

Nonfiction Writing Power

*Teaching Information Writing
with Intent and Purpose*

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Introduction

Linking Writing Power to Nonfiction

Writing Power is an approach to writing instruction that focuses on writing to engage and connect with the reader. “We write to invite thinking” is the foundation of this approach, with an intentional effort to address the close, intimate link between reader and writer. Writing Power

- integrates the research of Donald Graves (1983) that revealed what good writers do, including the stages of the writing process: plan, write, edit/revise, and share.
- explores the explicit teaching of the writing techniques, or traits (Spandel, 1990), that enhance the quality of writing, including using interesting details, interesting words, similes, personification, voice, and the senses.
- uses *anchor books* as models of writing style, writing techniques, and topics.

The lessons in my book *Writing Power* were designed around writing fiction—personal narratives and stories, with a brief look at poetry—but all focused on writing with the intent of engaging, connecting, and inviting the reader to think. The lessons in this book focus on writing nonfiction and explore different forms or structures of nonfiction writing, including description, instruction, persuasion, comparison, explanation, and reporting. But the purpose behind all the lessons is the same—writing with the reader in mind.

The underlying principles of Writing Power originated from my work in the area of reading comprehension. Because of the important shift in the last ten years toward more explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies to enhance understanding, many students have become familiar with applying thinking strategies to the reading process. These thinking strategies, based on the research of David Pearson (1983) include making connections, visualizing, asking questions, inferring, and transforming (synthesizing). With Writing Power, I explored these strategies, but looked at them from the writer’s perspective. As a writer, how can I write to invite a visual image? How can I write to invite my reader to make a connection? How can I write to invite my reader to infer? Through this shift in perspective from writer to reader, writing lessons have taken on a different focus. We are now learning to become better writers not for ourselves, or for a mark, but for our readers.

I knew, even before I had completed my Writing Power book, that it only made sense for me to follow it up with a companion book on nonfiction writing. As with my Reading Power books, my first Writing Power book focuses on writing fiction and my second, the one in your hands, on writing nonfiction.

The underlying principles of Writing Power are also the foundation for this book: we are learning to write and to improve our writing skills not for ourselves, but for our readers. All writers write because they have something they

My struggle with linking this book to *Writing Power* was figuring out how to best organize it around the same strategies. After a great deal of thought, I decided that I couldn’t. Because nonfiction writing is specifically broken down into different forms, or structures, it makes more sense to organize this book around these forms.

“Fictional narrative will not be enough to help us through life’s journey.” — Tony Stead

want to share with someone else. Writers of fiction have stories to tell and experiences to share—some completely imaginary; some embedded in experiences. Fiction writers want to entertain their readers with humor, to romance them, to excite them with adventure, to tug on their heartstrings and make personal and emotional connections. Writers of nonfiction have information that they feel is important and interesting to share with their readers. Because of that desire to share with someone else something we know or have discovered, it is important that we write in a clear, interesting, and engaging way. We not only want our readers to finish reading what we write, but also want to engage them, connect to them, inform them, teach them, persuade them, instruct them, or stimulate their thinking. And in some circumstances, we might even inspire them, move them, and possibly transform their thinking or their actions in some way.

The principle of *writing for the reader* can be applied to both fiction and nonfiction writing instruction. In terms of nonfiction writing, this concept plays a key role in helping young writers understand the purpose of all forms of nonfiction. From blogging to tweeting to reporting to instructing—the world of social media is certainly encouraging writers think carefully about who might be on the receiving end of their words and how their words can be perceived. More than ever, our students need to learn the structure, purpose, and intent of a wide range of writing forms that will help them navigate successfully through the written world of essay writing, provincial and state exams, and university and job applications—not to mention blogging, texting, and tweeting. But is our classroom writing instruction really doing enough to help students learn the impact and power of their writing? Is our writing instruction reflective of the real-world writing that students encounter in their day-to-day lives?

