

Re-thinking the Transactional Theory of Reading

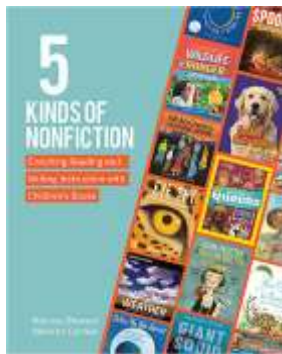
According to Louise Rosenblatt's highly-regarded Transactional Theory of Reading, there are two different stances (or approaches) to reading—aesthetic and efferent. The difference between the two approaches lies in where the reader's attention is while reading.

Rosenblatt's theory states that when readers adopt an aesthetic stance, they read for enjoyment and focus on how they're experiencing the book. For example, are they connecting emotionally with the main character? How do they feel about the main character's response to the situation?



In the efferent stance, readers are focused on learning and retaining information. One example Rosenblatt often used was reading the label on a cleaning product after a child has accidentally swallowed some. At that moment, all the reader cares about is how to save the child. They want to digest the information on the label as quickly as possible, so they can take action.

There's no doubt that no matter how much a reader loves stories and storytelling, in an emergency situation, they're going to adopt an efferent stance. Rosenblatt claimed that same the reader will switch to the aesthetic stance as soon as they're handed a novel. This belief is based on the "common knowledge" that everyone loves stories.



For years, I've questioned this idea. Based on my own experience as a reader, conversations I've had with children and educators, and a growing body of research that Marlene Correia and I outline in [*5 Kinds of Nonfiction: Enriching Reading and Writing Instruction with Children's Books*](#), it seems that *some* children are, indeed, naturally drawn to narratives. But others aren't.

Instead, these children prefer expository nonfiction because they're passionate about facts, figures, ideas, and information. Ron Jobe and Mary Dayton-Sakari call these young analytical thinkers "info-kids" because they read to learn.

Every day.

All the time.

In other words, they **never** adopt the aesthetic stance.

So rather than a transactional theory of reading in which readers easily switch back and forth between two stances, I envision a narrative-analytical thinking continuum.

According to this model, some readers do naturally have the flexibility Rosenblatt suggests. Because they're at the center of the continuum, they enjoy narratives and expository text equally. But other readers have a noted preference for narratives. And still others have a strong and persistent preference for expository nonfiction.



Why does this distinction matter? Because, as the table below shows, the reading preferences of many teachers and librarians are significantly different from those of the students they serve.

Writing Style Preferences*

	Expository	Narrative	Both
Grade 1 Girls	38%	24%	38%
Grade 1 Boys	67%	14%	19%
Grade 4 Girls	19%	19%	62%
Grade 4 Boys	48%	19%	33%
Educators	8%	56%	36%

For info-kids to become strong, passionate readers, educators must work hard to build book collections that include a diverse array of expository nonfiction as well as a healthy mix of narrative nonfiction and fiction.

*This table combines data from Repaskey, L., Schumm, J. & Johnson, J. (2017) "First and Fourth Grade Boys' and Girls' Preferences for and Perceptions about Narrative and Expository Text." *Reading Psychology*, 38: 808-847 and a survey of more than 1,000 classroom teachers, literacy educators, and school librarians I conducted in 2018.