

## The Idea Incubator

We all know that students do their best writing when they select their own topics. They're more invested in the process, from research to revision.

But we also know that choosing a topic from the wide world of possibilities is intimidating, even paralyzing, for some children. So the question is: How can we support them? By providing real-world, practical strategies that lead to success.

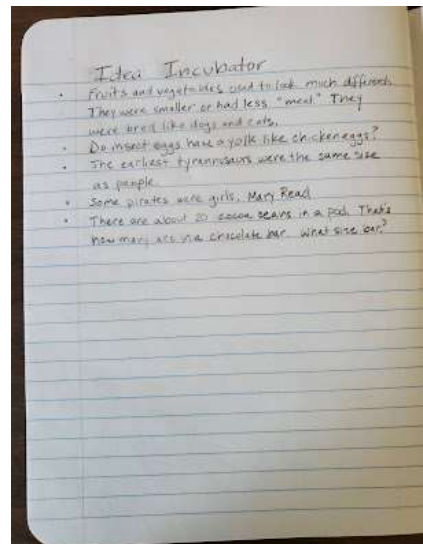


During school visits, I tell students about the Idea Board in my office. Anytime I have an idea or a question, anytime I hear a tantalizing tidbit, I write it on a scrap of paper and tack it up there. Some of those ideas lead nowhere, but others turn into books.

Young writers can mimic my technique by creating what I call an Idea Incubator—a bulleted list potential topics on the last page of their writer's notebook. Every time they have an idea or question about something they see, read, or experience, they can add it to their Idea Incubator. They can also include cool facts they come across.

When it's time to start a nonfiction writing project, students can use their Idea Incubator as a starting point. If students are choosing their own topic, they may be able to pull an idea directly from their list. But even if you assign a whole-class topic that aligns with your content-area curriculum, a list of facts, ideas, and questions is still a valuable tool. Working alone or with a partner, students can search for a common thread among the items on their list and brainstorm ways to apply that to the whole-class topic you've assigned.

For example, let's say your class is studying the American Revolutionary War, and you want everyone to write a report



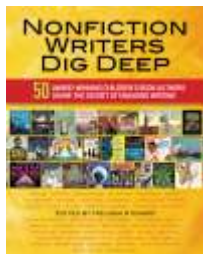
related to that whole-class topic. Obvious choices might be George Washington or the Battle of Bunker Hill. But let's face it, not everyone has a deep natural interest in a dead white guy or a skirmish that happened in Boston almost 250 years ago.

That's where the Idea Incubator can come in handy. As a student looks at her list, she may notice a lot of facts, questions, and ideas about the weather and wonders if she could write a report about the weather during the Revolutionary War. After doing some research, she discovers that the 1770s were an exceptionally cold, snowy period in history, and the weather influenced the outcome of many battles. Bingo! She's identified a great topic that she's excited about.

Another student notices that his list includes some facts, questions, and ideas about numbers and math. He might decide to create a series of infographics comparing statistics related to different battles or the two competing armies.

A third student who's fascinated by fashion could focus on the kind of clothing the soldiers wore, including how a severe shortage of boots affected the Colonial troops.

When students use an Idea Incubator to recognize their natural interests and find ways to discuss a whole-class topic through that lens, they'll be more invested in the process and their final piece will burst with passion and personality.



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