Visualize an old-fashioned balancing scale. One side of the scale is labeled *Fiction*, and the other *Nonfiction*. Now take a moment to consider all the writing experiences you provide for your students in your classroom. What percentage would you say are fiction and what percentage nonfiction? Now think about reading. What about read-alouds? Reading groups? Your classroom library? Put it all together and consider how your scales would be sitting. Are they balanced 50/50? Or are they tipping more toward the fiction side? Toward the nonfiction side? Finally, think about the many reading and writing experiences you have in a single day, everything you read and write as an adult in the real world. How many of those would be considered fiction and how many would classify as nonfiction? Think about the newspaper articles, recipes, instructional manuals, signs, blogs, e-mails, texts, tweets, catalogues, application forms, letters, lists, pamphlets, want-ads, newsletters, and programs you might read in a single day. Now compare that to how many times you pick up a novel, picture book, or fairy tale. Truth be told, there appears to be a disconnect between the reading and writing experiences we are providing for our children in school and those we actually experience on a day-to-day basis.

“Children write personal narratives and stories not because this is the limit of their experiences but because they don’t know how to write outside these forms.” — Tony Stead

When I first read Tony Stead’s book *Is That a Fact?* more than 10 years ago, I was completely transformed. His book about nonfiction writing changed my thinking and my practice. In it, he states that teachers are actually limiting students’ ability to effectively write nonfiction because we spend so much of our classroom time on teaching them to write fiction. Ten years ago, I was certainly guilty of focusing the majority of my literacy lessons on fiction, believing that my once-a-year trip to the library to teach my students how to research and write an animal report sufficiently covered nonfiction writing. Since that time, however, I have grown to appreciate how critical a component of a complete writing

program nonfiction writing actually is. I have heeded Tony Stead's caution that nonfiction writing involves a lot more than writing reports about animals. I have also grown to understand the importance of the reader, purpose, form, and language in nonfiction writing.

So why do we often limit our students' nonfiction experiences to writing about what an animal looks like, where it lives, and what it eats? Perhaps some of us believe that younger children are not developmentally ready for more complex types of texts. But many of the experts in the field, including Lucy Calkins (1986), Donald Graves (1989), Tom Newkirk (1989), and Tony Stead (2002), would disagree completely with that theory; they tell us that young learners can be writing all different forms of nonfiction if they are given the right kind of immersion, demonstration, and engagement. I believe it has a lot to do with our comfort zone and knowledge base as teachers. I'm comfortable with the straightforward, descriptive animal report because I understand it and have had a lot of experience with it. Such is not the case with, for example, persuasion and comparison. As a result, my nonfiction writing program consisted of what I knew best: descriptive reports about animals. Over the last several years, I have been exploring other forms of nonfiction and have become more familiar with them. My hope is that this book will help you move out of your comfort zone, become more comfortable with different nonfiction writing forms, and begin to explore them with your students.

Connecting Reading Power to Writing

My first book, *Reading Power*, established Reading Power as an approach to comprehension instruction that focuses students' attention on their thinking and enables them to find meaning from text based on their own ideas, experiences, and background knowledge. This practical approach to reading comprehension has provided teachers with specific strategies to teach students to use while they read, shifting the focus of reading comprehension from *what to think* to *how to think*. The Reading Power strategies, based on David Pearson's research into what strategies proficient readers use when they read (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) include making connections, visualizing, questioning, inferring, synthesizing (transforming), and determining importance. "Zooming in" to nonfiction text features is a strategy I included in *Nonfiction Reading Power*. Through this focus on the more-complex approach of thinking through a text rather than simply retelling it, students are taught specific strategies to use to enhance their understanding of what they are reading, as well as a language to articulate their thinking.

My transition into Writing Power came as a result of considering these reading strategies from a writer's perspective. After many years of telling students that good readers think while they read, I began to consider what made this thinking possible. Why do I make a connection to certain books but not others? Why am I able to visualize easily with this book but not that one? These questions led me realize that my thinking is often guided by the writing itself. The writing, one could argue, was *inviting* me to connect, to question, to visualize, to infer. When I make a connection to something I'm reading, it's not that I, as the reader, have made that connection happen; often it is the writer inviting me, through the writing, to make that connection. When I visualize, I would not be able to do so were it not for the writer's intention of creating a visual image with his or her

“A small drop of ink produces that which makes others think.” — Lord Byron

words. This intimate link between the reader’s thinking and the writer’s intent became the foundation for my first Writing Power book, which focuses primarily on personal narratives and story writing.

