

5 Kinds of Nonfiction: An Update

Back in 2017, I proposed a five-category system for classifying children’s nonfiction [on my blog](#), and the response was incredible.

Teachers loved it. So did librarians and children’s book authors and editors. People praised the clarity it brought to the range of children’s nonfiction available today. In May 2018, *School Library Journal* published an [article](#) about the 5 Kinds of Nonfiction. Again, the response was incredibly positive.

It’s hard to believe that an idea I posted just to see if it might resonate with anyone has become more and more popular. Teachers and librarians really see how classifying books in this way can help students think about the wide world of nonfiction and all that it has to offer.

As I thought more deeply about the relationship among the various categories, I realized that the tree analogy didn’t quite work. Now I’m using this visual:

5 Kinds of Nonfiction



When students understand the characteristics of the five categories, they can predict the type of information they’re likely to find in a particular book and how that information will be presented. As a result, they can quickly and easily identify the best books for a particular purpose (early stages of research, later stages of research, mentor texts in writing workshop, etc.) as well as the kind of nonfiction books they enjoy reading most.

Here’s what school librarian Traci Kirkland has to say about it:

“The 5 Kinds of Nonfiction classification system brings clarity to the way we think about nonfiction. We’re used to subdividing our fiction section into genres like mysteries and science fiction. But then we just lump all the nonfiction together. Now we can see smart, useful ways to categorize these books too.”

Here are Category Feature Cards to help you and your students get a better sense of the characteristics of each category. For more printable versions, please see [this](#) pinterest board:

Category Feature Cards

Traditional Nonfiction



- Survey (all about) books
- Overview of a topic
- Part of a large series
- Clear, straightforward language
- Expository writing style
- Description text structure

Developed by children's book author Melissa Stewart. For more information, please visit www.melissa-stewart.com

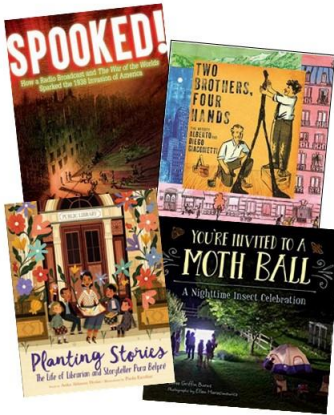
Browseable Nonfiction



- Eye-catching design, lavishly illustrated
- Short blocks of straightforward text
- Can be read cover to cover or by skipping around
- Great for shared reading
- Expository writing style
- Description text structure

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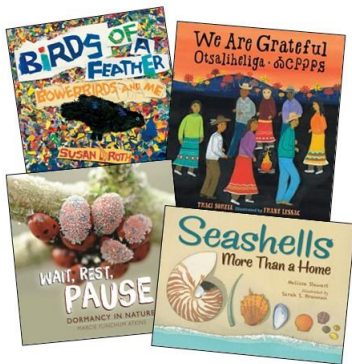
Narrative Nonfiction



- Narrative writing style
- Tells a story or conveys an experience
- Real characters, scenes, dialog, narrative arc
- Strong voice and rich, engaging language
- Chronological sequence structure
- Ideal for biographies and historical events

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Expository Literature



- Expository writing style
- Specialized topic presented creatively
- Strong voice and rich, engaging language
- Innovative format
- Carefully chosen text structure
- Ideal for STEM concepts

Developed by children's book author Melissa Stewart. For more information, please visit www.melissa-stewart.com

Active Nonfiction



- Highly interactive and/or teaches skills for engaging in an activity
- How-to guides, field guides, cookbooks, craft books
- Clear, straightforward language
- Expository writing style

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As time has passed, I keep hearing the same questions about the 5 Kinds of Nonfiction classification system, so I've provided some answers below. If you have other questions, please let me know.

Q: Do all nonfiction books really fit neatly into one of these 5 categories?

A: Most do, but there are definitely books that cross categories, and that's a good thing! I've written more about these Blended Books on my blog and will continue to do so.

Q: So if these categories don't encompass all the books being published today, why have them at all?

A: Because as students try to make sense of the wide world of nonfiction, it helps to have general categories that are easy to understand. Then, as children become more sophisticated readers and thinkers, they can explore the exceptions. The idea of students debating the various ways a particular nonfiction title might be classified makes my heart sing.

Q: Can you provide some exemplar titles for each category?

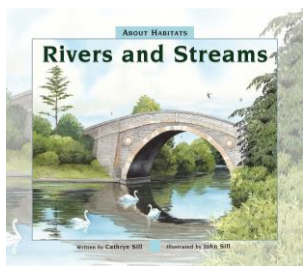
A: Yes!

