

# *Non Fiction Craft Lessons*

Teaching Information Writing F–8

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# Introduction



A few years ago we were preparing a big workshop on how to teach nonfiction writing. In our workshops we like to feature lots of student writing. But when we started digging for wonderful, quirky, voice-filled examples of content-area writing, we ran into a snag – we couldn't find much. We had stacks of terrific narrative, fiction and poetry, but very little wonderful nonfiction writing by students. In an effort to stem a mounting sense of panic, we telephoned Don Graves and told him about our dilemma.

“You know what researchers say when something like that happens”, Don said with a chuckle. “No data is data.”

“You mean – ”

“I mean you've got to pay attention to the fact that you don't have many nonfiction samples from students,” he said. “That's got to tell you something.”

He was right. It wasn't due to chance that we had trouble digging up student nonfiction samples. Rather, this lack indicated a larger problem in our writing classrooms.

For almost 20 years we have been advocates of the writing process approach to teaching writing. We believe that this approach has had a dramatic, highly positive effect on thousands of classrooms. But this effect has been largely limited to expressive writing: poetry, memoir and personal narrative, to name a few.

## Write from Abundance

How do you know when you're ready to write? Simple: when you feel ready to teach. At some point, students shift from exploratory writing to writing for presentation. Because the focus has been on becoming an expert, students can often judge when they are expert enough to teach others about their topics. This threshold varies for students at different ages. Of course, research doesn't only precede writing. In reality, research begets writing and writing begets more research. And all that research and exploratory writing should result in a storehouse full of information from which students draw as they make the shift into writing for presentation.

Writing well requires selecting the salient facts out of a larger pool. Beginning nonfiction writers will often write all of what they know in their attempts to fill a page or two. Ideally, we want students to have pages of notes and heads full of knowledge that they can cull from, and craft a piece that will both teach and entertain their readers.

Where do literary models fit into all of this? Certainly we need to familiarise students with high-quality nonfiction writing. They need to know the landscape of nonfiction texts so they can navigate that world as they are researching and writing. But first let's familiarise ourselves. In the next chapter we take a brief look at what's available for students in the world of children's nonfiction literature.

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## Organise Your Note-Taking

There are lots of ways to organise information as it's coming in, such as learning logs or journals, index cards and research folders. It matters less what system you use than that a system exists. Because students will do a variety of writing as they research, it's important for them to have a place to gather that work. Folders work well for me because they allow slips of paper to be ordered and reordered, clipped when they belong together or held side by side. But whether you use folders, learning logs or something else altogether, your students will probably generate and organise some of the following strategies.

- An ongoing list of questions that arise as they learn more about their topic.
- Notes organised around individual questions. (Some students list one question per page and then use these sheets for collecting notes.)
- A glossary for content-specific words they are learning.
- Early attempts at transforming notes into longer chunks of text. This could be flash drafts (see section 5–8) or simple free-writing. I asked my students to follow every session of note-taking with 10 minutes of free-writing on what they learned that day about their topic. (No notes allowed while writing!) This helped them bring their own voice to the material. It also pointed out where their knowledge was fuzzy, helping them organise the next day's research.
- A list of resources being used.

Organising data on paper helps students develop the mental organisation they need to make cognitive sense of what they are learning.

## Talk About Your Subject to Everyone You Know

Talk, like exploratory writing, helps students get familiar with new information. During all the reading, note-taking and writing, I encourage students to talk, talk and talk some more. “Teach me what you learned today”, I say in a conference. “Come to the author’s chair and teach us what you are learning.” When students sit before peers and talk about their subjects, they are rehearsing for the day they will write. The talk makes them think about organisation. “Where should I start? How can I say this so they’ll understand?” When we ask questions based on what they share, it helps students discover what they know and what they need to know.

# Exploratory: Observing the World

## RESOURCE MATERIAL

- *If You Find a Rock* by Peggy Christian
- *One Small Square* by Donald M. Silver
- Small blank notebooks

## DISCUSSION

Young children have a natural curiosity about the natural world. We should tap into that curiosity as we introduce them to information writing. Researching involves more than simply copying facts out of a book. It is being alive to the world, and valuing one's perceptions of the world. In this craft lesson we explore the idea of observation. We want our students to begin to trust and learn from how they experience the physical world. You can encourage careful observation by providing them with some sort of notebook that can be used as a container to hold their perceptions.

