Nonfiction Inquiry: Using Real Reading and Writing to Explore the World

Nonfiction is the genre most likely to spur children's passion and wonder for learning.

Stephanie Harvey

Several years ago, I boarded a plane from Denver to Salt Lake City. To my great fortune, I was seated next to an eight-year-old boy named Craig, an unaccompanied minor in airline-speak, who was heading to Salt Lake to spend the summer with his dad. I asked him if I could help him in any way, but as a seasoned flyer, he graciously declined. I explained that I would likely be sleeping by the time the wheels were up, but not to hesitate to wake me if he needed anything. Some time later, a hand shaking my shoulder jolted me out of a deep sleep. "Look outside, look outside," a voice implored. "Isn't it beautiful!" As I craned my neck to peer out his window, the majesty of the snow-capped peaks stunned me. Craig immediately pelted me with questions: How tall were they? When would the snow melt? What was our altitude? Which ones were fourteeners (mountains over 14,000 feet tall)? Although I'd made this flight many times, I had never taken time to contemplate the Rocky Mountains from 35,000 feet in the air. We spent the remainder of the trip checking out individual peaks, estimating their height and marveling at their beauty. How lucky I was to have ended up next to Craig, a boy whose curiosity wouldn't let him sit quietly and

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soak up this beauty without sharing it with a stranger.

The real world is rich, fascinating, and compelling. If I didn't believe this, I'd cover my head with my pillow when the alarm invaded my sleep each morning and give the snooze button a workout every five minutes! Not a day goes by that I don't encounter something different, wonder about something that baffles, meet someone interesting, learn something new, or see something beautiful. For me, the real world is the realm that most intrigues. And nonfiction is the genre that best lets me explore and understand the real world.

I once attended a workshop in which Howard Gardner scribbled a line of small dark letters on the overhead projector that emerged as the question, "What is the purpose of education?" He asked us to take a moment and comment in our notebooks.

I was confounded. How could he ask such a thing—to take a few minutes to address the complexities of my twenty years in education? Could he be serious? I twitched nervously, shifting from side to side in my chair, the auditorium silent except for pens skittering across paper. What were they writing? I couldn't imagine. The task overwhelmed me. Ten minutes later when Gardner solicited comments, my notebook lay bare on the table in front of me.

Volunteers from around the room shared admirable, altruistic accounts of the purpose of education: to develop good citizens, to instill compassion, to give unlucky individuals the chance at a better life. After a dozen or so responses, Gardner acknowledged the merit in this spectrum of responses and then mentioned that for him the purpose of education was *to enhance understanding.*

Gardner recounted the story of his daughter, an A student in physics with exemplary grades and very high percentile test scores, who went to Brown University for her freshman year in college. Several weeks into the term she called home, as so many freshmen do when shaken to their foundation by one thing or another. Her voice stammered as she told her dad that she didn't understand physics. "What do you mean you don't understand physics? You have always been a superior physics student," Gardner responded incredulously. She explained that although she had little trouble with the math and could complete the assignments error free, she did not *understand* physics. She'd discovered her lack of understanding when her professor had flipped a coin and asked the class to explain in writing the physics involved in coin tossing. She couldn't do it. Years of high marks and stratospheric SAT scores did not guarantee understanding.

I have never forgotten Gardner's simple response to what appeared to be such a complex question. Not one audience member mentioned the word *understanding* when addressing the purpose of education. This was a watershed moment for me. We all have them as educators; this was one of my biggest. Gardner (1991) discusses teaching for understanding in *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach.* I devoured it within days of the workshop and began to teach with the goal of enhancing my students' understandings. As a result, my instruction is forever changed. From that point on, I revised my lesson plans and followed a two-column chart headed on the left with the words *My Instruction* and on the right with the words *How This Helps My Students Understand.* If I couldn't match the two, I rethought my instruction.

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Vito Perrone (1994) says, "Our students need to be able to use knowledge, not just know about things. Understanding is about making connections among and between things, about deep and not surface knowledge, and about greater complexity, not simplicity" (p. 13). Nonfiction enhances our understanding. It allows us to investigate the real world and inspires us to dig deeper to inquire and better understand. As teachers we can practice guiding principles that lead our students to deeper understanding and learning. We can:

- Share our own passion and wonder about the real world. Passion and wonder are contagious.
- Surround kids with compelling nonfiction of every type and form.
- Match the reading to the writing.
- Emphasize short text for nonfiction reading and writing instruction and practice.
- Engage in the inquiry process ourselves—modeling instruction, showing our thinking, demonstrating how we do things, and giving our students time to practice.

- Build in long blocks of time for students to explore their thoughts and questions, to read text of their choice, to research topics of interest, and to practice reading and writing strategies.

