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**Tony Stead • Linda Hoyt**  
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**A Guide  
to Teaching  
Nonfiction Writing**



**Explorations in Nonfiction Writing**  
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DEDICATED TO TEACHERS

*firsthand*

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***To all the teachers who have embraced nonfiction  
as the heartbeat of their writing program—***

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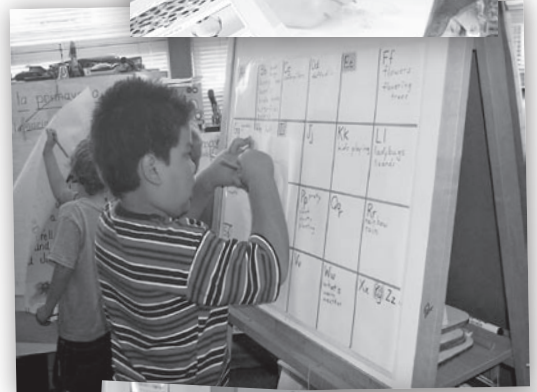
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## Explorations in Nonfiction Writing

*When I write, I wonder*

*When I write, I think*

*When I write, I learn*

*When I write . . .*

*I wrap myself in the magic of nonfiction*

# Rationale for Teaching Nonfiction Writing

Nonfiction writing used to be saved for genre studies in which young writers created a set of directions or engaged in crafting a report about animals. But, evidence now suggests that this limited view of nonfiction writing is "too little—too late!" We now know that informational literacy that engages our youngest learners as readers and writers of nonfiction texts needs to be an integral part of every learner's school experience from pre-school onward (Purcell-Gates, Duke, Martineau, 2007). We now know that forward-thinking educators of young children weave explicit scaffolds for nonfiction reading and nonfiction writing into the fabric of daily literacy instruction, making sure that children write for a wide variety of purposes and experience a broad array of nonfiction text types (Hoyt, 2009, 2004; Stead, 2007, 2002; Saunders-Smith, 2010, Glover, 2009).



*“Since young children are curious about the world, nonfiction reading and writing should be woven throughout the curriculum from the minute they start school. By beginning early on, we are preparing young children for nonfiction material they will be presented with and be expected to generate as they progress through the grades into adulthood.”*

— KELLY DAVIS,  
LITERACY COACH,  
HOWARD COUNTY,  
MARYLAND

*“Children live in a world full of information. The most important thing we can do is teach them to communicate in their world.”*

— BARBARA PETRUCCIO,  
LANGUAGE ARTS/  
SOCIAL STUDIES  
CURRICULUM  
SPECIALIST,  
HUDSON, OHIO

*“When we teach children how to write nonfiction, we tap into their passionate curiosity about the world around them. No longer will teachers hear the dreaded whine, “I don’t know what to write about!” The endless list of topics included in the world of nonfiction is waiting for children with open arms and is accessible to everyone!”*

— KELLY BOSWELL,  
TEACHER/AUTHOR,  
BOZEMAN,  
MONTANA

## TEACH NONFICTION WRITING EXPLICITLY

Nonfiction writing fills our lives. Everywhere we look there are newspapers, magazines, directions, street signs, recipes, letters, maps, menus, e-mails, Internet sites, and so on. As writers, we make lists, craft letters, send e-mails, provide explanations, and jot notes. In the real world, we have clear purposes and select the text types that help us fulfill our goals for remembering, recording, and communicating to others. To be successful in school, in the workplace, and in our personal lives, we must learn about this wide range of nonfiction text types so we can navigate and create them with comfort and purpose—to gain control over the unique structures, language, and visual features that comprise the heart of nonfiction texts. It is interesting to note that while informational texts make up the great majority of texts written and read by literate adults, far too few children are taught explicit strategies for reading and writing these text types (Barone and Mandell-Morrow, 2002).

## EMPHASIZE NONFICTION WRITING— FROM THE BEGINNING

The Common Core Standards (2010) along with grade-level expectations and standards from most states now call for a strong emphasis on reading and writing nonfiction texts—from the beginning. This means that learners of all ages need to become acquainted with the structures and features of informational texts, both as readers and as writers. They need to develop strategies for using those features to enhance understanding and increase efficiency in seeking and recording information and to communicate ideas. It was once thought that primary-grade learners were too young for nonfiction writing, but now we know that is not true. Even kindergartners love learning about the world while they are learning to read and learning to write. Nonfiction topics appeal to children’s intrinsic sense of wonder and fuel a natural desire to understand and to learn.

As nonfiction researchers and writers, our youngest learners become thoroughly engaged in identifying and using nonfiction text features such as labels, bullets, arrows, cross-section diagrams, and bold words. They find enormous purpose in capturing their learning in labeled diagrams, charts, posters, and student-authored books.





With nonfiction literacy in mind, we would expect to see primary writers engaged in research using artifacts, live animals, photographs, high-quality nonfiction reading materials, listening centers, and computers. We would expect to see these young learners recording information in pictures, in words, and in running sentences. We would expect them to read and write in collaboration with partners, take great pride in sharing their writing with each other, and enthusiastically generate questions that fuel more reading, more research, and more writing!