Traditional Nonfiction

Not long ago, there was just one kind of nonfiction for children—traditional survey (all-about) books that provide a general overview of a topic. They feature a description text structure, an expository writing style, and concise, straightforward language. Thanks to the invention of desktop publishing software, these books, which are often published in large series, are now more visually appealing than they were in the past.

Traditional nonfiction is ideal for the early stages of the research process, when students are “reading around” a topic to find a focus for their report or project. The straightforward, age-appropriate explanations make the information easy to digest, which is helpful to students who are just beginning to learn how to synthesize and summarize information as they take notes.

Here are some examples:



About Rivers and Streams by Cathryn Sills

Behind the Scenes Gymnastics by Blythe Lawrence

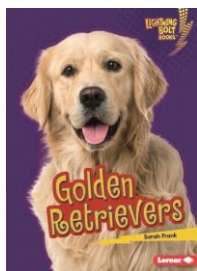
Galaxies, Galaxies! by Gail Gibbons

Weather by Seymour Simon

Golden Retrievers by Sarah Frank

Monster Trucks by Matt Doeden

Mountain Gorillas: Powerful Forest Animals by Rebecca Hirsch



The Supreme Court by Christine Taylor Butler

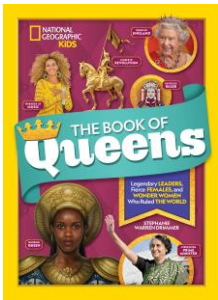
Browseable Books

Thanks to Dorling Kindersley’s innovative Eyewitness Books series, the 1990s brought remarkable changes to traditional expository nonfiction. These beautifully designed, lavishly illustrated books with short text blocks and extended captions revolutionized children’s nonfiction by giving fact-loving kids a fresh, engaging way to access information.

Readers can easily dip in and out of browseable books, focusing on the sections that interest them most, or they can read the books cover to cover. Today, National Geographic, Time for Kids, and the Discovery Channel are all publishing fact-tastic books in this category, and kids love them.

Due to their wide array of text features, browseable books are well suited for the later stages of the research process, when students are seeking specific information and looking for tantalizing tidbits to engage their audience of readers.

Here are some examples:



The Book of Queens by Stephanie Warren Drimmer

Discovery Channel Sharkopedia: The Complete Guide to Everything Shark by Discovery Channel

Eye Spy: Wild Ways Animals See the World by Guillaume Duprat

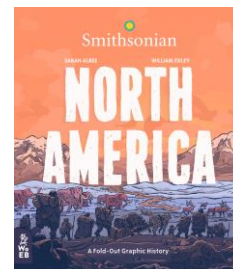
Eyewitness Books: Rocks & Minerals by R.F. Symes

Guinness World Records 2019 by Guinness World Records

North America: A Fold-Out Graphic History by Sarah Albee

Trees: A Rooted History by Piotr Socha and Wojciech Grajkowski

Time for Kids Big Book of Why by the Editors of Time for Kids



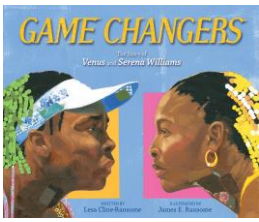
Narrative Nonfiction

In the mid-1990s, children’s authors began crafting narrative nonfiction—prose that tells a true story or conveys an experience. Narrative nonfiction appeals to fiction lovers because it includes real characters and settings; narrative scenes; and, ideally, a narrative arc with rising tension, a climax, and denouement. The scenes, which give readers an intimate look at the events and people being described, are linked by transitional text that provides necessary background while speeding through parts of the true story that don’t require close inspection.

Narrative nonfiction, which typically features a chronological sequence text structure, slowly gained momentum during the 2000s. Today, it’s the writing style of choice for biographies and books that focus on historical events. It may also be used in books about animal life cycles or scientific processes, which have a built-in beginning, middle, and end.

Because narrative nonfiction titles often lack headings and other text features, they aren't as useful for targeted research as other kinds of nonfiction, but they can help young readers get an overall sense of a particular time and place or a person and his or her important achievements

Here are some examples:



Game Changers: The Story of Venus and Serena Williams by Lesa Cline-Ransome

Joan Proctor, Reptile Doctor by Patricia Valdez

Karl's New Beak by Lela Nargi

Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré by Anika Aldamuy Denise

Spooked!: How a Radio Broadcast and The War of the Worlds Sparked the 1938 Invasion of America by Gail Jarrow

Something Rotten: A Fresh Look at Roadkill by Heather L. Montgomery

Two Brothers, Four Hands by Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan

You're Invited to a Moth Ball: A Nighttime Insect Celebration by Loree Griffin Burns



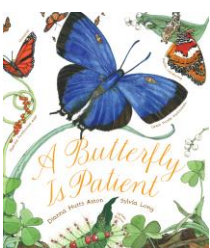
Expository Literature

When Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, school funding priorities changed. School library budgets were slashed, and many school librarians lost their jobs. Around the same time, the proliferation of websites made straightforward, kid-friendly information widely available without cost, which meant traditional survey books about volcanoes or whales or the Boston Tea Party were no longer mandatory purchases for libraries.