Share Our Own Passion and Wonder

Einstein once said, "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious"—a powerful statement considering the source (cited in Calaprice, 1996, p. 12). It is said that as a young boy Einstein had trouble getting to sleep at night. His mother would kiss his forehead, murmur "sleep tight," and switch off the light. Later, just before she was about to turn in for the night, she would crack the door to check on him, only to find him lying on his back, eyes wide and staring at the ceiling. One night she tiptoed in and sat at the edge of his bed. "Why can't you sleep?" she asked him.

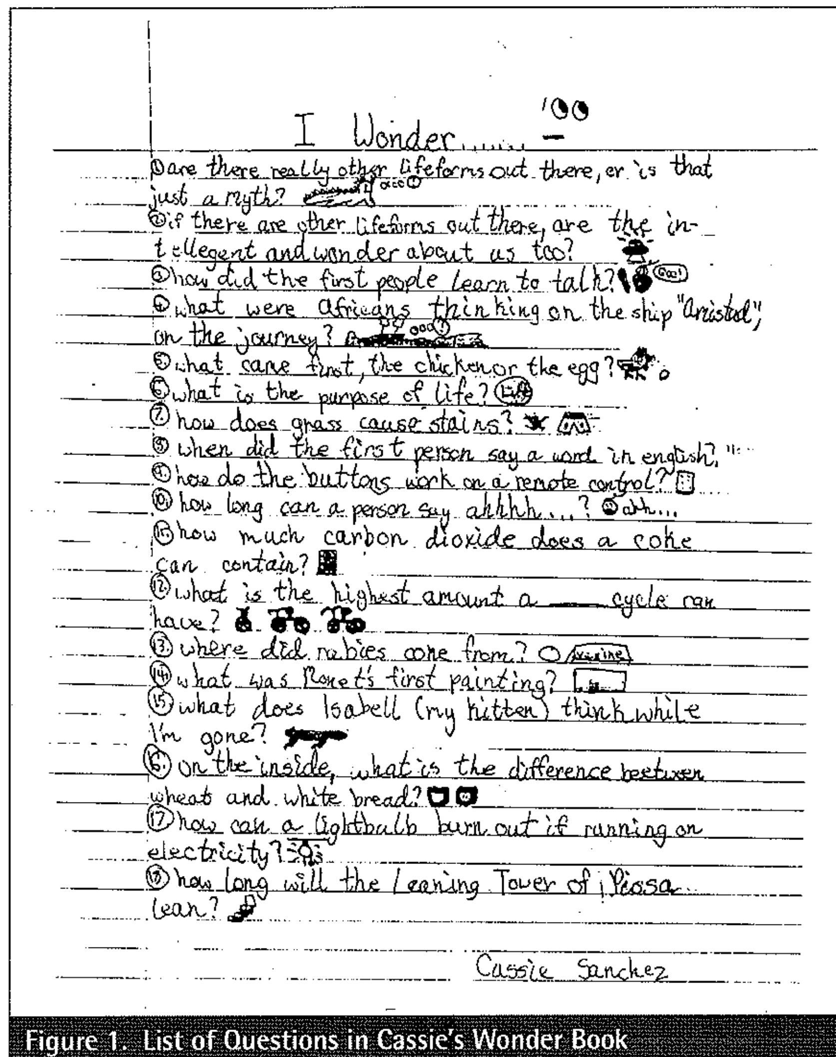
"I'm thinking," he answered.

"About what?" she queried.

"I'm wondering where the light goes."

"What light?" his mother asked.

"When you switch off the lamp each night, where does the light go?"



I Wonder......

1. are there really other lifeforms out there, or is that just a myth?
2. if there are other lifeforms out there, are the intellegent and wonder about us too?
3. how did the first people learn to talk?
4. what were africans thinking on the ship "Amistad" on the journey?
5. what came first, the chicken or the egg?
6. what is the purpose of life?
7. how does grass cause stains?
8. when did the first person say a word in english?
9. how do the buttons work on a remote control?
10. how long can a person say ahhhh...? ahh...
11. how much carbon dioxide does a coke can contain?
12. what is the highest amount a cycle can have?
13. where did rubies come from?
14. what was Monet's first painting?
15. what does Isabell (my kitten) think while I'm gone?
16. on the inside, what is the difference between wheat and white bread?
17. how can a lightbulb burn out if running on electricity?
18. how long will the Leaning Tower of Pisa lean?

Cassie Sanchez

Figure 1. List of Questions in Cassie's Wonder Book

If his mother were anything like me, she probably said, "Jeez, where do you think it goes? It goes out, Albert. The light goes out. Now get to sleep."