## BELIEVE THAT THEY CAN!

We know that humans want to write. Early humans carved messages on the walls of their caves and on stone tablets because of their innate desire to create messages for others to read. And, many of us can tell stories of our own children marking up the walls of our homes because they have such a strong desire to “write.” As early as 1966, the seminal research studies of Dolores Durkin determined that young children are actually ready to write before they are ready to read and that emergent readers benefit greatly from attempts at writing, especially when the writing is based upon real-world experience.

The first challenge is to believe that a kindergartner or first or second grader can research and can learn to craft quality nonfiction selections. If we believe in them, and set the bar high with explicit modeled writing and coaching, even our youngest learners will be able to reach astonishing heights as nonfiction writers.

The feedback from primary teachers who have taken the leap and immersed themselves and their students in nonfiction writing has been overwhelmingly positive. They all report that their students are writing more and showing greater levels of accomplishment than they dreamed could be possible.



*“I am so excited about how the children are writing, especially in comparison to years past. My kindergartners are confident with several text types and absolutely love to write. We have lists, notes, and multi-page books that look like they were done by much older students. Thank you for helping me to believe. . . . They are more accomplished writers and I am a more accomplished teacher.”*

— SANDY GORDON,  
KINDERGARTEN  
TEACHER,  
HUDSON, OHIO

“The hardest thing was learning to trust my students. I was so afraid that they wouldn’t write or that the writing wouldn’t be good. All it took was an interesting topic, a bit of modeled writing on a chart, and they were off and running.”

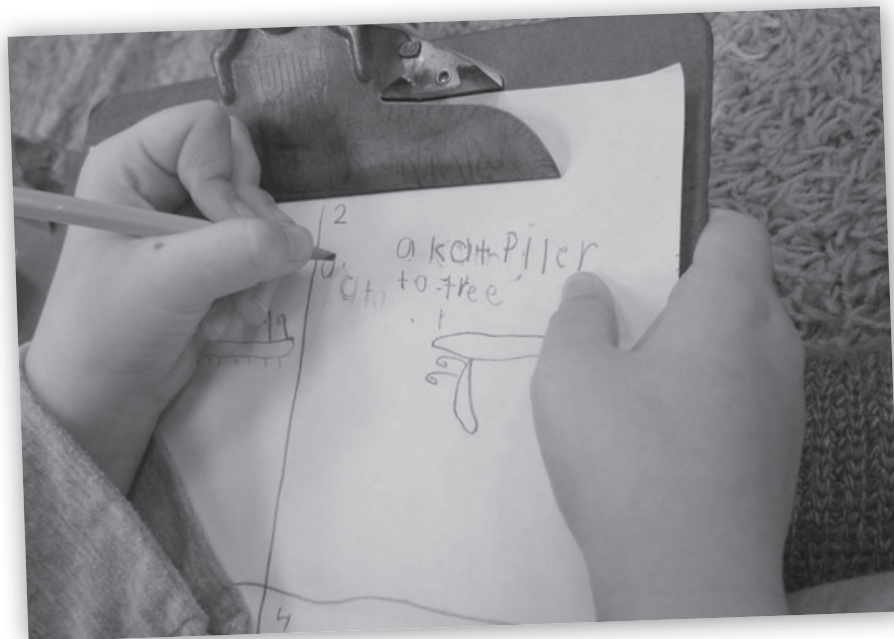
— ANDREA THOMPSON,  
FIRST-GRADE  
TEACHER

## JUST DO IT!

Donald Graves was often heard sharing the story of a time when he gave paper and pencils to three-year-olds, simply saying, “You may write on this.” The three-year-olds dove in with enthusiasm and great abandon, producing writing-like script and then proudly reading their writing to one another. There was no concern that these writers would write like this forever; instead there was celebration of what they could do. The enthusiasm of these emergent writers was a perfect pathway for instruction and growth.

As we launch experiences with nonfiction writing, it is important to remember that children do not need to have correct spelling, complete sentence structures, deep content knowledge, or well-developed writing traits in place before they begin to engage as nonfiction writers. They will develop these essential skills as a natural extension of modeled writing, coaching conferences, revising, editing, and presenting their work. They WILL learn as they go. With each successive writing experience, writing skills will grow and children’s writing will gain sophistication.

The key is: *Don’t expect perfection—expect growth.* Once you get your students started with nonfiction writing, there will be amazing opportunities for growth and development. Do lots of modeling and take time to think aloud as you write under the watchful eyes of your students. Let them hear what is in your mind as you capture an interesting fact on paper, insert a label on a diagram, or list the attributes of a tree frog. Show them again and again how you write, revise



All writers, even those who are most vulnerable, benefit from the concept development and language acquisition that go hand in hand with nonfiction writing.

by choosing a better word, edit by remembering to put a period at the end of a sentence. At the right developmental moment, your models will “stick.” Celebrate each moment of growth knowing that when your students write tomorrow, they will do even better. Spelling, sentence structure, and traits will develop—hand in hand—within the context of the instructionally rich writing opportunities you provide. So “just do it!” Leap in and get started.

## **BE CONFIDENT THAT VULNERABLE LEARNERS CAN SUCCEED AS NONFICTION WRITERS**

It is helpful to remember that in early childhood, understanding builds from concrete experience. It is through real experiences with real things that concepts, understanding, and language are acquired. When young children get to touch, think, talk, and wonder, they feel a stronger sense of connection to their learning and move forward with a powerful sense of intrinsic motivation. For these reasons, nonfiction writing is a perfect entry point for special education learners, students learning English as an additional language, and learners with limited academic language and experience.

