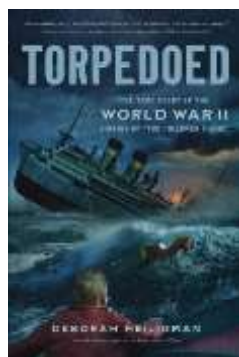
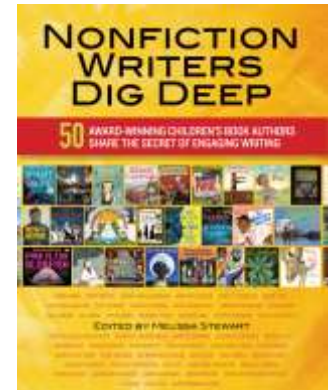




## Look for the “Oh, wow!”

Wouldn't it be wonderful if nonfiction writers could always find the perfect way to focus their topic at the beginning of the prewriting process? Unfortunately, that often isn't the case. Sometimes writers really have to be in the thick of things before their focus becomes clear.

What should young writers do when they begin researching with nothing more than a general topic in mind? Here are some helpful suggestions gleaned from Chapter 2 of [\*Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep: 50 Award-winning Authors Share the Secret of Engaging Writing\*](#). They're perfect for writers of all ages.

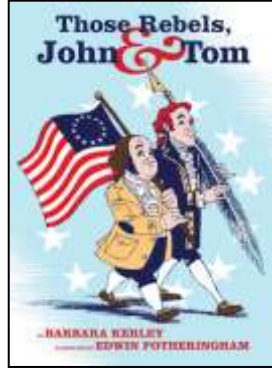


Author [Deborah Heiligman](#), author of *Torpedoed: The True Story of the World War II Shipwreck of the Children's Ship* and many other wonderful books for young readers, recommends a targeted note-taking strategy in which students read broadly about their topic and only jot down information that makes them say, “Oh, wow!” This approach helps writers view the topic through their own lens and pinpoint the ideas and information that interest them most.

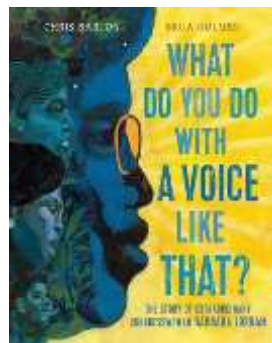


This is literally what **Jason Chin** did as he was creating *Grand Canyon*. After reading widely about his topic without a specific approach in mind, Jason decided to visit the canyon. And the first time he walked up to the edge, he had an “Oh, wow!” experience that inspired him and guided his creative process as he wrote and illustrated the book.

When Deborah employs her “Oh, wow!” technique, she uses the notes she's taken to develop a “mantra”—a statement that helps her determine what information to highlight and what to leave out. She writes the statement on a piece of paper and tapes it to the wall above her computer.



**Barbara Kerley**, author of *Those Rebels, John & Tom*, and many other award-winning titles, describes a similar process. Whether she’s writing a picture book biography with a narrative writing style or a concept book with an expository writing style, she creates a single sentence that focuses her thinking and her writing.



**Chris Barton** may not have written down the “mantra” that guided him as he wrote *What Do You Do with a Voice Like That? The Story of Extraordinary Congresswoman Barbara Jordan*, but his essay clearly explains how a core idea that emerged during his research process helped him focus his manuscript and fueled his passion for the project.

Copyright © 2021 Melissa Stewart. May be copied for educational use but may not be reprinted or resold for commercial purposes. [www.melissa-stewart.com](http://www.melissa-stewart.com)