



Children's Literature Reviews

## The Evolution of All-About Books: How Today's Nonfiction Can Inspire Young Writers

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Modern children's nonfiction emphasizes creativity and passion. By exploring engaging examples, educators can inspire students to write dynamic, personal nonfiction instead of lifeless all-about books.

**There's no denying** that, when it comes to creativity and innovation, we're in the midst of a golden age of children's nonfiction. "You have kids in your class who really like the facts and interesting things they can hold onto. Plus the quality of nonfiction that's coming out now is just over the top," says Meg Medina, 2023–2024 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. "I think nonfiction has a lot to offer" (Meg Medina, personal communication, July 1, 2024)

In recent years, nonfiction for kids has transformed from the stodgy series of all-about books we remember from childhood into a range of innovative new categories that feature captivating art, dynamic design, and rich engaging text (Stewart & Correia, 2021). And despite the recent increase in book challenges and bans, finely crafted nonfiction literature for children is receiving more positive attention than ever before from book reviewers, awards committees, educators, school and public librarians, and kids themselves.

But what hasn't changed is elementary school writing assignments. Most teachers are still asking students to write all-about books that mimic the traditional nonfiction of yesteryear.

When I do school visits, educators often ask me how they can work within the confines of their required curriculum to help students craft more vibrant, lucid informational writing, and my response

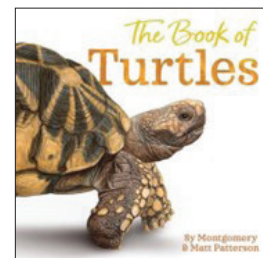
is to stop using mentor texts that are dull and lifeless. In truth, it's extremely challenging to write a general introduction to a topic in a way that's engaging to a broad audience (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2009; Portalupi & Fletcher, 2001). In fact, children's book authors are just beginning to discover how to do it.

What's their secret? To find out, let's look at two remarkable books: *The Book of Turtles* by Sy Montgomery and Matt Patterson (2023) and *The Great Lakes: Our Freshwater Treasure* by Barb Rosenstock and Jamey Christopher (2024).

Both books have titles that let us know their goal is to present a broad overview of a topic. And like most all-about books, they have a description text structure and an expository writing style. But that's where the similarities to all-about books of the past end. Instead of being uninspired recitations of facts, these innovative titles present information creatively, and the creators' passion for their topics comes shining through.

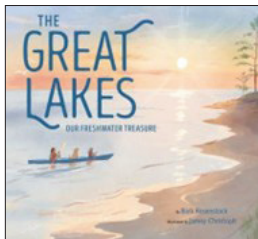
### ***The Book of Turtles***

*The Book of Turtles* welcomes readers with a thought-provoking idea: "Sometime around 240 million years ago . . . the shell invented the turtle." What an intriguing way of thinking about a turtle's unique body structure and how it came to be!



From there, Montgomery—a *New York Times* bestselling author, National Book Award Finalist, and Sibert Medalist—delves into shell anatomy and the role the shell plays during a turtle's long life. Masterful transitions lead us on a fascinating overview of turtle types, extreme turtle traits, unusual turtle behaviors, turtle senses, and turtle communication. Superb use of page turns creates a seamless flow from one subtopic to the next, as Montgomery discusses “celebrity” turtles, emphasizes that each turtle has a distinct personality, and then segues into the many dangers turtles face today. Following three pages (with a yellow background and different typography to set them apart) that highlight ten ways we can help turtles survive, we're treated to a heartfelt conclusion. The author's compelling conversational voice and irrepressible admiration for turtles make this all-about book a pleasure to read.

Patterson's copious acrylic paintings are well placed throughout the text to enrich and enhance the presentation. The gorgeous, detailed wildlife art gives readers an up-close, photorealistic view of one of nature's most incredible creatures. The backmatter includes a joyful photo of the author and illustrator holding turtles. An accompanying caption notes their volunteer work for the Turtle Survival Alliance, highlighting their deep commitment to the subjects of their book.



### **The Great Lakes: Our Freshwater Treasure**

In *The Great Lakes: Our Freshwater Treasure*, Rosenstock—author of the Caldecott Honoree *The Noisy Paint Box*, several ALA Notable Books for Children, and an NCTE Orbis Pictus

Honoree—uses an impressive array of literary devices to engage readers.