In the nonfiction writing classroom, there is a sense of energy as writers observe, think together, and connect with their subject. This classroom often erupts with excitement as researchers and writers share their observations and factual learning. In this classroom, learning floats on a sea of academic talk that supports and lifts content understanding and language.

The emphasis on visual literacy, collaboration, and modeled writing in the nonfiction writing classroom offers important systems of support for learners who need additional scaffolding to reach their highest levels of potential.

For example, Sketch to Stretch, a TESOL-endorsed strategy, is often used during research so students can represent their learning through a sketch or a labeled diagram. With Sketch to Stretch, the academic vocabulary is highlighted and the visual representation of the facts helps learners access the content through multiple systems of communication (Hoyt, 2009). Visual texts such as this scaffold content understanding, build academic vocabulary, and support even the most vulnerable learners toward success with nonfiction writing.

### *“English Language*

*Learners learn language best when it is embedded in meaningful context. When ELLs read high-interest books about science, social studies, and language arts, discuss their reading to build oral language, and then respond to learning through different kinds of writing activities, they gain the academic language they need for school success.”*

—DRS. YVONNE AND DAVID FREEMAN, AUTHORS OF NUMEROUS BOOKS ON SUPPORTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

# Building a Culture of Inquiry and Research

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Research and data gathering need to be positioned at the very center of a nonfiction writing program, as children must learn how to acquire the facts that will fuel their work as writers. But it is important to remember that each time we take a walk, stopping to look closely at ants scurrying in and out of their burrows, or taking time to examine the fragile pollens clustered at the heart of a daisy, we are conducting research.

## QUESTIONING

Questions empower researchers. Research and questioning are inseparable partners in the nonfiction writing classroom. Whether young learners are researching the parts of a flower or the process of using ice and rock salt to chill ice cream, questions should be flowing in a constant stream of engaged wonder. For young writers, questions are a significant device for seeking to understand their world. Primary-grade learners need to understand that it is good to ask questions and wonder collaboratively with their learning partners. They need to understand that their questions will lead them to more research and to deeper learning. It is interesting that many states now have standards requiring students to generate questions on a topic and then follow their own line of questioning with research and nonfiction writing. So fire up those questions and keep them rolling!

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

With our youngest readers and writers, the first and perhaps most significant source of information is personal experience. Those experiences may be part of their prior knowledge or built through hands-on experiments and observations that you have provided for your students. To create a culture of inquiry and an understanding that real life is filled with opportunities for research, it is important to label these observations and life experiences "research." When you gather your students to observe changing weather patterns, notice the intricate webbing spun by a spider, study the veins in a leaf, or plant seeds, tell your students that this is research. Label it! Show your researcher-writers how to gather data, record facts, make notes, create labeled diagrams, and record the important learning that is at the tips of their fingers. Then, invite them to pick up their pencils and join you in recording their research.

*"If you give children the opportunity to explore and ask questions, their level of understanding and the quality of their nonfiction writing will far surpass what would have been accomplished through typical direct instruction."*

— MELISSA  
LEONARD, FIRST-  
AND SECOND-  
GRADE TEACHER,  
DENTON, TEXAS



## SCHOOL-BASED SOURCES FOR RESEARCH

We know that it is not likely that your students will be able to have hands-on experience with a polar bear, to touch the ridged surface of a glacier, or to wiggle through the jungle with a giant anaconda. So we also need to be sure writers are skilled in gathering information from realia, print sources, video, audio programming, and Internet research.

### REALIA

Realia is the next best thing to real-life experience. Real fruits, vegetables, plants, animal hides, turtle shells, fish tanks, fossils, and so on provide rich opportunities for hands-on research, questioning, and language building. This is particularly important for students who are learning English as an additional language. For these learners, firsthand experience and realia provide the strongest possible foundation for the development of academic language and concepts. For all learners, realia adds a sense of excitement and wonder that can be far more difficult to achieve with a picture or written text.



*“Teachers always talk about making writing authentic. Nonfiction writing can’t help but be authentic.”*

— NOEMI URIBE,  
FIRST- AND  
SECOND-GRADE  
TEACHER,  
DENTON, TEXAS

### LOTS OF BOOKS ON LOTS OF TOPICS

The classroom library is central to success with nonfiction writing. Each classroom should be brimming with nonfiction texts that both inform and invite readers into the magic of their pages. Building a robust classroom library is a career-long effort, but working steadily at it, adding resources year by year, will contribute much to your rich learning environment. For temporary resources, don’t forget to take advantage of your school and local libraries, your school or colleagues’ collections, and other contributions. We highly encourage you to examine your state standards for science and social studies to ensure that you have wonderfully rich and enticing resources devoted to those topics. We want to be sure that nonfiction writing is not seen as an add-on curriculum but rather as a natural extension of the topics and disciplines you need to cover to help your students progress toward standards.

### GROUP BOOKS BY TOPIC

Many teachers find it helpful to group nonfiction books according to topic so writers can easily find collections of books on penguins, bears, solar energy, celebrations around the world, and so on. It is also helpful to identify books that are written with a purpose in mind: books that describe, instructions, scientific explanations, persuasion, and nonfiction narratives such as biographies or *Bat Loves the Night* by Nicola Davies.