## HOW TO TEACH IT

Have you ever felt the cottony stuff inside a milkweed pod? Have you ever heard the Eastern Banjo Frogs making a racket by the dams? Have you ever smelled a Tasmanian Devil?

When you did that, you were paying close attention to the world. That's called *observation*. Scientists are trained to observe the world, whether it's a one-celled amoeba or immense galaxies. You observe the world by looking very carefully. And when you observe, you also use your other four senses – smell, sound, touch and taste.

We've been reading some books that talk about how important it is to observe the world. Remember this book *If You Find a Rock*? The author talks about all the things you can do if you find a special rock.

Another book, *One Small Square*, shows you all the things you can see just from closely studying one small piece of your backyard.

(Go to page 9 of *One Small Square*.)

This book has ideas about how you might keep a backyard notebook where you can write down what you notice. I've put together some blank notebooks you could use. In this notebook you can draw pictures and write words to explain what you saw. Before you write or draw a picture in your notebook, it's important to take a really good look so you can mark down as many details as possible. When you do that, you're really living like a scientist.



# Adding Supporting Details

## RESOURCE MATERIAL

■ *Exploding Ants: Amazing Facts About How Animals Adapt* by Joanne Settel

## DISCUSSION

Young writers often throw big ideas onto the paper and then forget to follow them up with supporting details. Learning to develop an idea is an important skill for the nonfiction writer.

## HOW TO TEACH IT

I know some of you play soccer. When you get the soccer ball it's often tempting to kick it as hard as you can. But to get it further down the field it's really better to give it a smaller kick and then to stay with it, kicking it a few more times before you pass it off to someone else on your team.

Writing is a little like soccer. Sometimes you have an exciting idea – a big idea – and you put it on the paper and then move on to something else. But just as with the soccer ball, it's better to stay with the big idea by adding a few more sentences to help explain it to the reader.

Listen to how this writer begins her book, *Exploding Ants: Amazing Facts About How Animals Adapt*:

Animals often do things that seem gross to us.

That's a pretty interesting idea. Doesn't it make you want to know more? Well, instead of just leaving us with the big idea, the writer follows up with a few details to help support the big idea. We call these "supporting details" and readers love them because they help them understand the interesting idea in more detail. Here's the big idea with three supporting details:

Animals often do things that seem gross to us. They eat foods that people would find nauseating. They make their homes in disgusting places and feed on mucus and blood. They swell or blow up their body parts.

Notice the difference? When you go back to read your writing today, I want you to look and see if you wrote some big ideas that need following up. If you find any, underline them. When I confer with you today I'll help you think about how to follow up those sentences with supporting details.

# Using Subheadings to Organise Information

## RESOURCE MATERIAL

■ *The Top of the World: Climbing Mt. Everest* by Steve Jenkins

## DISCUSSION

Whenever we look at nonfiction books we find ourselves getting excited about those with text features that seem particularly accessible to students. The book cited here, *The Top of the World: Climbing Mt. Everest* by Steve Jenkins, has much to teach our nonfiction writers. But this craft lesson focuses on the subheading as a way to help students present their information in a clear and organised manner.

## HOW TO TEACH IT

Today we're going to study a nonfiction picture book – *The Top of the World: Climbing Mt. Everest* by Steve Jenkins.

(Read book.)

What did you notice about the way the author wrote this book?  
(Discuss.)

You were struck by the unusual illustrations made from paper cut-outs. But you also may have noticed that at the top of each page you find what looks like a chapter title, in bold print. This is called a subheading. Steve Jenkins uses it to organise his material. On one page the subheading is “Packing for the Trip” and underneath you see all the equipment you'll need. On another page the subheading is “Avalanche” and you learn that most people who die on Mt Everest are victims of avalanches.

Subheadings help you structure or “chunk” your material. They help keep you organised when you write. Readers appreciate them, too, because they know where to find what they're looking for. Can you think of other books that use subheadings?

(Discuss.)

Think about whether you want to use subheadings in your nonfiction writing. What would the subheadings be?