in the upper primary grades.

Keenan, S. (2007). *Animals in the house: A history of pets and people*. New York: Scholastic.

This book provides a very thorough and descriptive explanation of the history of domesticated animals. It also describes the role that different pets have played over the course of human history as companions and helpers of people. Due to the length and amount of detail provided in this book, it is probably most appropriate for ELL students in the middle grades.

Meadows, G., & Vial, C. (2003). *Grasshoppers and crickets*. Carlsbad, CA: Dominic Press.

This book provides detailed descriptions and illustrations of a variety of types of grasshoppers and crickets. Although the text is not written in an explicit compare–contrast format, the detailed descriptions provide an excellent opportunity for students to compare and contrast the different insects.

Pfeffer, W. (1996). *What's it like to be a fish?* New York: HarperTrophy.

This book, written for early primary students, compares and contrasts the bodies of fish and the bodies of humans. The book also provides information about how to take care of fish when they are kept as pets. Though the entire book is not written in a compare–contrast format, there are many clear examples of the compare–contrast structure that could be used to help children begin to identify and understand this structure.

Zoehfeld, K.W. (1995). *What's alive?* New York: HarperTrophy.

This book, also written for early primary students, explores what it means to be alive. The book compares and contrasts people to living and nonliving things.



and phrases in the compare–contrast text by displaying the text on an overhead projector and circling the words, by making a word bank of the cueing words and phrases found in a compare–contrast text, or by asking students to go on a word hunt to locate the cueing words. Teachers can also conduct brief think-aloud activities when reading compare–contrast texts aloud to students to model the use of these words as cues to let the reader know what the text is asking them to do. Finally, when appropriate, teachers can draw students’ attention to cognates that may exist between these highlighted words and phrases and students’ first languages.

**Content-specific vocabulary.** To teach content-specific vocabulary, teachers may choose a small number of content-specific words to focus on during their explicit vocabulary instruction. They can then highlight these words using visual aids, diagrams, or word cards. Figure 4 shows an example of what a word card might look like. In addition, teachers can support students’ understandings of targeted vocabulary words (including content-specific words) by providing clear, student-friendly definitions of the words during read-aloud activities using the texts (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Silverman, 2007). For example, in a lesson comparing killer whales and sharks, a teacher could define the term *dorsal fin* by comparing and discussing pictures of killer whales and sharks. Then

when the term comes up during a read-aloud of the text, the teacher could provide additional support for students’ understanding of the word by embedding a student-friendly definition into the read-aloud (such as “the shark’s dorsal fin, or the fin on the shark’s back”).

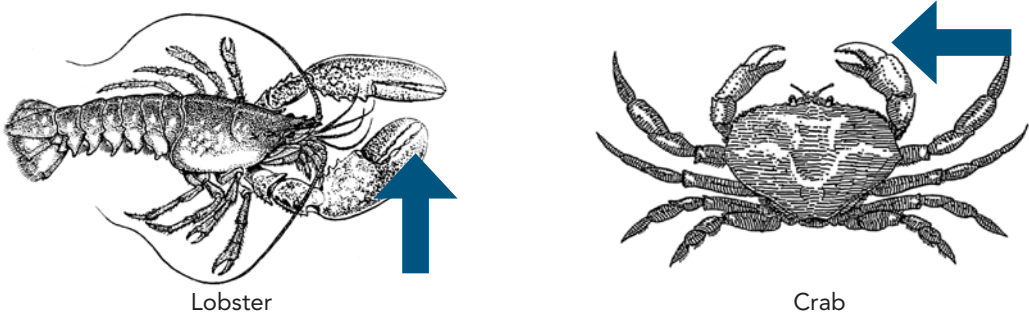
## Compare–Contrast Instruction Makes a Difference

Although we have focused on ELL students, all young learners can benefit from the strategies we have described. Explicit instruction on the compare–contrast text structure can help students understand this structure and support their comprehension of compare–contrast texts. This type of instruction can also help students learn the vocabulary that will help them to recognize this structure when they encounter it in the texts that they read. Once students understand this structure, compare–contrast texts can be used to help young students make connections between new content and their own background knowledge and experiences.

As we have discussed, this instruction is especially important for young ELL students. ELL students are even less likely than their native English-speaking peers to have the vocabulary needed to comprehend informational text, and so instruction that helps build

**Figure 4**  
**Word Card**

A word card like this could be used to teach both content-specific vocabulary and compare–contrast cueing words and phrases.



Lobsters and crabs are alike because they both have strong pincers.

both general academic and content-specific vocabulary knowledge is particularly critical for them. ELL students are also likely to draw on different types of background knowledge than native English-speaking students, and to come from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that may be different from that of either their peers or their teacher. Compare–contrast texts can be used both to build ELL students' background knowledge and to tap into the knowledge and experiences they bring to school.

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## Lesson Link

For a related lesson plan, visit [ReadWriteThink.org](http://ReadWriteThink.org) to find

► [Exploring Compare and Contrast Structure in Expository Texts](#)