Following an interactive beginning, the author embeds three sections with sequence text structures within the book's overarching description text structure to give the text a story-like feel. First, we're invited to imagine ourselves being a snowflake that becomes part of a gigantic glacier, allowing us to witness the formation of the Great Lakes and

discover how they've changed over time. Next, we imagine being a drop of water that begins in Lake Superior and travels through the other lakes to the sea, including a harrowing ride over Niagara Falls!

From there, Rosenstock shares a wide range of information with a perfectly paced blend of fascinating facts and staggering statistics before launching into a chronological description of how humans have interacted with the lakes. Judicious use of direct address and lively language keeps us involved and engaged, and metaphors make the information relevant to our everyday lives. Christopher's bright, friendly watercolor paintings support and elevate the text, and sometimes they offer delightful surprises.

A shift to first person plural in the section about environmental challenges emphasizes our collective responsibility to protect and preserve our continent's freshwater treasure. And finally, the book's ending makes skillful use of repetition to echo the beginning and offer hope for the future. An author's note in the backmatter and brief bios on the back flap reveal that the author and illustrator both live along the shores of the Great Lakes and have a deep personal connection to their topic.

### **The Secret of Engaging Nonfiction**

Although *The Book of Turtles* and *The Great Lakes: Our Freshwater Treasure* are different in many ways, their creators have something critical in common—personal passion for their topic. And that's the secret of their success (Hadjiioannou et al., 2023; Stewart, 2020). It's what makes these two books so exceptional that they should be included in every elementary classroom library. And when it's time for the class to write all-about books, these titles should be every teacher's go-to mentor texts.

Books like these can show students that writing nonfiction isn't merely a matter of doing a little bit of research and then cobbling together a bunch of facts. To create nonfiction that delights as well as informs, writers have to dig deep. They have to get in touch with their passions and their vulnerabilities and use them to fuel their work. By taking the time to evaluate, assimilate, analyze, and synthesize their research with their hearts as well as their

### Getting Started: The Idea Incubator

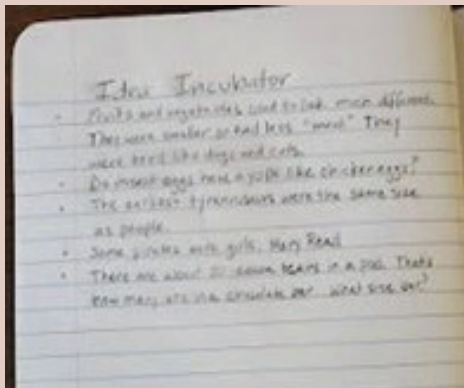
Many students find it challenging—even paralyzing—to choose a topic for informational writing assignments. An Idea Incubator can alleviate this problem.

At the beginning of the school year, invite students to write the words “Idea Incubator” at the top of the last page of their writer’s notebook. Let them know that every time they have an idea or question about something they see, hear, read, or experience, they can add it to their Idea Incubator. They can also list cool facts or things they wonder about.

If you model adding information to an Idea Incubator a few times and periodically set aside class time for students to update their own entries, they should quickly get the hang of it.

Like the Idea Board on the wall above the desk in my office, an Idea Incubator can help young writers keep track of ideas. If they’re lucky, they may be able to pull an idea directly from their list. They can also review their list with a partner and look for topics that keep popping up. A student might notice a lot of facts, questions, and ideas about the weather or cooking or baseball. From there, they can do a little bit of research and a whole lot of thinking to focus their topic in a way that excites them.

When students use an Idea Incubator to record and explore their natural interests, they’ll be more invested in the writing process, and their final draft will burst with passion and personality.



heads, writers can view a topic through their own personal lens, allowing them to present information in unique and interesting ways.

How can young writers get started on this journey? By choosing a topic they care about and searching for a way to make it their own. Their excitement, their curiosity, their sense of wonder can inspire them to craft prose that sings. Instead of writing all-about books that mimic the humdrum traditional nonfiction of the past, they’ll create info-licious books more like the vibrant, vital expository literature titles that are becoming increasingly common today (Fleming, 2024; Stewart & Young, 2018).

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**Melissa Stewart** has written more than two hundred nonfiction books for children, including the Sibert Medal Honoree *Summertime Sleepers: Animals that Estivate*, illustrated by Sarah S. Brannen, and the ALA Notable *Whale Fall: Exploring an Ocean-Floor Ecosystem*, illustrated by Rob Dunlavey. She cowrote *5 Kinds of Nonfiction: Enriching Reading and Writing Instruction with Children's Books* and edited the anthology *Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep: 50 Award-Winning Authors Share the Secret of Engaging Writing*.