Mini-Lesson Ideas for Expository Writing
Expository - Where do I begin?
(From 3-5 Writing: Focusing on Organization and Progression to Move Writers, Continuous Improvement Conference 2016)
Many lesson ideas taken from Boxes and Bullets, Personal and Persuasive Essays by Lucy Calkins

Anchor Chart: What is expository writing? (What do students know from the start? Add to the chart as new learning occurs.)
Thoughts about some key academic vocabulary to include: topic sentence, central idea, facts/supporting sentences, concluding statements, audience, purpose.

The anchor chart might include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is Expository Writing?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Explains something or shares information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Focuses on a topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Contains facts, details, examples, and explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Contains a conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It may be necessary to review the characteristics of Narrative Writing and compare this to Expository Writing.

Discuss Goals as a Writer - Use STAAR rubric and district-created rubric for setting clear writing expectations.

Focus and Coherence - to explain: topic sentence, central idea, supporting sentences
Organization - make sure each paragraph and sentence leads to next, concluding statement
Development of Ideas - support ideas with facts, details, and explanations with when, why, and how
Voice - select words and phrases that engage the reader and hear you on a personal level
Conventions - check grammar and sentence structure as well as spelling, capitalization, and punctuation
Share Exemplar Writing - Look at initial structure of essay. Discuss with students what makes this piece work. Add additional noticings to Anchor Chart, “What is Expository Writing?” Note: Continue to share exemplar writing samples frequently. Collect them from your students, or you can find scored writing samples with comments on the TEA website at http://tea.texas.gov/student.assessment/staar/writing/

Prewriting: Gathering Ideas - Students must have time to gather ideas to refer back to again and again for quick writes/flash drafts. These are seed ideas that can be developed into full pieces of writing. Gathering ideas may take the form of t-charts, lists, or webs. (See 4th Grade Mini-Lessons: Significant People/Places/Events Lists, The Best Times! The Worst Times!, Writing About an Artifact, Brainstorming Boxes, My Authority List, Pocket of Picture Topics, Lists from the Elementary Curriculum Website. Other ideas: lessons learned, things that make you laugh/cry, something you learned at school, favorite subject, favorite activity, etc.)

Mining Our Writing - We can't just gather the ideas and do nothing with them. Students need to have time to go back to their lists, webs, t-charts to mine their writing for ideas they want to develop further. This needs to be a part of the writing process. You need to explicitly show how you as a writer go back to your ideas and mine them for topics you want to write about. Students should be proficient at narrowing their focus (choosing a topic) but will need support in ways to collect information and formulate questions to further their thinking.

Developing a Strong Central Idea: Shared Writing - Students may need you to show how you develop a central idea. Demonstrate the following:

1. **Find** a territory or idea within your topic.
2. **Review and collect** relevant examples, ideas, information, and stories that could perhaps go into your essay.
3. Then, **ask** yourself, What do I really want to say about this topic?
4. **Reach** for the exact words and say the idea as a sentence. Think, Is this the general idea I want to explore?
5. Once, you have centered on an idea, try saying it again a bit differently. Do this until it feels exactly right and true. Explain that the central idea affects all of the other parts of the paper, so it is written in the center of the paper. (See below.) In each of the three quadrants, the students write a sentence that supports the central idea and then adds facts, explanation, examples, or details that FEED the supporting sentence. They are essentially elaborating on, or telling more about, the first sentence in this box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Write a sentence to support the central idea. FEED the supporting sentence with one or more of the following: Facts</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>Explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Details</td>
<td>Details</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Establish a central idea in a topic sentence and record it here.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Write a sentence to support the central idea. FEED the supporting sentence with one or more of the following: Facts</td>
</tr>
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<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Details</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important that students read the supporting sentences and the central idea to ensure the supporting sentences actually do support the central idea. They may find they need to revise their central idea or their supporting sentences. The final quadrant contains a concluding statement. Encourage the student to express the central ideas of the essay in different words. (After all of this is done, then the student can begin drafting.)

