

Bridging the Gap

Nonfiction as a “Gateway Drug”

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In 2012, Jonathan Hunt, coordinator of library services in San Diego, CA, and former member of the Newbery, Caldecott, Printz, and *Los Angeles Times* Book Award committees, asked a pointed question during a presentation at an ALA conference: “What kind of book could be a gateway drug for nonfiction readers?”

In the years since, there has been an ongoing discussion about this intriguing idea. What type of books can form a bridge between the browsable nonfiction that captivates elementary-aged kids and the more rigorous nonfiction texts students encounter in middle school and high school?

For some students, Hunt suggested, the answer may be fast-paced narrative nonfiction thrillers, such as *Bomb* and *Impossible Escape*, both by Steve Sheinkin. Other possibilities might include gripping true-crime stories like *The Mona Lisa Vanishes: A Legendary Painter, a Shocking Heist, and the Birth of a Global Celebrity* by Nicholas Day or contemporary ripped-from-the-headlines accounts like *The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime That Changed Their Lives* and *Accountable: The True Story of a Racist Social Media Account and the Teenagers Whose Lives It Changed*, both by Dashka Slater.

Marc Aronson, a nonfiction author and associate professor in the Department of Library and Information Science at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ, has proposed something completely different—books about making, doing, and creating. He suggests sports-themed cookbooks or titles that describe how to construct an interesting model or device, such as a robot, or participate in an engaging activity, such as geocaching.

“As kids create,” says Aronson, “we might offer them biographies of inventors, survivalists, adventurers—people who have impacted the communities and the world they live in.”¹

The type of books Aronson describes is what Marlene Correia, an associate professor in the Department of Elementary & Early Childhood Education at Bridgewater (MA) State University, and I call “active nonfiction” in our book *5 Kinds of Nonfiction: Enriching Reading and Writing Instruction with Children’s Books* (Stenhouse, 2020).

The Benefits of Blended Nonfiction

While we agree that compelling narrative nonfiction or active nonfiction could bridge the gap for some readers, more and more, we’re leaning toward high-interest titles that are a blend of narrative nonfiction and expository literature as the best way to help many upper elementary readers transition to more sophisticated long-form nonfiction titles.

A robust body of research shows that most children enjoy reading nonfiction, but while some have a natural affinity for true stories (narrative nonfiction), others prefer fact-filled books that explain, describe, and inform (expository nonfiction). As a result, books that blend the two writing styles have something for everyone, *and* they can help all children stretch and grow as



Melissa Stewart has written more than two hundred science books for children. Her work has been translated into more than a dozen languages and has garnered such awards as the Sibert Honor, American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAAS)/Subaru Prize for Excellence in Science Books, eighteen National Science

Teaching Association (NSTA) Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students, two Green Earth Book Awards, and three American Library Association (ALA) Notables. She coauthored *5 Kinds of Nonfiction: Enriching Reading and Writing Instruction with Children’s Books*, edited the anthology *Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep: 50 Award-Winning Authors Share the Secret of Engaging Writing*, and maintains the award-winning blog *Celebrate Nonfiction*.



readers. Examples include *If You Take Away the Otter* by Susannah Buhrman-Deever, *The Great Monkey Rescue: Saving the Golden Lion Tamarins* by Sandra Markle, *Neighborhood Sharks: Hunting with the Great Whites of California's Farallon Islands* by Katherine Roy, *Sniffer Dogs: How Dogs (and Their Noses) Save the World* by Nancy Castaldo, and *When Lunch Fights Back: Wickedly Clever Animal Defenses* by Rebecca L. Johnson.

The expository sections of high-quality, high-interest blended books captivate fact-loving kids in a way that feels familiar and comfortable, giving them the confidence to tackle the narrative sections. Similarly, young narrative lovers are drawn to the story-rich sections, motivating them to digest and comprehend the expository passages. Regardless of a student's natural reading preference, books that mix narrative and expository writing styles can help them develop the skills to successfully interact with a broad range of complex texts.

Gateways to New Knowledge

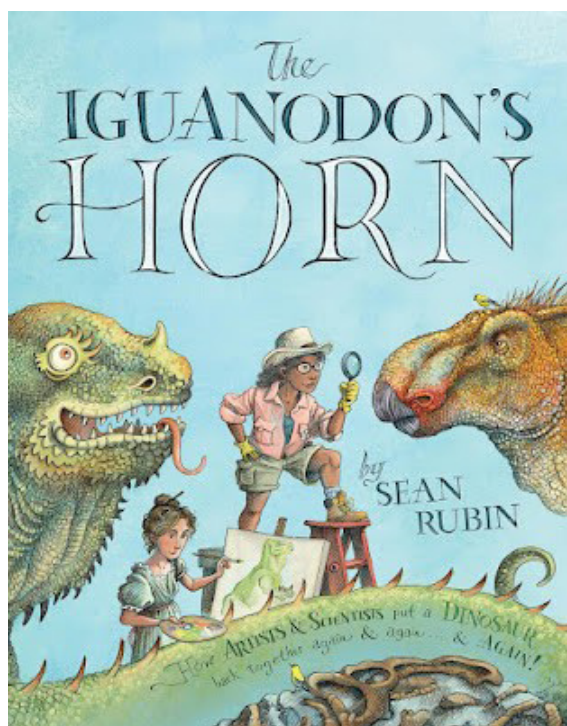
While the number of blended books available to students is slowly growing, there's another critical factor to consider when helping students choose books they can't resist: topic. Just as young fiction readers often have trouble moving beyond a particular author or series, young info-kids often become obsessed with a specific topic, such as dinosaurs or basketball or the moon. Offering these students a "gateway" title that connects strongly to their beloved topic, but also includes ideas and information that can propel their curious young minds in new directions, may be especially powerful.