The story intrigues me, especially because Einstein's curiosity prompted him to solve one of the greatest mysteries of our physical universe. Curiosity comes in all forms. Kids have a natural sense of wonder. They wonder about all sorts of things; nothing is too trivial. Fifth-grader Cassie knows this and keeps a list of questions she contemplates in a nonfiction notebook her class calls a Wonder Book (see Figure 1). Knowledge expands because of wonder. Now, when a student asks me a question that I can't answer or that I might deem superfluous, I think of Albert's insomnia and respond, "Let's see if we can find out."

Questions are at the heart of teaching and learning. Outside of school, no one reads about or studies a topic or concept they don't already wonder about. Questioning is the strategy that propels learners forward. Primary teachers know this. They live in classrooms brimming with questions. Kindergartners, for instance, blurt questions out fast and furiously, often without raising a hand. Frankly, if we didn't delight so in their youthful enthusiasm, they might drive us crazy with the sheer number of questions that burst forth—How do birds fly? Do animals talk to each other? Where did the cowboys go? Sadly, by fifth grade, kids' questions practically disappear. By middle school, kids often expect teachers to have the questions while students supply the answers.

Traditionally, schools have focused on answers, not questions. Real questions still occur infrequently in most classrooms (Busching & Slesinger, 1995). Allington (1994) notes, "School questions are different from the questions we pose outside of school. In school, we ask

known-answer questions—we interrogate. Outside of school we ask authentic questions—questions we do not know the answer to but are interested in having answered" (p. 23). The majority of questions in schools are *assessment questions,* questions teachers and publishers ask to see what kids know. Assessment questions have a legitimate place in schools. But do we have to ask so many? The far more important questions are the *sincere questions,* questions that we don't know the answers to, authentic questions that people really wonder about. Sincere questions engage learners, cure dreaded diseases, unlock the mysteries of the universe, and maybe will secure world peace.

In *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out,* a collection of anecdotes, Nobel Prize–winning physicist Richard Feynman (1999) recollects that getting the Nobel was a pain in the rear. He said, "I do physics not for the glory of the awards and prizes, but for the fun of it, for the sheer pleasure of finding out how the world works, what makes it tick" (p. xiv). We want our kids to learn for the fun of it, for the pleasure of finding stuff out. We need to help them find their passions, nurture their wonder, and give them opportunities to explore their own sincere questions so that they will engage in inquiry and dig deeper.

Passion and wonder are contagious (Harvey, 1998). When I walk into a nonfiction room, I know it. It's rarely quiet, because readers can't sit still when they read about the gleaming, razor-sharp teeth of the great white shark or the day-to-day risks of the Underground Railroad conductor. They feel compelled to lean over, grab their friends, and share the compelling photograph of the Komodo dragon. Nonfiction offers the widest range of topics, subjects, people, issues, events, and thoughts to explore.

We know that learners learn best those things they know, care, and wonder about. We can model our own passion for real-world topics and share our thoughts and questions, as well as the thoughts and questions of others such as Einstein and Feynman. Nonfiction breeds passionate curiosity; passion leads to engagement. If, at the year's end, we can look at our class and say with conviction that our kids are passionately curious learners, we are on the right track.

Surround Students with Compelling Nonfiction

A number of years ago, a group of teachers and I recognized that we virtually ignored authentic nonfiction reading, writing, and research in our classrooms. We knew we needed to focus more on real-world reading and writing, so we began a nonfiction study group on how to better teach the genre. A half-dozen teachers met weekly and read a range of articles and books, learning from the writers. Christine Duthie (1996) taught us how she used nonfiction to nurture the natural sense of wonder in first graders and how the genre transformed their experience into "an exhilarating journey of discovery" (p. 29). We learned from Eileen Burke and Susan Mandel Glazer (1994) that nonfiction materials and publications were the ones most likely to foster wonder and "keep curiosity alive and well" (p. 7). William Zinsser's (1998) *On Writing Well* gave us much to think about, including the notion that we need to surround kids in authentic nonfiction if we want them to read and write it well.