We can see that there is a strong need for students to develop an understanding of the various forms of writing—forms beyond storytelling and report writing. Developing a book that supports the teaching of nonfiction writing was an important next step for me. And while the organization of this book differs slightly from the previous three, it is important to emphasize how it connects to all that has come before it. *Reading Power* and *Nonfiction Reading Power* promote the notion that, when we read, we need to think. *Writing Power* and *Nonfiction Writing Power* promote the notion that, when we write, we need to invite thinking. (There you have a summary of all four of my books!) The clear link between Reading Power and Writing Power is *thinking*. As a teacher, it is no longer enough for me to teach reading and writing as separate subjects; I need to guide students to recognize that these actions are intimately linked through the power of thinking. I can’t imagine teaching a writing lesson now without discussing the importance of writing to engage and invite the reader to think. I can’t imagine teaching a reading lesson now without emphasizing the importance of how the writing invites our thinking. Reading and writing are intimately linked through thinking.

As I considered how this book would be organized, I realized that the link to thinking would continue to be the foundation upon which I structure the lessons, even though the specific lessons are organized around the nonfiction writing forms rather than the thinking strategies. However, it is important that we continue, while teaching nonfiction writing, to emphasize to our students the notion of writing for the reader. Because different forms of nonfiction are used for different purposes, writers of nonfiction need to be very clear on intent for their reader. It is also interesting to consider how different forms of nonfiction writing can promote different thinking strategies. Below are some ways we can continue to provide our students with links to thinking of the different forms of nonfiction:

- **Descriptive writing** invites readers to visualize and determine importance.
- **Instructional writing** invites readers to visualize and sometimes to transform their actions.
- **Persuasive writing** invites readers to make connections and transform their thinking.
- **Comparison writing** invites readers to make connections, ask questions, and zoom in.
- **Explanation writing** invites readers to question and visualize.
- **Nonfiction Narrative** invites readers to make connections, question, visualize, infer, and determine importance.

The strategies of thinking are an essential component of writing instruction. Writing with intention and purpose is an essential component of nonfiction writing. In my attempt to incorporate both in the organization of this book, form won out over strategy. However, I encourage you to continue to use the language of thinking and to promote thinking strategies throughout these lessons.

What to Expect

This book is designed to help teachers develop a writing program that focuses on the different forms of nonfiction through writing with intent. It is also meant to help teachers begin to develop ways to link up their writing instruction to the content areas of science and social studies. As in all my books, my intention is to make things as practical and straightforward as possible by providing teachers with a book they can pick up and use. In this book, you will find outlines of specific lessons, along with reproducible organizers and anchor book suggestions to accompany the lessons.

The first chapter provides the background and explanation for nonfiction writing forms that teachers will need to understand before launching into specific lessons. I outline the specific text structures covered in this book: description, instruction, persuasion, comparison, explanation, and nonfiction narrative. I discuss the specific teaching elements for each structure and provide a detailed description of each: the purpose, text form, language, and links to content areas.

The next chapter outlines the components of Nonfiction Writing Power. Included in this section are explanations of the Nonfiction Writing Power lesson framework, a detailed breakdown of a weekly writing schedule (based on the writing process), as well as thoughts about conferencing and editing.

Chapter 3 introduces the “big picture” concepts connected to Nonfiction Writing Power, including nonfiction text structures, writer’s intent, writer’s goals, and writing techniques. Following an explanation of each of these concepts is a scripted lesson to help teachers introduce these important background ideas to their students. In particular, the section Nonfiction Writing Techniques provides teachers with lessons for introducing a wide variety of writing techniques that, once introduced, can be applied throughout the weekly writing lessons. These techniques include incorporating nonfiction text features, adding interesting details, using triple-scoop words, making comparisons, writing with voice, crafting great beginnings, and organization.

Finally, the chapters on the Nonfiction Writing Powers provide overviews of the Nonfiction Writing Power or form, including a list of anchor books and notes on intent, form, language features, writing techniques, and assessment. They go on to outline explicit and sequential writing lessons that focus on each of the six nonfiction text structures: description, instruction, persuasion, comparison, explanation, and nonfiction narrative. Each lesson, regardless of the form, supports the notion of writing with purpose and intent. Often, the first lesson in a chapter outlines a *whole-class write*, in which the teacher models the new structure with student participation. As always, each lesson is supported by recommended anchor books, and extensions to individual lessons and to the text structure are provided.