When books and other resources are organized by topic, researchers find it easier to locate information. Inviting displays pique interest in a topic.

### MULTI-LEVEL THEME SETS

As we embrace increasing levels of diversity in our classrooms, it is critical that we provide students with opportunities to engage with books and resources that entice and fuel their sense of wonder, but we also need to offer resources at their “just right” reading level. Multi-level theme sets are a support system that provides a range of books and other resources on a focused topic, while offering a range of difficulty levels for reading and inquiry (Hoyt, 2003).

If you use a crate with hanging folders inside, your multi-level theme set can easily include multiple-copy sets of leveled selections, magazines, read-aloud selections, pages printed from the Internet, recorded books and CDs for listening, DVDs to play on the computer, and so on. Multi-level theme sets keep topics at the forefront while enabling you to better meet the literacy learning needs of your students by giving them resources that are accessible to them as readers.

As you build your multi-level theme sets, it is important to indicate reading level in such a way that it is not evident to your students. Mark books with a color-coded set of dots, for example, using one to five green dots for A-E (A = 1 green dot, B = 2 green dots, and so on) and one to five blue dots for F-J, and so on. We would never want students to feel limited by a perception that they are a “level D” reader and can therefore only interact with level D books. The levels will assist you in matching children to books for instruction, but we also want to ensure that your writers can and do feel free to interact with books that intrigue them, as there is much to be learned from pictures. And, research suggests that when young children have multiple text experiences related to the same topic, the core academic vocabulary they build enables them to read increasingly more difficult texts related to the topic. With concepts and key vocabulary in hand, children who might normally read at that level D can move quickly into more complex reading selections on the topic.

The following is a small sample of what a multi-level theme set on animals might include.

Leveled Books for Research		
LEVEL	TITLE	PUBLISHER
A	<i>Life in a Pond</i>	Newbridge
B	<i>Animals of the Rainforest</i> <i>Look at the Animals</i>	Rigby Benchmark
C	<i>Koalas</i> <i>Animals in the Desert</i> <i>How Animals Move</i> <i>Animals at Night</i>	Rigby Rigby National Geographic National Geographic
D	<i>Animals Hide</i> <i>Under the Ice</i>	Newbridge Rigby
E	<i>Caterpillar Diary</i> <i>Colorful Animals</i>	Rigby Rigby
F	<i>A Frog Has a Sticky Tongue</i> <i>Fantastic Frogs</i>	National Geographic Rigby
G	<i>How Do Frogs Grow?</i> <i>Chimpanzees</i>	Newbridge Rigby
H	<i>Piranhas</i>	Rigby
I	<i>The Speedy Cheetah</i>	National Geographic
J	<i>Animal Mysteries</i> <i>Animal Armor</i>	Rigby National Geographic
L	<i>Baboon Troops</i> <i>Mountain Gorilla</i>	Rigby Heinemann Classroom
M	<i>Life Cycle of a Frog</i>	Heinemann Classroom

“Children need to chronicle their knowledge in sequences, lists, descriptions, explanations, labels, captions, and more. What they see, know, and wonder should come to life as they research and construct nonfiction texts.”

— DR. GAIL SAUNDERS-SMITH, AUTHOR OF NON-FICTION TEXT STRUCTURES FOR BETTER COMPREHENSION AND RESPONSE

In addition to leveled books, you'll also want to collect other accessible, theme-related resources like those that follow.

Additional Resources for Instruction and Research Stations		
RESOURCE	TITLE (SERIES)	AUTHOR/PUBLISHER
Books for Read-Aloud and Learning from Visuals	<i>Animals Nobody Loves</i>	Seymour Simon/Chronicle Books
	<i>Frog (See How They Grow)</i>	DK Preschool
	<i>Actual Size</i>	Steve Jenkins/Houghton Mifflin Books for Children
	<i>Bat Loves the Night (Read and Wonder)</i>	Nicola Davies/Candlewick
Magazines	<i>Young Explorer</i>	National Geographic
	<i>Explorer</i>	National Geographic
	<i>Zoobooks</i>	Wildlife Education, Ltd.
	<i>Your Big Backyard</i>	National Wildlife Federation
	<i>Ranger Rick</i>	National Wildlife Federation
Big Books	<i>What Do Animals Need?</i>	Benchmark
Books for a Listening Center	<i>Animal Habitats</i>	National Geographic
Wordless Text	<i>A Dog's Life</i>	National Geographic



# Understanding the Goals of Teaching Nonfiction Writing

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Underpinning every strong nonfiction writing curriculum is a commitment to increasing writing volume across the curriculum, to understanding purpose and text types, to exploring and using nonfiction text features, and to striving for critical and visual literacy.

## WRITING VOLUME

It is essential that we increase writing volume across the curriculum. It has been well proven that writing influences content retention, boosts acquisition of academic vocabulary, and enhances reasoning ability (Marzano, 2008; Hoyt, 2007; Stead; 2002). So, it makes good sense to write in response to read-aloud, math, science, social studies, small-group literacy instruction—every segment of the learning day. When children write across the curriculum, the writing is naturally and authentically nonfiction in focus.

