

Investigating Nonfiction Like a Detective

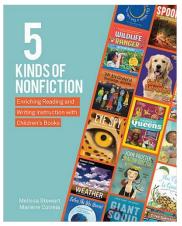
This activity was developed by Texas teacher-librarian D'Anne Dwight Mosby

My first introduction to the 5 Kinds of Nonfiction classification system came from an article in *School Library Journal* in 2018. At the time, I was working hard to build a better, more readable nonfiction collection in my library and used the system to find various kinds of reading choices within that nonfiction collection.

5 Kinds of Nonfiction



Fast forward to 2021, and I am in a brand-new elementary school with an incredible hand-picked collection of books and a team of highly collaborative teachers. Four grade levels on my campus are focusing on inquiry during our second nine-week term. When the third grade decided to read nonfiction for fun before choosing research topics, I was excited to help them walk through their inquiry project slowly.



To me, sharing a love of nonfiction falls under a role that I love as a librarian: Promoter of Knowledge and Critical Thinking. Of course, I want students to love to read any genre. But I also want them to get the most out of their reading, and nonfiction is written to teach us about the world and help us become critical thinkers about the world.

My goal then, was not only to promote reading, but to also promote thinking. So, I turned to what I have learned in reading the recently published book <u>5 Kinds of Nonfiction: Enriching Reading and Writing Instruction with Children's Books</u> by Melissa Stewart and Marlene Correia, to give my students a reason

to read informational text and nonfiction books that went beyond enjoyment. I wanted them to read to learn, to discover, and to grow.

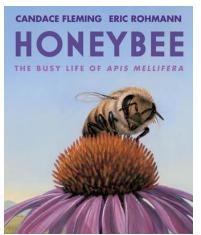
My teachers stated that most of their students found nonfiction "boring," so they had anxiety about where this research project would lead. They believed that students consider expository nonfiction as static and dull. That is the category they most often encounter in guided reading and in testing.

But I know by how my National Geographic: Weird But True copies fly off the shelves that students do love expository nonfiction, they just don't know they are reading it! And I had previously worked with third grade to introduce Literary Nonfiction by reading aloud *Honeybee: The Busy Life of Apis Mellifera* by Candace Fleming.

Students enjoyed learning about the life cycle of a bee and had even gotten choked up by poor Apis' death. So, I knew they only needed to be reminded of the nonfiction they have enjoyed in the past to find nonfiction they can enjoy now.



As I prepared my lesson, my goal was to show students that nonfiction books hold more than facts and figures. And as the students were entering a research unit, I wanted them to read to enjoy but also read to retain. Therefore, my idea of making our nonfiction exploration "detective work" was born.



To introduce them to the 5 Kinds of Nonfiction, I used the recommended <u>lesson from Melissa's website</u>: I showed them 5 books on one topic, each from a different category. For narrative nonfiction, I chose *Honeybee* by Candace Fleming. They remembered how we noticed the literary elements and the nonfiction content. I pulled other books about bees that showed traditional, expository literature, browseable, and even an active nonfiction book on how to care for bees in order to demonstrate that authors reveal information in varied ways.

I explained to students that when we read nonfiction, we are not just reading to learn, but reading to discover. I asked them to tell me what a detective does.

They answered with thoughts like: gather evidence, find clues, solve crimes.

I told them that reading nonfiction makes them an investigator, a detective. And authors use things like text features to provide evidence on topics. Their challenge was to investigate each kind of nonfiction and look for ways authors provided evidence (text features).

Each student was given a clipboard and a chart to fill in as they went through the investigation stations. On the handout, I had created a chart of each of the kinds of nonfiction and a checklist of the kinds of text features they had studied. Each station had 5 to 6 examples of books from the 5 Kinds of Nonfiction, but all on various topics.

Students had 5 minutes per station to simply preview the evidence, looking for the way this category of nonfiction presented its information. Students found that narrative nonfiction had evidence ensconced in the story, whereas browsable nonfiction used many text features to share tidbits of "text evidence."

Students noted what they liked or did not like about finding information in that category of book. A few students found browsable nonfiction overstimulating and preferred learning from text presented as a narrative. Some found traditional nonfiction comfortable and preferable. And many loved knowing that active nonfiction comes in an extensive range of topics—not just origami!

After investigating each nonfiction category, I gave students time to choose 3 topics of interest and look at books from that area of the library to see if they could find some in their preferred category.

Circulation of our nonfiction books has doubled since that lesson! And when it came time to teach students how to find database articles for research, students took their detective skills further and practiced skimming for "evidence." Many students pointed out that even online reading fits into the five categories. The National Geographic Kids database is very browsable. Britannica Online is quite traditional. And Gale in Context leads them to articles that share information in a more literary way, such as narrative and expository literature.

I believe that identifying the kinds of nonfiction has helped my students to recognize their preferences and their own talents in reading. My students who love browsable nonfiction would have been the ones to say they don't like reading. But now they know that reading is done in various ways and learning is an investigation.

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