

Teaching the Key Traits of Expository Nonfiction With Children's Books

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Drawing from the Common Core State Standards, the authors present innovative activities for using award-winning children's books to explore four key traits of finely crafted expository nonfiction.

For many years, all-about books have been the go-to informational writing project in elementary classrooms. The goal of this assignment is to produce text that is similar to the kind of writing typically found in traditional nonfiction children's books. These survey books present a general overview of a broad topic and feature language that is clear, concise, and straightforward (Hepler, 2003; Kiefer, 2010). They have an expository writing style that explains, describes, or informs, and they typically employ a description text structure (Stewart, 2018).

When students are writing a report, traditional nonfiction titles are a great place to begin the research process because they introduce readers to a topic and provide age-appropriate background information. However, these books do not make good mentor texts for producing finely crafted informational writing. Simply put, broad topics impede a nonfiction writer's ability to craft rich, engaging text (Portalupi & Fletcher, 2001).

What is the alternative? Use expository literature—informational writing that presents narrowly focused topics in creative ways that reflect a writer's zeal for the subject (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2009; Kiefer, 2010).

When writers choose a topic they are passionate about and zoom in on a specific question or unique perspective, they can be more playful and innovative. They can select a format and text structure that complements their distinctive approach to the content (Clark, Jones, & Reutzler, 2013; Jones, Clark, & Reutzler, 2016; Kerper, 2003; Williams et al., 2007). They can also experiment with voice and language devices (Moss, 2003; Stewart & Young, 2018). Because writers of traditional nonfiction must cover a huge amount of information in a limited number of words, they do not have the same kind of opportunities to delight as well as inform.

The activities in this teaching tip can help upper elementary and middle school students learn to identify the characteristics of expository literature and integrate them into their nonfiction writing. They were designed to support the following Common Core ELA anchor standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010):

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4: "Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone" (p. 10).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5: "Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole" (p. 10).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9: "Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take" (p. 10).

Because most current ELA standards are closely aligned with the Common Core, sharing these activities with students will help prepare them for state-mandated standardized tests.

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Activity 1: Having Fun With Format

After letting your class know that many high-quality expository nonfiction books make skillful use of creative formats (Kerper, 2003), read aloud *Move!* by Steve Jenkins and Robin Page. Draw your students' attention to the verbs set in large type, the bold-faced animal names, and the ellipses on each two-page spread. Point out that each verb describes the movements of two animals and that two movements are described for each animal. Because this clever scheme moves readers from one spread to the next, the book's main idea is reinforced by the format.

Next, read aloud *Where in the Wild? Camouflaged Creatures Concealed...and Revealed* by David Schwartz and Yael Schy and *Mama Built a Little Nest* by Jennifer Ward. Then, guide your class in comparing the two books by asking the following questions:

- How is the format of the two books similar? How is it different?
- Does the poetic text in the two books perform the same function?
- Why do you think there is so much more descriptive text with supporting details in *Where in the Wild*?
- What do you think was each author's purpose for writing their book?
- Does the format of each book help the authors achieve their purpose? Explain your rationale.

After sharing *An Egg Is Quiet* by Dianna Aston and *Look Up! Bird-Watching in Your Own Backyard* by Annette LeBlanc Cate with your class, encourage students to discuss the following questions in small groups:

- How is the format of the two books different? Are there any similarities in format?
- How does each author use text features?
- What do you think was each author's purpose for writing her book?
- Does the format of each book help the author achieve her purpose? Explain your rationale.

As the group discussions wind down, encourage students in each team to share their ideas with the rest of the class.

Activity 2: Experimenting With Text Structure

Most traditional nonfiction books have a description text structure, but expository literature can have just about any text structure you can think of, from the delightful compare/contrast text structure of *Rodent Rascals* by Roxie Munro to the thought-provoking problem/solution text structure of *Boy, Were We Wrong About Dinosaurs* by Kathleen V. Kudlinski or the compelling cause/effect text structure of *If Sharks Disappeared* by Lily Williams. Indeed, finding just the right text structure is often the greatest challenge professional nonfiction writers face as they craft expository literature (Stewart & Young, 2018).