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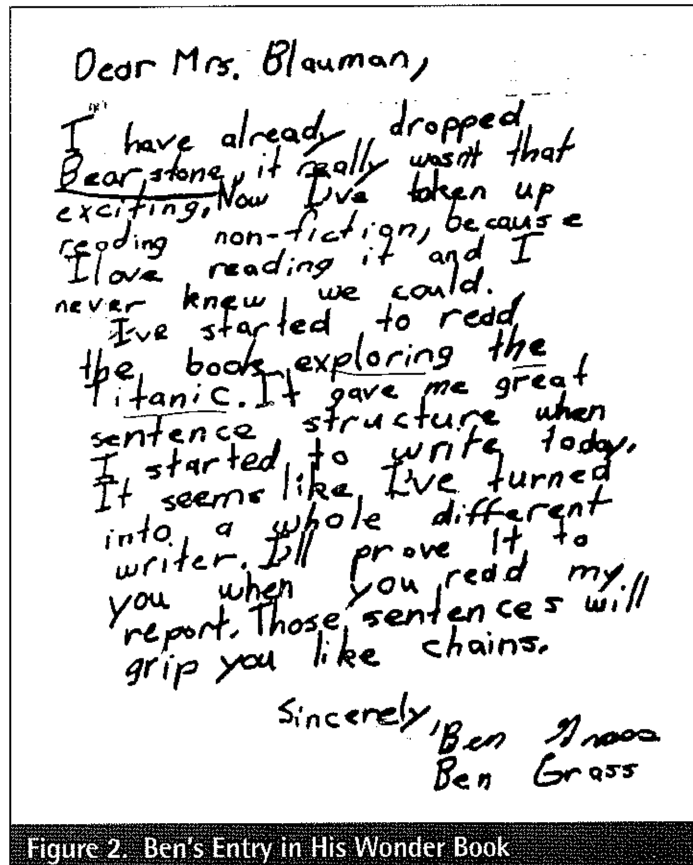
As we scanned our classroom libraries, we unearthed loads of fiction and mounds of picture books, but little nonfiction. In an effort to get a handle on the exact contents of our classroom libraries, we conducted a classroom book audit. To assure that we had the widest range of reading material available for the many different kids in our classrooms, we audited our classroom libraries for a spectrum of categories such as genre, multicultural themes, short text forms, and so on. Then we focused on ways to fill obvious voids. In this case, we discovered that over 80 percent of the books in our rooms were fiction, and the nonfiction books were primarily for reference: textbooks, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and the like.

Outside of school about 80–90 percent of the reading adults do is nonfiction—newspapers, magazines, memos, manuals, and directions, as well as informational trade books (Zinsser, 1998). It didn't take rocket science to recognize a lack of connection between the classroom and real life. We needed to get more trade nonfiction into our classrooms so the kids could read it, appreciate it, learn from it, and write it more authentically. We headed to our school and public libraries and packed our rooms with nonfiction of every size and shape. And kids started reading the genre like never before.

Shortly after this infusion of nonfiction text into his classroom, fifth-grader Ben wrote about his enjoyment of reading nonfiction in his Wonder Book (see Figure 2).

Reading is about appetite and diet. Ben needed opportunities to read nonfiction. We never told Ben he couldn't read nonfiction, but we hadn't shared it in the same way we shared fiction in the classroom. We could picture him on the playground in one of those round, cement tunnels clandestinely reading a piece of nonfiction. We inadvertently turned Ben into a closet nonfiction reader! We hadn't surrounded him in the genre or used it effectively in our classroom. It's not enough to simply provide access to books and materials. We need to:

- read nonfiction aloud.
- explore nonfiction to satisfy curiosity.
- use nonfiction for instruction.
- read nonfiction to find out information.
- read nonfiction to do research.
- skim nonfiction to answer questions.
- show particular features of nonfiction—the titles, headings, bold print, graphs, charts—and point out the purpose of these text elements.
- read nonfiction to write it well (Maxim, 1998).



Dear Mrs. Blauman,

I have already dropped Bearstone, it really wasn't that exciting. Now I've taken up reading non-fiction, because I love reading it and I never knew we could. I've started to read the book exploring the Titanic. It gave me great sentence structure when I started to write today. It seems like I've turned into a whole different writer. I'll prove it to you when you read my report. Those sentences will grip you like chains.

Sincerely, Ben
Ben Grass

Figure 2. Ben's Entry in His Wonder Book

When I was in elementary school, my favorite part of the day came when my teacher sat down in her rocking chair and read aloud to us. Curled up in the reading corner I encountered Bartholomew Cubbins, the Sailor Dog, and Black Beauty. Teachers know the value of reading aloud, and the teachers of my youth read me all sorts of books and stories. But I can't for the life of me remember a teacher reading a piece of informational text out loud. Doiron (1994) notes that we need to balance our read-aloud programs with fiction and nonfiction. "Balancing books does not preclude the powerful role that fiction plays in reading aloud but will give nonfiction an equal opportunity to act as a model for students, help them develop schema for the genre, and motivate them to read" (p. 619).