As nonfiction book sales to schools and libraries slumped, authors, illustrators, and publishers began searching for new ways to add value to their work, so they could compete with the internet. The result has been a new breed of finely-crafted expository literature that delights as well as informs.

Besides being meticulously researched and fully faithful to the facts, expository literature features captivating art, dynamic design, and rich engaging language. It may also include strong voice, innovative point of view, carefully-chosen text structure, and purposeful text format.

Unlike traditional nonfiction, expository literature often presents narrowly-focused or specialized topics, such as STEM concepts, in creative ways that reflect the author's passion for the subject. For example, in the traditional nonfiction book *Butterflies* by Seymour Simon, children learn all about the graceful insects. The book has a standard format in which each double-page spread features one page of text and one full-page photo. The author employs a description text structure and uses concise, straightforward language.

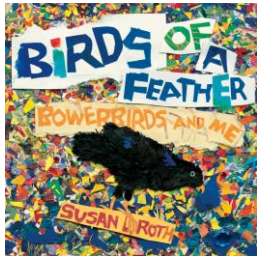


But the expository literature title *A Butterfly Is Patient* by Dianna Hutts Aston focuses on a butterfly's most amazing characteristics. The book has an innovative format with two layers of text, stunning art, and a dynamic design. The author presents the information with

a wondrous, lyrical voice and makes expert use of such language devices as imagery and personification, inviting readers to think about and appreciate butterflies in a whole new way.

Because expository literature titles are so carefully crafted, they work especially well as mentor texts in writing workshop. They can also help students recognize patterns, think by analogy, and engage in big picture thinking.

Here are some examples:



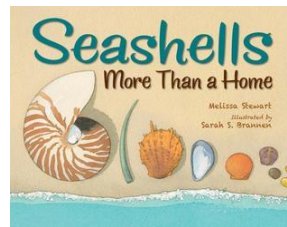
Birds of a Feather: Bowerbirds and Me by Susan L. Roth

Homes in the Wild: Where Baby Animals and Their Parents Live by Lita Judge

The Next President: The Unexpected Beginnings and Unwritten Future of America's Presidents by Kate Messner

Rotten: Vultures, Beetles, Slime and Nature's Other Decomposers by Anita Sanchez

Seashells: More than a Home by Melissa Stewart



Wait, Rest, Pause: Dormancy in Nature by Marcie Flinchum Atkins

We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga by Traci Sorell

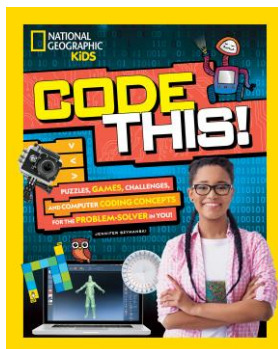
Women in Art: 50 Fearless Creatives Who Inspired the World by Rachel Ignatofsky

Active Nonfiction

Active nonfiction has been around since at least the 1980s, but thanks to the maker movement, these books have really hit their stride in recent years. Active nonfiction titles are highly interactive and/or teach skills that readers can use to engage in an activity. Written with an expository writing style, these field guides, craft books, cookbooks, books of scientific experiments, book-model combinations, etc. are richly designed and carefully formatted to make the information and procedures they present clear and accessible.

These books, which are currently extremely popular with young readers, are the perfect addition to school and library makerspaces.

Here are some recently-published examples:



Brain Games: The Mind-Blowing Science of Your Amazing Brain by Jennifer Swanson

Code This! Puzzles, Games, Challenges, and Computer Coding Concepts for the Problem Solver in You by Jennifer Szymanski

Cooking Class Global Feast! 44 Recipes that Celebrate the World's Cultures by Deanna F. Cook

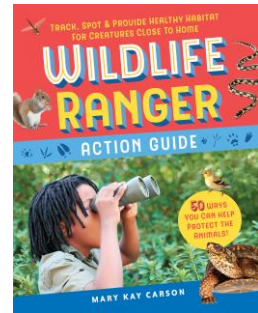
Hair-Raising Hairstyles that Make a Statement by Rebecca Rissman

The Klutz Book of Paper Airplanes by Doug Stillinger

National Geographic Kids Bird Guide of North America by Jonathan Alderfer

Ralph Masiello's Alien Drawing Book by Ralph Masiello

Wildlife Ranger Action Guide: Track, Spot & Provide Healthy Habitat for Creatures Close to Home by Mary Kay Carson



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