With increasing writing volume and *extensive* experiences in mind, primary-grade writers can and should write at every available opportunity—creating labeled diagrams of plant growth, writing letters to a partner explaining what they learned in math, crafting directions for a project in art, making a list of resources needed for a unit of study in science, or writing "From the Desk of \_\_\_\_" notes about an experience at a learning center. Kindergarteners can write or illustrate sticky-note book reviews for their favorite books, create a persuasive poster reminding others to cover a sneeze, or write a set of directions together during guided writing. Extensive cross-curricular immersion in nonfiction writing helps first and second graders understand that writing helps us to remember and to think more deeply, while stretching the range of text types that they can control.

## RESEARCH AND NONFICTION WRITING

In addition to extensive, cross-curricular writing experiences, young writers also need opportunities to slow down and to explore a specific text type within the context of the writing workshop. With an *intensive* writing experience, writers take time to closely examine the internal workings of a specific text type and engage in research on topics of personal interest during an extended writing unit.

*“When students write more frequently, their ability to think, reason, analyze, communicate, and perform on tests will improve. Writing in every curricular area, using many different text types, is critical to student achievement.”*

— DR. DOUGLAS REEVES, CENTER FOR PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT, IN GREINER, "ELEVEN RESEARCH-BASED TIPS FOR IMPROVING WRITING INSTRUCTION," 2007

*“I’ve never met a student who didn’t feel like he or she could write nonfiction . . . whether it was a list, labeling pictures, a note, or a letter. I often let my students write my notes to the office, custodians, librarian, and other teachers. They are always happy to deliver their notes and get a response to their writing.”*

— NOEMI URIBE,  
FIRST- AND  
SECOND-GRADE  
TEACHER,  
DENTON, TEXAS

An extended writing unit stretches over time—taking from a week to a month—as nonfiction writers investigate, gather facts, and prepare to carry a piece of writing across the entire writing process. Beginning writers learn to think about why they are writing, who the audience might be, and what kind of nonfiction text would best support their work (Stead, 2002). In an extended unit, where research and nonfiction writing come together, writing can at times be messy as young writers gather data and communicate it in sketches, notes, and lists. It can be focused as writers closely examine nonfiction mentors that are exemplars of the text type they will be creating.

An extended nonfiction writing unit is filled with deep and long-lasting learning because, over time, children take on many roles. They cast themselves as observers, watching as their teacher thinks aloud and creates a model of the focus text type. They are careful listeners, noticing how the teacher verbally cross-checks to ensure that the modeled writing has the same features and structures as the mentor text. They are researchers, guided by their own questions and lines of inquiry. Most of all, they are writers. They take notes, draw sketches, create drafts, and experience all phases of the writing process.

Because extended writing units can be stretched over time and integrated into the routines of a writers workshop, there is time for small-group guided writing. There is time for one-on-one conferences. There is time to engage in a whole-class collaborative project and an independent project that include all the elements of their intensive study. The time that an intensive experience provides for nonfiction writers is fertile ground for the development of excellence in nonfiction writing.

Extensive and intensive experiences are both essential for primary-grade learners as they develop proficiency with nonfiction writing.

## PURPOSE AND TEXT TYPE

Young writers need to learn that nonfiction authors write for specific purposes. They write to describe, to entertain, to provide instructions, to explain, and so on.

When we write informational texts, it is important to understand the purpose for which we are writing and then to select a text type to match our goals. If the goal is to describe, we could do that through a news article, a poem, a question-and-answer book, a letter, an e-mail message, or an informational report. If the goal is to provide instructions, those might be delivered with a poster, a brochure, a scientific procedure, a recipe, or a written set of directions. So with deliberate purposes and a wide range of text types in mind, we can always find an authentic writing activity for our students.

## Purposes and Text Types: Nonfiction Writing

PURPOSE	CHARACTERISTICS	TEXT TYPES
<p><b>INFORM</b> to provide information: describe, explain, give the reader facts, tell what something looks like, summarize</p>	<p>Expository or other topic-centered structure, title, opening statement, information organized in logical clusters, conclusion or summary</p>	<p>Informational report (Understanding How Frogs Eat), descriptive report (The Body of a Blue Whale), explanatory report—telling how or why (How Wind Farms Work), observation log (effect of water color added to water and a stalk of celery), scientific description (patterns of scales on a fish), comparison, news article, question-and-answer, poem, photos with captions, sign, letter, note, list, e-mail message, postcard, presentation, interview, speech</p>
<p><b>INSTRUCT</b> to tell the reader how to do something; to outline a process</p>	<p>Title and/or goal, materials or equipment list, steps are numbered with verb-first sentences or presented in a specific order using time-order words (<i>first, second, third; now, next, then, finally</i>)</p>	<p>Recipe, science experiment, directions, instructions or manual, safety procedure, health procedure (washing hands, covering a sneeze), itinerary/schedule, rules, describing steps in a process such as a math operation, art project, steps in a fire drill, writing process, map with directions</p>
<p><b>NARRATE</b> to draw the reader into an event or sequence of events to provide insights into a situation or the life of a person or other living thing</p>	<p>Well-developed setting, sensory imaging, sequential (usually time-ordered) structure, relevant details situate events in a time and place, significance/importance of situation is established, distinct ending</p>	<p>Personal narrative, narrative nonfiction (factually accurate writing that is infused with craft elements and imagery), eye-witness account, news/magazine article recounting an event, nonfiction storyboard, diary, autobiography, biography, historical account, photo essay (sequential), observation log that includes personal thoughts and reflections (over time), narrative poetry, retell</p>
<p><b>PERSUADE</b> to influence the reader to take action or to subscribe to a belief</p>	<p>Overview of the topic, statement of author's position/argument, supporting facts/evidence, appeal to reader, conclusion or summary</p>	<p>Letter, advertisement, poster, essay, advertisement, brochure, review (movie or book), speech (e.g. political), debate, poem, pro/con argument</p>
<p><b>RESPOND</b> to express ideas about a text or topic; to engage in analytical, critical, evaluative thinking; may include a specific prompt or format</p>	<p>Clear reference to a text or prompt created by an outside agent; cites specific examples and includes analysis</p>	<p><i>Response to literature:</i> reflective, analytical, or evaluative analysis, critical review, character study, author study</p> <p><i>Response to an academic prompt:</i> essay answer, a response to a test prompt</p> <p><i>Response to personal communication:</i> letter, note, e-mail</p>