We read aloud young adult magazines such as *National Geographic for Kids, Kids Discover, Time for Kids,* and *Jr. Scholastic.* We read aloud compelling nonfiction trade books on every imaginable topic and in a variety of forms. We read books like Jim Murphy's (1995) *The Great Fire,* the amazing story of the Chicago fire, Peter Lourie's (1999) *Lost Treasure of the Inca,* an adventure story about the author's search for Incan gold, William Miller's (1994) *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree,* which offers a glimpse into the writer's early years, Kathryn Lasky's (1994) *The Librarian Who Measured the Earth,* based on the life of Eratosthenes, the world's first librarian, and K. M. Kostyal's (1999) *Trial by Ice,* the story of Ernest Shackleton, who fought valiantly to save the lives of the men on his Antarctic expedition.

We turn to a variety of sources for nonfiction recommendations including books, journals, and Web sites. Kobrin's *Eyeopeners* (1988) and *Eyeopeners II* (1995) and Harvey and Goudvis's (2000) *Strategies That Work* contain annotated lists of nonfiction books covering a wide range of topics and content areas. *Book Links: Connecting Books, Libraries and Classrooms,* a journal of the American Library Association, is filled with annotated nonfiction bibliographies organized by grade level. The annual NCTE Orbis Pictus Awards for the best nonfiction children's book of the year can be found

at <www.ncte.org> (keyword *Orbis Pictus*). Web sites such as <www.nationalgeographic.com/kids> and <www.americaslibrary.gov> teem with interesting nonfiction resources.

Kobrin (1988) believes that no genre is as versatile as nonfiction to match children's interests and needs. Whether they are interested in math, science, or history, whether they are struggling or proficient readers, whether they are young children or young adults, nonfiction offers the best shot at capturing their interest and getting them to read.

Information comes in many forms. Most nonfiction doesn't need to be read cover to cover. We can check out the table of contents and choose what interests us. We don't have to read nonfiction sequentially. We can start in the middle to find the information we desire. We don't even have to read much text. We can get plenty of information from the photographs, captions, charts, and maps. We teach the features and text elements of nonfiction. We scan nonfiction text with our students and search for the supportive features common to the genre: headings, subheadings, bold print, graphs, diagrams, and so forth. Students search for these features in their independent reading texts as well.

Information comes in many forms. Most nonfiction doesn't need to be read cover to cover.

After finding authentic examples of nonfiction features and discussing their purpose, we co-construct a two-column classroom chart headed *Feature* on the left-hand side and *Purpose* on the right. Together with the kids, we write our working definition of the feature in the *Feature* column and then describe its purpose under the *Purpose* column. The chart is a work in progress that we add to over the course of the year to develop an awareness of nonfiction elements and enhance our understanding of the genre.

Feature	Purpose
Bold print	Make you stop and pay attention
Caption	Describe the photograph
Table of contents	Divide the book into sections or chapters
Heading	Tell you what the following text is about
Subheading	Break the text up into smaller parts
Distribution map	Show where something occurs

For years, we chose nonfiction reading material solely based on content. When the time came to study space, for example, we stopped at the library and asked the librarian to gather all the space books and send them our way. Now when we choose nonfiction books to share with our kids, we make our choices based on three criteria:

- Content—We choose books that relate to our curriculum or topic of study, that we are passionate about, or that we suspect will capture our kids' imaginations.
- Text features—We choose books that present text features such as maps, graphs, charts, headings, and subheadings, which support readers as they read for information.
- Writing quality—We choose books that are written in a compelling, visual way that engages readers and offers strong models for writing.

We don't just stop by and ask the librarian to gather the books. We join her to search for the most powerful nonfiction trade books. Doiron (1994) notes that educators are discovering what children have known for a long time—reading for information can be fun. "Children are naturally curious, with a great thirst to know about the world around them. They are not bored by facts, data or information; they are only bored by how such information is presented or what they are expected to do with it" (p. 618). We need to surround our students with nonfiction text, fill them in on the elements of the genre, point out the ways to acquire information, and encourage them to explore the real world through this lively genre.

Match the Reading to the Writing

Zinsser (1976) reminds us that we can best support nonfiction writers by matching the reading to the writing. Read strong nonfiction to write it well. Our nonfiction study group began to think about nonfiction writing and quickly recognized that we were not modeling nonfiction writing with authentic, well-written examples. We had assigned many content-area school reports—the usual suspects of state reports, country reports, and animal reports, but they seemed more suited to curing insomnia than engaging readers. We must surround kids with well-written interesting nonfiction, so that they learn to write it well.

