

Motivating and Engaging K-5 Writers: Teaching the Construction of Nonfiction Texts

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Abstract

As attention to the instruction of nonfiction writing intensifies in educational settings, educators need instructional strategies that inspire and engage elementary students as they envision and create nonfiction texts. In this chapter, the most up-to-date writing research for young writers is explored in accordance with the rigor and demands of today's teaching environment. To highlight the uniqueness of nonfiction texts, the subgenres of nonfiction are addressed individually. Important to the construction of nonfiction texts is explicit instruction on the distinct structures and features of this genre, as well as the use of mentor texts as models of the author's craft; models that illuminate the reading-writing connection. Additionally, strategies designed to increase motivation are discussed, empowering students to develop agency and independence in their writing.

Identified as one of the “eight most critical literacy topics in the current professional environment” by Cassidy and Loveless (2011), the topic of informational nonfiction texts has recently begun to receive much attention (p. 16). Additionally, research on writing instruction for elementary students indicates the need for teachers to understand how to teach the numerous and unique genres of writing. Addressing the particular challenges of nonfiction writing construction, Dorfman and Cappelli (2009) argued, "It makes sense if we want our students to write good nonfiction, we need to immerse them in the work of good nonfiction authors" (p. 3).

Teachers of young writers have clamored for research-based strategies for teaching the numerous subgenres of nonfiction writing as well as ways to motivate and engage students throughout the writing process. This chapter addresses the most up-to-date writing research for teaching primary writers in accordance with the rigor and demands of today's teaching environment. Important to the construction of nonfiction texts is explicit instruction on the unique structures and features of this genre, as well as the use of mentor texts as models of the author's craft; models that illuminate the reading-writing connection. Additionally, strategies designed to increase motivation are discussed, empowering students to develop agency and independence.

Uniqueness of Nonfiction Reading and Writing

Nonfiction reading and writing are broad encompassing genres that must be taught with authentic purpose. Kletzien and Dreher (2004) pointed out that as adults we primarily read and write informational texts. Informational texts that engage young learners need to be a central part of every learner's school experience beginning in preschool (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007). Stead (2002) questioned the rationale for an overemphasis on narrative writing in the primary grades, instead calling for teachers and students alike to become more familiar with all the different writing genres and how they work. Only recently in our schools are we seeing an intentional instructional shift from fiction reading and writing to nonfiction reading and writing. However, simply exposing our students to nonfiction texts and nonfiction writing prompts is not enough. Both Casbergue and Plauché (2003) spoke to this, stating, "when children read and write expository texts without the knowledge they need, their reading comprehension and writing development is hampered" (p. 286). It's time to move from exposure to nonfiction reading and writing in the classroom toward opportunities for the application of nonfiction reading comprehension through nonfiction writing.

So, how do we impart the knowledge to which Casbergue and Plauché referred? According to Stead and Hoyt (2011), we need to begin by teaching our students "to gain control over the unique structures, language, and visual features that comprise the heart of nonfiction texts" (p. 2). Turning our attention to the "uniqueness" of these text types fosters the understanding of the purpose of nonfiction texts and what it means to be an author of nonfiction.

Nonfiction Text Types

According to the *Common Core State Standards* (2010), "students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts" (p. 10). Equally important, students must be able to transfer what they have read into written products of understanding. Knowing that each piece of nonfiction writing is written for a specific purpose helps students approach their own writing with intent. Stead and Hoyt (2011) categorized the primary purposes of nonfiction writing as the following: to inform,

to instruct, to narrate, to persuade, and to respond. Correlated to an author's purpose for writing, they composed a comprehensive list of text types organized by purpose which are condensed and listed in Table 1.

Stead (2002) summed up the importance of explicitly teaching children the purpose for and the ways in which to write the various text types when he posited the following: “If we want children to become able writers for many different purposes, we need to dive deep and give our children comprehensive learning engagements so that they can develop deeper understanding about how different text types work” (p. 14).

Table 1

Nonfiction Writing Purposes and Text Types

Purpose	Text Types
Inform	Explanatory report, informational report, descriptive report, observations log, news article, question-and-answer, poem, photo with captions, sign, letter, list, e-mail message, note, postcard, interview, speech, presentation
Instruct	Recipe, science experiment, instructions, manual, directions, instructions, health procedure, safety procedure, itinerary, schedule, rules, steps in a process, map with directions
Narrate	Personal narrative, narrative nonfiction, eye-witness account, news article, magazine article, nonfiction storyboard, autobiography, biography, diary, journal, historical account, photo essay, observational log, retell, narrative poetry
Persuade	Letter, advertisement, poster, essay, brochure, book review, movie review, speech, debate, poem, argument
Respond	Analytical analysis, evaluative analysis, reflective analysis, critical review, author study, character study, essay answer, test prompt response, note, letter, e-mail

Note: Purpose and Text Types are from Stead and Hoyt (2011).

Features of Nonfiction Texts

In addition to teaching purpose and text types, the features specific to a particular text must also be taught. Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, and Martin (2011) pointed out that “teaching genre features explicitly can also help develop students’ ability to think about texts as text—what some call *authors’ craft* or *metatextuality*” (p. 17). They further argued that “writing strategies are often taught as though they apply equally to all texts or all strategies work equally well for most texts, but this is not the case” (p. 18). For example, teaching the writing of procedural texts, these authors explained, should vary in many crucial ways from teaching the writing of personal narratives. According to these researchers, it's no longer just about teaching "composition", what's important is the composition "*of what for what*" (p. 6).