Verbal Rehearsal - Another part of a good writing system is having students use verbal rehearsal - collecting your ideas and thoughts across your fingers and digging deeper for details and evidence to support their reasons. Using partners, students sit side by side, or knee to knee to share their ideas. You might begin with a
topic everybody knows - like ice cream. Your central idea is “I love ice cream...” Show students a chart with the central idea I love ice cream written at the top. Add 3 bullets under the box. Have students come up with reasons they love ice cream. Students share with their partner as they walk their ideas across their fingers. (Model) Writing is thinking on paper. Collecting their ideas and thoughts across their fingers and digging deeper for details and evidence to support reasons can be done orally before writing begins. As students share their ideas, add them to the bullets on the chart as shown below.

I love ice cream.
- I love ice cream because you can add different toppings.
- I love ice cream because there are so many flavors.
- I love ice cream because it’s refreshing on a hot day.

Students will practice “writing” one body paragraph of their essay by sharing it orally with a partner. They will come up with 3 details or evidence to support the first reason, “I love ice cream because you can add different toppings.” (The first one may be done together as a whole class.)

I love ice cream.
- One reason I love ice cream is because you can add different toppings. For example, you can add chocolate sauce or butterscotch sauce. You can also add chocolate chips, nuts, and sprinkles. The toppings are a reason why I love ice cream.

As students work with a partner, listen in to the words they are using. Commend those who are using words such as for example, also, in addition, etc.

Essay Structure - Helping students with the structure of an explanatory/expository essay will help with the organization and cohesiveness of the essay as a whole. You might use Boxes and Bullets (see below) to show students a structure that works. (NOTE: Structure does not mean formula.)

I love ice cream.
- One reason I love ice cream is because you can add different toppings.
  - evidence/details
- Another reason I love ice cream is because there are so many flavors.
  - evidence/details
- Most of all I love ice cream because it’s refreshing on a hot day.
  - evidence/details

Moving Up and Down the Ladder of Abstraction - Students need to understand the moves a writer makes--how they go from big idea to detail, big idea to detail, big idea to detail. They need to have time to push their thinking about a topic, ways to stay longer with a topic. They need to learn to have a conversation with themselves. The teacher may want to display an anchor chart that shows ways they can push their thinking about a topic. (See example on the right.)

Flash Drafts - After practicing the entire essay with a partner, students should be able to write a 10-minute essay using the central idea, the reasons, and the evidence/details for each reason. (Purpose of a flash draft: Students need to be able to write freely, get their ideas on paper to build writing fluency. Collect a baseline essay early in this genre to know where students are, so that you can better support their learning needs in conferring and when planning your mini-lessons.)
Planning for Independent Essay Writing - Frame our essay (use “Boxes and Bullets”)
The teacher might have students write their boxes and bullets on a sticky note. The teacher collects the notes and looks them over to see which students are “on track” and which might need to meet with the teacher.

It is best to meet with students before they get too far along in the process of writing their essay. It will help relieve frustration for students as well as the teacher if the confusions are taken care of early in the writing process.

Examples of sticky notes (Boxes and Bullets) that might require a conference with the teacher:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My mom is my best friend</th>
<th>My mom is my best friend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● because she is a good cook</td>
<td>● because she buys me things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● because she dresses well</td>
<td>● now that I am older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● because she works hard at her job</td>
<td>● when I am at home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reasons do not support/match central idea. Reasons are not parallel.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My dad is my best friend and my mentor</th>
<th>My mom is my best friend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central idea is two-pronged. Writer would need to prove both parts and gather reasons to support both.</td>
<td>● because she is fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● because I have a good time with her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● because she listens to me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reasons are overlapping.

Show Me - Students need practice in writing the details, facts, explanations for their reasons. Show me when, why, and/or how - time to compose mini-stories as support that are angled to support their central idea. They need time and practice finding the specifics that bring their piece of writing to life.

Organization is Key - We learn the pattern of success through exposure to real texts and our analytical discussion of them. Genre and form are guideposts, not a rule or formula but a pattern of success that might be helpful in communicating with readers. Graphic organizers may help students. (See below.) Some things to consider when organizing ideas: evaluating strength of each reason to ensure a logical order, deciding if stronger reason goes first or last, extending ideas (push their thinking).
Read Another Example - This is a draft that Lucy Calkins wrote about her father.