Remember state reports? Each student drew a state out of a hat. Audible groans reverberated from unfortunate souls who drew states that offered no connection or allure. Cheers burst from the lucky kids who drew hot spots like California,

Alaska, or Hawaii. The teacher assigned a list of subtopics that bore a striking resemblance to the structure of a *World Book* article. Then each student rushed to the library to check out a lettered-volume, the over-represented N's stumbling over one another to get to the encyclopedia stacks first. Kids read the encyclopedia and perhaps a book from a series on states and then spent hours rearranging words to avoid plagiarizing, a terrifying offense that might land them a dawn execution. Traditional school research reports relegate students to the status of mere "word movers" who essentially rearrange information and report it (McKenzie, 1995). I learned as early as the fourth grade that if I moved the object to the subject and the sub-

Nonfiction Notebooks: AKA Wonder Books

Many writers and researchers keep notebooks to record their day-to-day thinking. We ask kids to keep nonfiction notebooks (typically spiral notebooks with lined paper) to hold their thinking related to their nonfiction reading, writing, and inquiry. A group of fifth graders named these notebooks Wonder Books to reflect their inquisitiveness about the real world and their understanding of the genre of nonfiction. The Wonder Book provides a record of student thinking and learning as they engage in nonfiction inquiry through writing, responding, and notetaking.

Teachers keep their own Wonder Books. They model entries and share true-to-life narratives where the author or main character records and reflects on an interest, topic, or concept, merging their own thinking with the text. Several possibilities for launching Wonder Books include:

- *Sanctuary* by Mary Ann Fraser
- *I'm In Charge of Celebrations* by Byrd Baylor
- *For Home and Country: A Civil War Scrapbook* by Norman Bolotin and Angela Herb
- *A Desert Scrapbook* by Virginia Wright-Frierson

At the beginning of the year, we encourage students to study anything that interests them and to record their thinking in their Wonder Books. Kids also record their responses to curricular topics and content-area reading in Wonder Books.

Ultimately, Wonder Books include:

- Passions and interests
- Questions and wonderings
- Current thoughts
- Topic lists
- Project ideas
- Observations
- Responses to nonfiction reading
- Notes on reading content
- Notes on topics of interest
- Notes on field research
- Notes on inquiry projects
- Bibliographic information on books that were read
- Lists of helpful resources: Web sites, readings, conversations, etc.
- Outlines, webs, and other graphic organizers
- Interviews
- Letters
- Poems and rhymes
- Drawings, sketches, cartoons, and doodles
- Maps, charts, graphs, and diagrams
- Photographs, pictures, and postcards
- Assorted artifacts
- Quotes from books, writers, teachers, other kids
- Models of beautiful language and well-written nonfiction
- Drafts of nonfiction writing

Wonder Books are perhaps the most important tool for real-world nonfiction investigation as kids read, write, and engage in inquiry. They give kids an opportunity to reflect on their learning about the real world and merge their thinking with the ideas and information they have read and studied. Wonder Books help to make the learning their own.

—**Stephanie Harvey**

ject to the end of the sentence, I beat the plagiarizing charge. Unfortunately, the bulk of my thinking was focused on how to avoid plagiarizing rather than on content and craft. A week or two later, my state report was turned in to await FDA approval as a surefire cure for insomnia.

Authentic nonfiction writing is rich and full of voice. We teach our students that their best writing teachers are the authors they love, not the encyclopedias they need for beginning research.

We've all read those deadly school reports that sound the same year after year, only differentiated by the student's name in the upper corner. The truth is, I not only wrote these reports in school, but I also assigned them as a teacher. Unless we are training our young writers for a career in encyclopedia writing, we need to search for better models of authentic nonfiction.

Authentic nonfiction writing is rich and full of voice. We teach our students that their best writing teachers are the authors they love, not the encyclopedias they need for beginning research. Freeman (1991) points out that we need to share a range of nonfiction trade books when we teach nonfiction writing. Children can become familiar with a variety of nonfiction authors and their individual writing styles and then use these books as models for their own writing. We share the works of such writers as Jean Fritz, who makes history come alive, Stephen Kramer, whose investigations into tornados and avalanches rattle our senses, and Russell Freedman, who takes us inside the heads of remarkable people such as Abe Lincoln and Crazy Horse. When we use well-crafted nonfiction text as the model, nonfiction writing comes to life.

One sure-fire way to help kids notice high-quality writing is to make a transparency of a well-crafted nonfiction piece and place it on the overhead projector next to a copy of a textbook or encyclopedia article of similar content. We might compare an article from *National Geographic Magazine* with a textbook article on the same topic. We might compare a page out of a nonfiction trade book with the encyclopedia. We might use the striking lead in Russell Freedman's (1997) Newbery award-winning *Lincoln: A Photobiography,* which begins as follows: "Abe Lincoln wasn't the sort of man who could lose himself in a crowd. After all, he stood six feet four inches tall, and to top it off, he wore a tall silk hat. His height was mostly in his long bony legs. When he sat in a chair, he seemed no taller than anyone else. It was only when he stood up that he towered above other men" (p. 1). After reading and discussing the rich writing with our kids, we can show a copy of an encyclopedia page on the same content: "Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States, was born on February 12, 1809 near the present town of Hodgenville, Ky" (Angle, 1963, p. 652). The difference is immediately obvious, and kids pick up on it even though they may never have noticed it before. We follow by inviting them to comb through pieces of authentic nonfiction text—trade books, newspapers, and magazines—searching for examples of rich nonfiction writing to share with the class. Authentic nonfiction is visual and compelling; no one would publish it if it were dry, dull, and formulaic. Our kids need to know this.