For example, if a child loves dinosaur fact books, hand them *The Iguanodon's Horn: How Artists and Scientists Put a Dinosaur Back*

Together Again and Again . . . and Again! by Sean Rubin, a forty-eight-page narrative nonfiction picture book that chronicles the historical and ongoing efforts to determine what the iguanodon looked like and reconstruct accurate models of the large plant-eating dinosaur. This book, which blends narrative and browsable nonfiction, does much more than just build readers' content knowledge of dinosaurs. It also puts historical events into context and shows the scientific process in action.

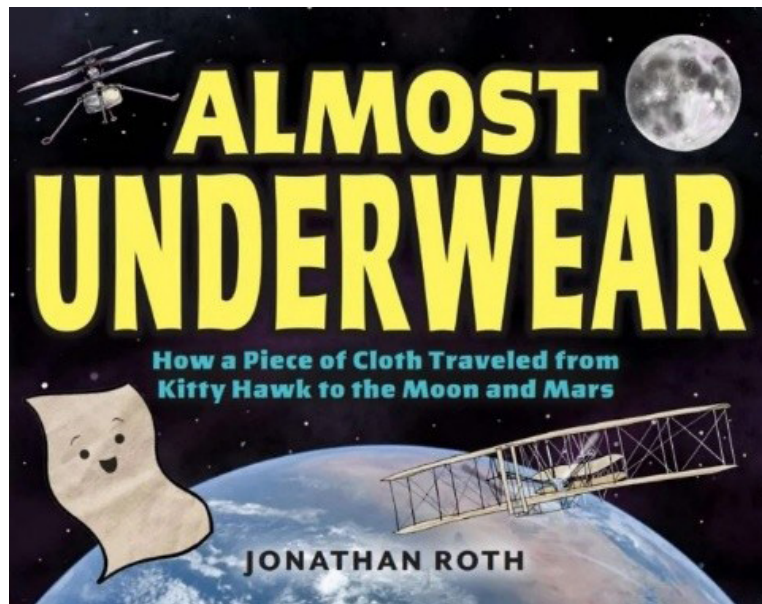
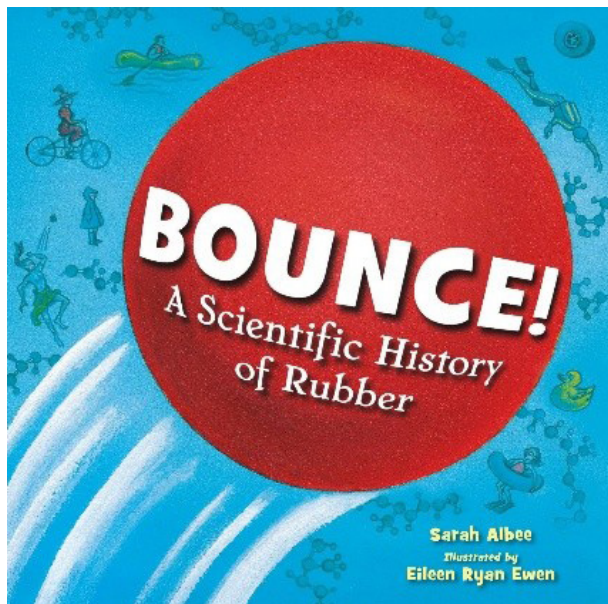
Because *The Iguanodon's Horn* accomplishes so much, it has the power to fuel inquiry into a broad range of interconnected topics. And because the book is moderately text-heavy and visually complex, it can also help children build their reading stamina.

Bounce! A Scientific History of Rubber by Sarah Albee is the perfect stepping stone for readers who have devoured your library's sports section and perhaps the sports biographies, too. Using familiar objects—such as basketballs, soccer balls, and bicycle tires—as a starting point, this picture book takes readers on a journey into the science and history of rubber.



Like *The Iguanodon's Horn*, this book offers readers a cornucopia of text features and visual elements. The main text is an engaging blend of narrative and expository text with substantive sidebars that provide clear scientific explanations. The whimsical art includes occasional speech bubbles (with cited sources in the backmatter) and appealing diagrammatic illustrations with helpful captions.

Most kids (and adults) have never thought about how the equipment used in their favorite sports is made, so this book will open readers' minds to a whole new way of thinking about the objects around us, how they were invented, and how they've changed over time.



Many young readers are fascinated by airplanes, flight, and outer space. When you notice them plowing through your library's fact-focused books on these topics, offer them a book with one of the most intriguing titles imaginable: *Almost Underwear: How a Piece of Cloth Traveled from Kitty Hawk to the Moon and Mars* by Jonathan Roth. This delightful forty-page picture book is a mix of archival photos, realistic graphic artwork, narrative text, and browsable elements that tell the little-known story of a piece of muslin cloth—from the wing of the Wright brothers' historic airplane to the moon's surface via *Apollo 11* and the Martian sky aboard the robotic space helicopter *Ingenuity*. Like

The Iguanodon's Horn and *Bounce*, it bridges science and history and introduces readers to a range of topics that they can explore in more detail by reading other books.

The beauty of *Almost Underwear* is that even students who aren't already fascinated by space and flight won't be able to resist the book's clever hook. As a result, it can launch a wide range of students on their own voyages of discovery. And that's the true joy of reading nonfiction—moving from book to book and topic to topic as we learn about the world and how it works and our place in it. &

Reference

1. Marc Aronson, "Consider the Source: The Gateway Drug," *School Library Journal*, November 7, 2013, <https://www.slj.com/story/the-gateway-drug-consider-the-source>.