My Father Is My Most Important Teacher
Original Version
One reason my father is my most important teacher is because he taught me to love work, for example, he took me sailing at the end of summer and told me he was happy vacation was ending. When I asked him why, he said, “I miss work.” Seeing him so happy to go to work made me realize that work can be wonderful. Another example that shows this is every Christmas morning, my Dad set off for the hospital carrying a waffle iron, ready to make waffles for all the doctors and patients. Dad wasn’t sad to go. I asked him why he didn’t send someone else and he admitted he liked going to work. “It’s my hobby,” he said. I wanted to grow up and find work that I loved as much as he loved his. My dad taught me to love work.

Organizing for Drafting - Organization is key before writing a cohesive draft!! Students look at their graphic organizer and think about their organization.

1. Reread each piece of evidence.
2. Look for parts that match your reason.
   Underline parts that match.
3. Decide if you need to cut or revise.

Questions:
Does each bit of material develop the central idea and reason?
Does the material as a whole provide the right amount and right kind of support?

Building a Cohesive Draft - Transitions are words or phrases at the beginning of sentences that help to move the writing forward or to help put information in sequence (progression). Transition words help organize and glue or cement the different sections of the essay together. Each time we come to a new section of the essay, we use transition words to let readers know that it is a new section.

Transitions are used when moving from one reason/example to another OR when adding on within an example/reason. Anchor charts with transitions may be displayed for students.

- Sequence your ideas in a logical way.
- Use effective transition words, connecting one idea to the next.
- Repeat key words from central idea.

When you want to give a new example or reason...
One example that shows this is...
For instance...
One time...

When you want to add on within the reason or example...
Another example that shows this...
Also...
In addition to...
Revising for Powerful Beginnings - Mini-lessons on powerful beginnings may need to be taught for explanatory essays. In expository/explanatory writing for STAAR, students cannot take too long to introduce their ideas. With 26 lines, they will need to get in and then go on with the rest of their essay.

Revising for Thoughtful Endings - Mini-lessons on thoughtful endings will need to be taught for explanatory essays. The endings should leave the reader with a final thought that moves them forward and grows fresh, new, interesting thinking. The ending may 1) connect the end to the beginning, 2) give the reader a final thought, 3) connect to the reader, or 4) end with a surprise.
Revising Reminders - Once students have written their first drafts, it is time to revise their essays. The revising questions for each writing trait (below) might help guide students as they revise. These may also be the focus for a whole class mini-lesson or a one-on-one-conference with students.

**Organization** - Is my central idea clear? Are all of my ideas strongly related to my central idea?

**Focus and Coherence** - Is my supporting information focused? Is it in a logical order? Do I have sentence-to-sentence connections that help the essay flow? Have I included enough supporting information?

**Development of Ideas** - How can I support my ideas with strong examples? Are my facts, details, and explanations specific and well chosen?

**Voice** - Have I included interesting facts and ideas and described them in an engaging way? Do I use purposeful and precise words that show I care about my topic?

When looking at *Organization* and *Focus and Coherence*, students may need to remove the structures they used in the beginning such as “My first reason,” “My second reason,” “Another reason,” etc. These are okay for students to use to keep the essay organized but need to be removed or changed during the revision process.

**More Revising** - Here are some other ideas for students to think about as they revise and as teachers confer.

| • eliminate extraneous information that doesn’t move the reader along (including repetitiveness) |
| • clear up any confusions (look for non-qualifiers, like the word ‘it’ or nonspecific pronouns, ‘they,’ etc.) |
| • use just the right amount of words (Am I too wordy?) Get in and get out. |

**Editing Questions (Conventions)** - Have I checked for appropriate spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar and usage?

**Conferring with Students** - Feedback should be given to students all along the way. Research by John Hattie (*Visible Learning*, 2008) and others shows that one of the methods of teaching that accelerates a learner’s progress more than almost anything is the provision of feedback. If learners receive feedback that contains both acknowledgement of what that learner has begun to do that really works and suggestions for next steps toward an ambitious but accessible goal, then learners progress in dramatic ways. In writing instruction, one-to-one conferences and small-group instruction provide crucial opportunities for the teacher to offer strong, individualized feedback and instruction.

Providing feedback and instruction to students requires that the teacher makes time to read student work and talk individually or in small groups to learners. So the first challenge is not necessarily figuring out what to say in a conference or a small group; it is figuring out how to scaffold and build student independence so that responsive teaching is even possible.