After reading *Can an Aardvark Bark?* by Melissa Stewart (2017), group students in pairs and invite the teams to experiment with text structure by revising each of the following sentence pairs from the book to create one sentence for each of these four text structures:

1. *Sequence*: "Common barking geckos rest underground all day long. As the sun sets, a male comes out of his burrow and barks to let other geckos know where he is" (n.p.).
2. *Cause and effect*: "When a capybara senses danger, it belts out a series of rasping barks. The warning tells the rest of its herd: 'Head for the water and swim to safety!'" (n.p.).
3. *Problem and solution*: "During spring rains, a male barking tree frog attracts a female with loud calls that sound like a small dog. Then the couple mates in a nearby wetland" (n.p.).
4. *Compare and contrast*: "When woodchucks feel scared, they belt out a high-pitched whistle. But they often bark and squeal while fighting with one another" (n.p.).

Asking the teams to condense two sentences into one will help students quickly realize the scale of changes necessary to complete this activity. Once they have that understanding, they can focus on making meaningful revisions that will alter the text structure as requested (Anderson & Blum, 2014).

If students struggle with this activity, work through the first example with them. One possible answer is "First, a male gecko rests underground, and then he comes out and barks to let other geckos know where he is."

If time allows, encourage the groups to share their revision ideas with their classmates.

Activity 3: Choosing a Nonfiction Voice

Let your students know that in nonfiction, voice is the personality of the writing. It is how the writing makes readers feel. For each manuscript, writers let their topic and purpose for writing guide them to the best voice choice (Moss, 2003). Nonfiction voice options span a continuum from lively to lyrical, with plenty of options in between.

After reading aloud a few pages of *Pink Is for Blobfish: Discovering the World's Perfectly Pink Animals* by Jess Keating (2016), invite a few student volunteers to describe the book's voice. They might choose words such as *lively*, *playful*, or *humorous*. They also might notice that it seems like the author is speaking directly to them.

Next, read aloud a few pages of *A Butterfly Is Patient* by Dianna Hutts Aston (2011). Divide the class into small groups and encourage the groups to compare the voices of the two books. Students should notice that *A Butterfly Is Patient* features a more wondrous, lyrical voice.

Using a document camera, project the "Pretty in Pink!" sidebar on page 3 of *Pink Is for Blobfish* on your classroom interactive whiteboard. After giving students time to discuss the author's word choices and punctuation decisions in small groups, record their ideas about how these elements affect the voice of the passage. Did they notice Keating's use of alliteration in the first line or her use of an exclamation point at the end? What do they notice about the wording of the last sentence?

Now project the smaller secondary text on page 3 of *A Butterfly Is Patient* on your classroom interactive whiteboard, and listen in as your students analyze how the author crafted the voice. If students struggle with this task, you may wish to ask the following questions:

- Does it seem like the author is talking directly to readers?
- Is Aston creating an image in the reader's mind?
- How are the sentence structure and punctuation of this passage different from the "Pretty in Pink!" sidebar?

Finally, divide the class into small groups and invite each group to create a Venn diagram that lists text characteristics of a lively voice versus a lyrical

voice. Allow time for the groups to share their Venn diagrams with the rest of the class.

Activity 4: Appreciating Rich Language

The best way for young writers to get a feel for the flow of rich, engaging expository language is to analyze finely crafted mentor texts, such as *Frog Song* by Brenda Z. Guiberson, *If You Hopped Like a Frog* by David M. Schwartz, *Planting the Wild Garden* by Kathryn O. Galbraith, *Squirrels Leap, Squirrels Sleep* by April Pulley Sayre, and *Terrific Tongues!* by Maria Gianferrari.

Invite students to choose a mentor text and type out a few pages. After organizing the class into small groups, encourage the groups to identify key language features and highlight them with different colors. Students can color the text in the computer file or print out the text and mark it up with colored pencils or highlighting markers. The following color code works well for the titles listed: red for vivid verbs; blue for similes, metaphors, and other comparisons; green for alliteration; purple for repetition; and orange for onomatopoeia.

After students have highlighted the text, invite them to highlight these same language features in one of their rough drafts. Can they find spots where replacing a verb or adding a comparison or language device could strengthen their writing? As students complete this task, encourage them to share their changes with a classmate.

When students have access to a broad range of nonfiction children's books and are given opportunities to discuss and practice the nonfiction craft moves associated with high-quality informational writing, their own nonfiction writing will shine. As a result, they will become confident and enthusiastic writers of true texts.

NOTE

Melissa Stewart wrote one of the 16 children's trade books presented in this teaching tip.

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