

UpFront

The Five Kinds of Nonfiction

A look at the distinctions in informational books, with recommended titles

BY MELISSA STEWART

It's a great time for nonfiction. In the last 25 years, informational books for young readers have undergone exciting and dramatic changes, evolving into five distinct categories. Understanding the characteristics of these categories can help students predict the type of information they're likely to find in a book and how that information will be presented. It can also help them identify the kinds of nonfiction books they enjoy reading most.

Traditional

Not long ago, there was one kind of nonfiction for children—survey (aka “all-about”) books that provide a general overview of a topic. These traditional titles, often published in large series, emphasize balance and breadth of coverage, with language that is clear, concise, and straightforward. They have an expository writing style that explains, describes, or informs, and typically employ a description text structure.

For example:

About Fish: A Guide for Children by Cathryn Sill and John Sill (Peachtree, 2017)

Transportation! by Gail Gibbons (Holiday House, 2017)

Water by Seymour Simon (HarperCollins, 2017)

Browsable

Thanks to Dorling Kindersley's (DK) innovative “Eyewitness Books,” the early 1990s brought remarkable changes to expository nonfiction. These beautifully designed, lavishly illustrated books with short text blocks and extended captions revolutionized children's nonfiction by giving fact-loving kids a fresh, engaging way to access information. Readers can easily dip in and out, focusing on the content that interests them most, or they can read the books cover to cover. Today, many companies publish fact-tastic books in this category.

For example:

Eyewitness Books: Soccer (DK, 2018)

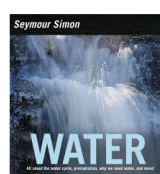
Browsable



Active



Traditional



Expository Literature



Narrative



Commercial Nonfiction

Literary Nonfiction

Guinness Book of World Records 2018 by Guinness World Records (Guinness World Records, 2017)

1,000 Facts About the White House by Sarah Wassner Flynn (National Geographic Kids, 2017)

Narrative

In the mid-1990s, children's authors began crafting narrative nonfiction—prose that tells a true story or conveys an experience. This style of writing appeals to fiction lovers because it includes real characters and settings; narrative scenes; and, ideally, a narrative arc with rising tension, a climax, and denouement. The scenes, which give readers an intimate look at the world and people being described, are linked by transitional text that provides necessary background while condensing parts of the true story that aren't relevant to the author's purpose. Although narrative nonfiction may have an *in medias res* opening, it generally features a chronological sequence text structure and is ideally suited for biographies and books that recount historical events.

Dazzle Ships: World War I and the Art of Confusion by Chris Barton and illustrated by Victo Ngai (Millbrook, 2017)

The World Is Not a Rectangle: A Portrait of Architect Zaha Hadid by Jeanette Winter (S. & S./Beach Lane, 2017)

Vincent and Theo: The Van Gogh Brothers by Deborah Heiligman (Holt, 2017)

Expository literature

When Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, funding priorities suddenly shifted. School library budgets were slashed, and many school librarians lost their jobs. Around the same time, a proliferation of websites made straightforward, kid-friendly information widely available without cost, which meant traditional survey books were no longer mandatory purchases for libraries.

As nonfiction book sales to schools and libraries slumped, authors began searching for ways to add value to their work, so they could compete with the Internet. The result has been a new breed of finely crafted expository literature that delights as well as informs.

Unlike traditional nonfiction, expository literature presents narrowly focused topics, such as STEM concepts and processes, in creative ways that reflect the author's passion for the subject. These books typically feature an innovative format and carefully chosen text structure, a strong voice, and rich, engaging language.

A Beetle Is Shy by Dianna Aston Hutts and illustrated by Sylvia Long (Chronicle, 2016)

A Hundred Billion Trillion Stars by Seth Fishman and illustrated by Isabel Greenberg (HarperCollins/Greenwillow, 2017)

Look at Me! How to Attract Attention in the Animal World by Steve Jenkins and Robin Page (HMH, 2018)

Active titles

Inspired by the maker movement, publishers have begun creating what booksellers call “active nonfiction”—browsable books that are highly interactive and/or teach skills that readers can use to engage in an activity. Written in an expository style, these how-to guides, cookbooks, field guides, craft books, and more are becoming increasingly popular with young readers.

Minecraft: Guide to Exploration by Mojang Ab and the Official Minecraft Team (Del Rey, 2017)

Stitch Camp: 18 Crafty Projects for Kids & Tweens by Nicole Blum and Catherine Newman (Storey, 2017)

Try This Extreme: 50 Fun & Safe Experiments for the Mad Scientist in You by Karen Romano Young (National Geographic, 2017)

Take a moment to evaluate your classroom or library book collection. Do you have enough nonfiction titles? Experts recommend a 50-50 mix of fiction and nonfiction. How diverse is

your nonfiction section? Does it include a healthy selection of books from all five categories—narrative, expository literature, traditional, browsable, and active?

Now think about your instruction. Do you tend to focus your reading and writing lessons around fiction? When you select informational books for read-alouds, book talks, or mentor texts in writing workshop, do you usually choose narrative nonfiction?

If you find yourself favoring fiction and narrative nonfiction, you aren't alone. Most people who choose to be children's librarians and literacy educators value and connect strongly with stories and storytelling. And it's natural for them to assume that young readers feel the same way. But this is a bias we must recognize and address.

Research clearly shows that many students (up to 75 percent, in some studies) enjoy expository writing as much as or more than narratives. And some kids have a strong preference for expository nonfiction. Because these fact-loving kids are more interested in data, ideas, and information than in making an emotional connection with a book's protagonist, they will only thrive as readers if they are given access to good, diverse expository nonfiction.

Let's celebrate all the different kinds of nonfiction and the kids who love it.

Activity: Introducing the five kinds of nonfiction

Organize students (grades 3–8) into small groups and invite each team to gather a variety of nonfiction books on a single topic from the school library. After the children have sorted the books into at least three categories that make sense to them, compare the criteria each group used.

Next, share books on the same topic that fit into each of the five categories. After reading aloud sections of each book, ask students to compare how the books present information.

Is the focus broad or narrow?

What kind of text structure, writing style does the author use? And does the writing have a distinct voice?

What similarities and differences do students notice across the categories?

Finally, send students back to the stacks to gather a selection of nonfiction books on a new topic. Invite each team to sort the books into the five types—narrative, expository literature, traditional, browsable, and active. Did they find examples of all five kinds of books? If not, can they explain why?

This piece has been adapted from a blog post originally published at “Celebrate Science” on December 13, 2017.

Melissa Stewart is the award-winning author of more than 180 nonfiction books for children.

If you find yourself favoring fiction and narrative nonfiction, you aren't alone.