*“Even the youngest writers become adept at including text features such as labels and diagrams to support the comprehension of a reader. When we foster the use of text features, we enhance a writer’s ability to comprehend throughout his life.”*

— JANE OLSON,  
SPECIAL  
EDUCATION  
REGIONAL COACH,  
APPLE VALLEY,  
MINNESOTA

## NONFICTION TEXT FEATURES

Informational text has many unique features. These features are designed to support readers in navigating through resources and provide reader-friendly access to content (Mooney, 2001). When readers expect these nonfiction features to appear in informational passages, they can move in and out of the material with confidence and purpose. To build this confidence and purpose with text features, nonfiction writers need first to notice these features in mentor books, read-alouds, and leveled selections used for small-group and independent reading. They need to carefully note which features occur most often, what the features tell the reader, and which features help them most as a reader, and then consciously infuse nonfiction features into the nonfiction they create.

The diagram illustrates a nonfiction text layout with several labeled features:

- title:** A box labeled "title" points to the word "Plants" at the top of the text column.
- heading:** A box labeled "heading" points to the subheading "Saguaro Cactus" within the text column.
- inset:** A box labeled "inset" points to a circular inset photograph of a woodpecker on a tree trunk.
- photograph:** A box labeled "photograph" points to a large, vertical photograph of a saguaro cactus on the right side of the page.
- caption:** A box labeled "caption" points to a line of text at the bottom of the page: "The Saguaro is the largest cactus in the United States."

Nonfiction features have two major functions. One is to communicate information in a visual way. Within this function, we see photographs, illustrations, diagrams, charts, graphs, tables, flow charts, arrows, and storyboards. The second function of nonfiction text features is to draw attention to important ideas and concepts. Within this function, we see titles, headings, subheadings, bold words, captions, tables of contents, glossaries, indexes, and so on.

**TO COMMUNICATE INFORMATION GRAPHICALLY, USE . . .**

photograph  
 illustration  
 diagram  
 chart  
 graph  
 table  
 flow chart  
 storyboard  
 map  
 legend or key  
 cross section  
 cutaway  
 time line

**TO DRAW ATTENTION TO IMPORTANT IDEAS AND CONCEPTS, USE . . .**

title or headline  
 heading  
 subheading  
 bold word  
 caption  
 label  
 arrow  
 bullets  
 text box  
 callout  
 table of contents  
 glossary  
 index

**CRITICAL AND VISUAL LITERACY**

Critical literacy—reading, hearing, or viewing to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate content—and visual literacy—inferring meaning from pictures, photographs, diagrams, and other graphic forms—are the cognitive underpinnings of nonfiction writing. Without the ability to construct meaning from a variety of contexts, writers have nothing to write about.

**CRITICAL LITERACY**

As the volume of world knowledge continues to grow, it is essential that we challenge our students from the earliest ages to read critically. As nonfiction readers and writers, they need to consider perspectives, point of view, accuracy, and relevance of information. When learners adopt a stance of critical literacy, they can more easily see the persuasive and biased tones inherent in advertising, letters to the editor, promotional brochures, and Internet sources. They can question, wonder, and consider multiple sources on each topic. They learn to be deliberate in separating fact from opinion and steadfast in their search for clear communication (Hoyt, 2003).

Writings about Christopher Columbus have become classic examples of misinformation spread as truth. For centuries, children have grown up celebrating Christopher Columbus as the discoverer of North America, even though we knew that he didn't *discover* America. The continent was already richly inhabited by people with sophisticated cultures and a possibly more advanced lifestyle than that of Europe at the time (Mann, 2002). With a stance toward critical literacy, we can

guide students to read about Christopher Columbus, the Vikings who explored the area two hundred years earlier, and the highly developed cultures and agricultural talents of the native North American tribes. With this broad base of perspectives, writers can engage in thoughtful conversations that go far beyond a simple recounting of dates and events.

Learning to Present Both Sides		
WE READ . . .	WE THINK THIS MEANS . . .	WE WONDER . . .
The Pilgrims landed and started to build homes.	The natives had to share the land.	How did the natives feel?  Were they mad at the Pilgrims?  Did the natives have to leave because the Pilgrims took their land?  Did this book tell us both sides of the story?