Emphasize Short Text

I advocate more extensive use of short text to teach reading and writing. Schools are overfocused on chapter books. I generally have a good novel or good nonfiction trade book on my bedstand, but for every long book I complete, I read mounds of short text—feature articles, essays, poems, editorials, manuals, book reviews, recipes, professional journals, letters, e-mail, etc. The bulk of the reading material housed in our classroom libraries is long fiction, whereas much of the reading we do outside of the classroom is short nonfiction. Short text is:

- well crafted with vivid language and striking illustrations and photographs.
- self-contained and provides a complete set of thoughts, ideas, and information.
- focused on issues of critical importance to readers of varying ages.
- easily read aloud, giving a common experience to everyone in the room.
- easily reread for deeper meaning.
- accessible to all kinds of readers; the length is less likely to intimidate.
- a realistic model for writing.
- authentic and prepares kids for real-world reading (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000)

The world is rife with rich nonfiction. We need to live in a way that lets us find it. We keep our antennae up in this pursuit by scanning newspapers, magazines, and trade books for short pieces to use for instruction. *National Geographic* is a

favorite of mine, but I never actually *read* one growing up. Although their yellow spines filled our bookshelves, and I spent hours pouring over the luscious photographs of far-off shores and deep dark jungles, I was fully grown before I *read* my first *National Geographic*. When I did, I found the words to be as striking as the pictures.

As a lifelong reader of newspapers and magazines, I read with scissors in hand, madly snipping articles to use for literacy instruction and

> Much of our responsibility when teaching is to make explicit what is implicit.

practice. We clip and laminate rich pieces of nonfiction writing to share with young writers to help them notice the craft as well as the content. We use short text to support our students as they practice reading strategically. We make transparencies of short text pieces and read them closely, reasoning through the text together with kids, showing how we activate background knowledge, ask questions, determine importance, and synthesize information as we read. We choose short text for the following reasons:

- Content—We search for pieces that support and build background knowledge of the content we are teaching. We also look for text that focuses on themes and concepts we have explored or want to explore, and we jump on text with content we suspect will engage our kids.
- Strategy Practice—We search for short pieces that push our thinking, demand that we question, visualize, infer, or synthesize to acquire information and understand.
- Features—We look for pieces that contain nonfiction features that signify importance, such as headings, bold print, italics, captions, so that we can show authentic examples of these elements, discover their purpose, and better understand the genre.
- Format—We choose different types of nonfiction short text such as newspapers, magazines, and picture books and notice how they compare.
- Form—We select a variety of writing forms including essays, letters, feature articles, columns, to expose our students to the different characteristics of each form.
- Text Structure—We clip different short text forms to examine different cue words and text structures. For instance, when a sentence begins with the word *but*, we teach our students to expect a change. We find articles framed around a specific text structure, such as comparing and contrasting ideas and information, and we look at them to better recognize and understand the structure next time.
- Writing Quality—We search for delicious writing. Our best writing teachers author the nonfiction texts we read.
- Perspective—We choose articles that might spark differences in opinion to enhance classroom discussions.
- Surprising Information—We notice unexpected information. I recently read a headline that said "Misunderstood Sharks, Not Feeding Machines." I couldn't resist reading and clipping it, because I always read that sharks were instinctive feeding machines, and now this surprising, new twist! Kids love surprising information (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

This collecting of short text is contagious. Portalupi and Fletcher (2001) remind us: "Nonfiction shows up everywhere and in lots of different forms. If students are alive to the possibilities, their options will broaden once it comes time to write" (p. 14). Teachers share short text examples with their class and with each other to build bigger, better collections. Kids clip striking articles, too, and pass them around the class. I used to find short pieces and articles that captivated me but tossed them away. Now, I save and file them even if I am not sure how to use them. Somehow, sometime, I find a purpose for them.

Engage in the Inquiry Process Ourselves

Throughout their childhood, I made a practice of telling my kids that it was okay to make a mistake, as long as they didn't make the same mistake over and over again. And I believed this, until it dawned on me that when it came to delivering instruction, I continued to make the same mistake over and over again. Each time I thought about why a lesson was ineffective, I could only conclude that it was due to one of two reasons: either I hadn't modeled explicitly enough what I was doing, or I hadn't given my students enough time to practice. When we cut the corner on modeling and guided practice, instruction suffers. So much for making the same mistake over and over.