The purpose, type of text, and the nature of the information all influence the organizational structure an author chooses for a text. Kristo and Bamford (2004) listed the organizational structures of nonfiction as the following: enumerative, chronological, sequential, compare-contrast, question-answer, cause-effect, and narrative. These scholars asserted that after students have determined the purpose of their writing, they then must decide how to organize their writing. For students to make that determination, they should consider the type of information they are using for their text, how the information could be chunked or divided up, and what kind of organization would be best for the readers of their writing.

Mentor Texts

How do the authors of nonfiction texts begin writing about a topic? How do they decide what to write about and how to organize their writing? How can teachers model through mini-lessons the key components of writing instruction in light of the expectations for nonfiction writing for students at each grade level? Dorfman and Cappelli (2009) posit that the first step for any nonfiction writer is to form an essential question. Finding texts that model this first step helps young writers grasp how writing topics are chosen. A couple of mentor texts recommended by Dorfman and Cappelli in which even the title reveals the origin of the ideas for each book are Kaner's (1999) *Animal Defenses: How Animals Protect Themselves* and Gehman's (2007) *Hummingbirds: Tiny but Mighty*.

Mentor texts are also models for the many different text features specific to nonfiction texts. According to Stead and Hoyt (2011), nonfiction text features serve two purposes—to visually communicate information and to draw attention to important concepts and ideas. Visual communication of information is accomplished through photographs, diagrams, illustrations, graphs, charts, tables, storyboards, flow charts and arrows. Young writers first notice these features in the work of others. Then, as they construct their own nonfiction texts, they learn to consider which visual features they could add to increase understanding of their own texts. The other purpose of nonfiction text features, to draw attention to important concepts and ideas, is

accomplished through titles, bold words, headings, subheadings, tables of contents, captions, indexes, and glossaries.

Teacher-created texts can also serve as mentor texts, intentionally created as models for the various types of nonfiction writing. Through modeling and using teacher-created nonfiction writing, students can, according to Portalupi and Fletcher (2001), “uncover the experiential knowledge they already possess” (p. 9). Stead and Hoyt (2011) suggested teachers conduct focused mini-lessons in which they create on-the-spot mentor texts of particular forms of nonfiction writing. During each mini-lesson, the teacher should accompany the writing of the text with a think-aloud, allowing students to both see and hear the writing process. This mentor text then becomes a part of the fabric of the classroom, allowing reflection and revisiting by the teacher and students alike. Additionally, teachers can create models of visual texts for students during their mini-lessons, once again accompanying the writing by thinking aloud about both the construction of and purpose for the visual text.

Using the personal stories of authors' struggles with their own writing is another way of mentoring our young authors with the words of familiar authors. Knowing that well-known authors such as Jon Scieszka also consider the task of writing to be hard work, a task he compares to "ditch-digging," informs students that they are not alone with the difficulty of getting words on paper. Cruz (2008) suggested putting up a classroom bulletin board of quotes and tips from all kinds of authors to help students find inspiration to persevere when the task seems overwhelming.

Motivation

When asked how they motivate students to write, Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) responded, “There’s no magic answer, and it’s a fact that certain kids will stubbornly resist the invitation to write. But it starts by giving them regular time, real choice, and your genuine interest in what they put down on paper” (p. 24). In her 2008 book for teachers, *A Quick Guide to Reaching Struggling Writers*, Cruz explored strategies teachers can use to address the causes behind the six most common statements made by students who lack motivation to write. Strategies for addressing motivation issues with young writers are categorized according to these frequently recurring statements. According to Cruz, those common statements are as follows:

"I'm not a good writer.'
'My hand hurts.'
'I don't know how to spell.'
'I don't have anything to write about.'
'I never get to write anything I want to write.'
'I'm done.'" (Cruz, 2008, p. xii)

Of particular relevance to the writing of nonfiction texts are the issues related to generating ideas and choice.

As all teachers of young writers know, many students find generating and developing a topic to write about very challenging. In order for many students to believe they truly have something to write about, teachers need to teach students numerous strategies for originating topics and ideas (Cruz, 2008). One strategy for generating writing topics is to have students develop personal lists of things they are familiar with, such as places, people, and objects, in order to give them a starting point for writing which draws on their own experiences. Another strategy ties back to the previous section on mentor texts, as students can get ideas for their own writing by reading the writing of others. What's important here is that students gain independence by knowing ways they can get "unstuck" when writing.

Classrooms that support quality nonfiction writing instruction give students ample opportunity to "bring their passion, knowledge, quirky humor, and authentic voice to this kind of writing" (Portalupi & Fletcher, 2001, p. 2). Many of our young writers struggle because they feel they aren't given choice or allowed voice when they write. Hill and Ekey (2010) stated, "Our decisions about *what* to teach will be based on our curriculum and standards, the focus for our unit of study, and what we know about each individual writer" (p. 12). While knowledge of the different forms of writing is essential, so is student agency. Decisions concerning what to write and what form that writing will take should not always rest solely with the teacher.

Conclusion

Current research on writing instruction for elementary students indicates the need for teachers to understand how to teach the unique genres of writing. Through consistent and explicit instruction, students can become accomplished nonfiction writers by having teachers who "marinate" them in the various types and constructions of nonfiction texts (Kristo & Bamford, 2004, p. 266). Mentor texts, whether by well-known authors or self-created by the teacher, serve as exemplars of the craft and components of nonfiction writing. Stead and Hoyt (2011) argued that success for students in school and beyond relies on their ability to create and navigate nonfiction texts with purpose and comfort. Teachers of young writers need to be very familiar with the uniqueness of and the opportunities presented by the creation of nonfiction texts.

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