The next step is to turn these conversations into opportunities to research and write. Whether kindergarteners listen to a read-aloud and draw or write one fact about the natives' response on a sticky note or second graders delve into your Pilgrim history book basket, all are thinking deeply and beginning to learn about multiple perspectives.

Some Experiences to Help Writers Develop Critical Literacy
<b>TO CONTRAST FACT AND FICTION</b>
<b>Read:</b> <i>Waiting for Wings</i> by Lois Ehlert, <i>Caterpillar Diary</i> by David Drew, and <i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i> by Eric Carle <b>Talk and write:</b> to contrast fact and fiction accounts of caterpillars
<b>TO EVALUATE REALISM</b>
<b>Read:</b> <i>The Biggest Bear</i> by Lynd Ward, <i>Blueberries for Sal</i> by Robert McCloskey, <i>Goldilocks and the Three Bears</i> ; then read nonfiction books on bears. <b>Talk and write:</b> to compare the way each author portrayed bears. In which fiction stories were the bears most like real bears?
<b>TO DEVELOP PERSPECTIVE</b>
<b>Present:</b> a problem of interest to the students such as how long recess should be or what to offer for school lunch <b>Talk:</b> about perspectives. What do students think? How might a teacher's or a principal's thinking be different? What suggestions do students have to help recess or lunchtime to run more smoothly? <b>Write:</b> a letter to the principal with your suggestions.



## VISUAL LITERACY

Visual images are powerful tools of communication. They bring significant amounts of information to a reader, greatly enhance understanding, and provide nonfiction writers with an alternative system for communicating ideas and images. The old adage, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” is actually quite accurate when considered in terms of brain research and studies of human learning (Jensen, 2008).

Wikipedia describes visual literacy: *the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image, a chart, or a symbolic representation*. It is based on the understanding that to teach learners to read and write at top levels of effectiveness, we must provide direct instruction in how to both understand and produce visual images such as photographs, illustrations, diagrams, and charts—to use graphic organizers, flow charts, and storyboards to communicate information.

As coaches for young writers, it is important to remember that the images we encounter in nonfiction resources greatly influence comprehension of the topic and that, in fact, we can use these images to bring everyone along: emergent readers and writers, English Language Learners, and fluent readers and writers alike can learn from and create graphic images that communicate meaning. With this in mind, we need to teach readers of nonfiction to pay close attention to those visuals and consciously integrate information in them with any available print (Stead, 2006).

Beginning readers can and should use visual literacy and go beyond identification of a subject. They can and should engage in interpreting, inferring, and critically analyzing visual information in the resources they encounter in their research. With modeling and coaching, learners can analyze the perspective of a photograph, wondering about the time of day or the time of year. They can weave language and description around a storyboard or flow chart explaining the life cycle of a butterfly. With critical and visual literacy as partners in thinking, a comparison chart that shows a great white shark as the same size as an automobile should be subjected to a rigorous round of challenges such as: What kind of car? Is it a compact car or an SUV?

Through visual literacy, young writers learn to offer detailed descriptions, to improve observation, and engage in critical thinking. Then, as they construct nonfiction texts of their own, writers continually wonder, “Which visual features might I add that will help my reader to understand?” “Is this information better represented by a visual or by sentences?” Visual encoding and decoding are essential skills for comprehension in reading and in writing. As you guide your nonfiction writers, be sure to take advantage of opportunities to think aloud about visual texts and demonstrate how to infuse them into writing.

“Visuals are a characteristic and important feature of informational text. Often a visual text (such as a map or diagram) will convey the meaning more clearly and memorably than the same information written in words or paragraphs.”

— STEVE MOLINE,  
AUTHOR OF *I SEE  
WHAT YOU MEAN*

“Enhance kids’ visual comprehension by using a masking tool (a piece of paper with a circular cutout). Have kids look through the cutout to focus in on smaller sections of a picture and then ‘zoom out’ to re-look at the whole in view of the details they’ve studied.”

— HARVEY (SMOKEY)  
DANIELS

# Emphasizing the Writing Process

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The writing process is the heart and soul, the essential framework, of any high-quality writing program. With an emphasis on process, young writers begin to understand that writing is about communicating and that writers need to consider both the purpose and the audience for the writing. Guided by purpose and audience, writers can then make better decisions about what to write, how much to write, whether or not to take a piece to publication, and so on. If a second grader is taking notes based on observation of an emerging butterfly, the writer is his or her own audience, so it doesn't make sense to revise, edit, and publish the notes. If those notes are turned into a labeled diagram and accompanying sentences that will be part of a class book, a poster, or a published product, then the writer has an obligation to be sure that communication is clear and effective. That writer needs to be sure that there are spaces between words and that spelling is such that someone else can read the work. That writer also has an obligation to be sure that the handwriting and presentation are neatly done and a source of personal pride.

The power of the writing process lies deep within the process itself—thinking about *why* you are writing and *who* will read the work. If someone else will read the work, then writers must understand that the writing is not over when they finish writing labels on a picture or crafting a sentence. The label and the sentence are the beginning. Writing is over when you have met your goals as a communicator and a thinker—when you are sure someone else can learn from what you have written—when you can take pride in the writing that you present to others to read.