Much of our responsibility when teaching is to make explicit what is implicit. Explicit instruction means that we explain the strategy to be taught and show learners how we use it, and how we think when we read and write. For too long in education, we told students what to do without showing them how. Our instruction always involves modeling and practice in one form or another. We may use charts, we might put text on the overhead and reason through it together, or we might

Informational Magazines for Children

Click <www.cricketmag.com> is a theme-based magazine for ages 3–7 on history, math, the arts, science, and technology. It contains dynamic photographs and illustrations, an activity insert, and a Web-based Parent's Companion.

Muse <www.cricketmag.com> is a visually striking nonfiction magazine for ages 8–14 with short informative articles, interviews, and photo essays on high-interest topics from current events, science, history, animals, the environment, technology, nature, and the arts.

KIDS Discover <www.discover.com> offers a wealth of information for ages 6–12 for themed issues on high-interest topics such as robots, blood, icebergs, and Martin Luther King Jr. Striking photographs accompany the articles along with puzzles and projects.

Cobblestone <www.cobblestonepub.com> focuses on American history for ages 9–14 through lively, historically accurate articles, visual images, primary documents, maps, timelines, and activities. *Cobblestone* also publishes a range of other magazines for children including *Footsteps* (African American history), *AppleSeeds* (social studies for young children), *Calliope* (world history), *Faces* (world cultures and geography), and *Odyssey* (scientific issues and discoveries).

ASK (Arts and Sciences for Kids) <www.cricketmag.com> is a new themed journal for ages 8–11 that explores the ways in which artists, inventors, and scientists discover ideas. Each issue integrates the arts and sciences on a particular topic through articles, a serial story about a group of young explorers, puzzles, activities, and lively art and photos.

Dig <www.digonsite.com>, a publication of the Archaeological Institute of America, encourages kids ages 8–13 to discover what's new about everything old on topics such as the pyramids, deep-sea artifacts, and dinosaurs. Each themed issue contains articles, projects, comics, puzzles, photographs, and news features on the work of archaeologists.

Ranger Rick <www.nwf.org/rangerrick>, produced by the National Wildlife Federation, aims to inspire a greater understanding of the natural world for ages 7–12 through colorful photographs and illustrations, fiction and nonfiction stories, and news on nature and wildlife from around the world.

National Geographic World <www.nationalgeographic.com/world> covers outdoor adventures, sports, foreign geography, science/technology, and natural history for ages 9–14. Special features include posters, games, activities, and puzzles.

—Kathy G. Short

show our thinking through reading and thinking out loud.

We do most everything we assign. If we assign an essay, we write one. We research and write inquiry reports from start to finish with kids. We show how we choose topics. We show how we ask questions and how we read for information. We use the overhead projector to show students how we organize our thinking for writing and how we draft and revise so students can see our process as thinkers, readers, and writers.

We demonstrate every step in the learning process for several reasons. First, if it is important enough for them to do, it is important enough for us to do. Second, we provide the instruction through modeling. We stay slightly ahead of the kids so they will see the next step when they are ready to move on. We can't imagine how to teach the process if we didn't show how. Third, we learn so much when we undertake these inquiry projects. I've written about the country of Tibet and the plight of Tibetans, the role of women in World War II, the Australian box jelly fish (the most toxic creature on earth), and the physicists who worked on the Manhattan Project. I know much more than I would have if I only assigned these projects rather than studied, researched, and written about them myself. When we take the time to show kids how, we all enhance our understanding, acquire information, and reap big rewards in the process.

Build in Long Blocks of Time for Students to Think, Question, Read, and Write

If we want our kids to engage in deep, meaningful inquiry and to understand what they learn, we need to build in long blocks of time for

students to explore topics of interest, read, write, and ponder about the world. Allington and Johnston (1994) found that thinking takes time. The most effective teachers understood that important things and big ideas are hard to teach in 20-minute chunks. Effective teachers integrated instruction and devoted large blocks of time to studying topics and concepts. Students were given time to "experiment with, think through, discuss, and refine their understandings" (Preller, 2000, p. 7).

We strive to create a culture of thinking in our classrooms (Perkins, 1993). Thinking, understanding, and engagement flourish in classrooms that foster real-world inquiry. Time and choice support students to enhance their understanding and acquire knowledge. When we build in time to share our passion and encourage sincere questions, surround our kids with compelling nonfiction, match the reading to the writing, model how we learn, and give students long blocks of time to delve into and practice with text of their choice, kids come alive and learning explodes. Nonfiction is the genre most likely to spur enthusiasm. The real world has something for everyone. As Beverly Kobrin (1990) said, "Life is nonfiction."

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