The labels for the phases of the writing process vary from context to context but essentially describe the same continuum from idea to published piece. The nonfiction process is unique only in that prewriting includes some kind of research or gathering of facts and that the accuracy of those facts is important throughout the writing and editing process. The chart on page 19 clarifies the writer's focus at each stage of the process.




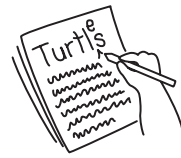



## GETTING STARTED WITH THE WRITING PROCESS

When writers are first exposed to the writing process, they may work through the phases one after the other in concert with teacher modeling and support. For emergent writers and those newly introduced to the writing process, this kind of guided scaffolding ensures that nonfiction writers can experience each phase with explicit teacher guidance.

Once the process is understood, nonfiction writers may be ready for a fully implemented writers workshop model in which writers move in and out of the phases of the process as individuals rather than as a whole class. In this case, you first need to analyze your writers' level of understanding of your target text type in a pre-assessment and guide writers through a whole-class project to fill in the gaps in their experience. Then, when it is time for the individual project, these writers can operate with high levels of independence and move through the phases at their own pace.

## Nonfiction Writing and the Writing Process

PREWRITING: PLANNING AND RESEARCH	DRAFTING	REVISING	EDITING	PUBLISHING: PRESENTING, SHARING, AND CELEBRATING
Getting ready to write	Getting ideas on the page	Polishing my thinking	Tuning up conventions	Publishing and presenting for an audience
				
<p>Think.</p> <p>Observe.</p> <p>Research. Get facts from pictures, books, the computer, videos, interviews, anywhere.</p> <p>Write or draw your research facts.</p> <p>Talk about your facts. Choose a topic.</p> <p>Think about who you are writing for.</p> <p>Think about why you are writing.</p> <p>Choose what you will write. (A letter? A poster? A report? Or what?)</p>	<p>Focus on what you want to say.</p> <p>Use your research to get the facts.</p> <p>Write the letters you know to spell words.</p> <p>Use the structure and features of the text type (letter, note, poster, report, and so on).</p> <p>Use interesting words: precise nouns, powerful verbs, sensory images.</p> <p>Include nonfiction features like headings and pictures. Write an interesting beginning and a satisfying ending.</p>	<p>Reread and ask:</p> <p>Does this make sense? Is there enough detail so a reader can "see" what I'm writing about?</p> <p>Are facts about the same thing grouped together?</p> <p>Are the facts accurate? Does this look like my teacher's example of this kind of text? (procedure, explanation, letter, report, and so on)</p> <p>Are the sentences varied? Do they start with different words? Are some long and some short?</p> <p>Did I use interesting words? When I read this to my friends, what questions did they ask me? What can I make better?</p>	<p>Focus on one thing at a time. Read to check for spaces between words. Then read it again to check the spelling, and so on.</p> <p>Check for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Spaces between words</li> <li>•Spelling</li> <li>•Capital letters</li> <li>•Title</li> <li>•Neat handwriting</li> <li>•Periods, commas, exclamation points</li> <li>•Complete sentences</li> </ul> <p>Do I have clear titles, headings, pictures, captions, and so on?</p> <p>Can my friends read this? What are their ideas for making it better?</p>	<p>If your writing is a book, number the pages and make a cover, a title page, a table of contents, an about-the-author page, an index or glossary, and a page for reader comments.</p> <p>If your writing is a letter, mail it!</p> <p>If your writing is a poster, display it!</p> <p>Show off your work!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Display it in the classroom library, the school office, the library, a doctor's office, a retirement center, and so on.</li> <li>•Read it aloud to your classmates, your family, the school staff, or friends from another school.</li> <li>•Send your writing to a newspaper or an online publishing service.</li> </ul>
Reread	Reread	Reread	Reread	Reread

The writing process chart may be found on the Resources CD-ROM and enlarged and printed for classroom display.

## THE WRITING PROCESS AT WORK

Alex participated in the whole-class project on report writing. Now, as he begins his independent project, Alex has gathered facts on polar bears and leaves the planning phase to begin to draft sentences and create visuals using his polar bear facts. Suddenly, Alex realizes that he doesn't have any facts on the foods that polar bears eat—an essential understanding. So, Alex skips back to the planning and research phase to find out what polar bears eat. Once he has those facts, he returns to drafting, creating several sentences and a great visual about the eating habits of the polar bear. Alex is now so excited about the eating habits of the polar bear that he decides to take this section of his work to a revision conference with his teacher. He wants this section to be absolutely clear to a reader and knows that a conference with the teacher will help him. Alex has now moved from planning and research to drafting, back to research and drafting, and is ready to revise one section. It is likely that Alex may return to researching again as he continues to gather facts on other sections of his report. Alex clearly understands the writing process and uses its phases effectively as he generates his nonfiction writing.

The writing process, when new to a group of learners, may be stepped out in a linear fashion as writers get a feel for how each phase of the process works. As writers gain proficiency and develop deeper understandings of the process itself, however, the process becomes more of a spiral. As was true for Alex, even our youngest writers can learn to apply the stages of the writing process, moving through them independently and with confidence.

## FOCUSED MINILESSONS TO SUPPORT EACH PHASE OF THE WRITING PROCESS

At some point in their school year, all writers should have opportunities to take a piece of their work through the entire writing process—not as a lock-step procedure (“If it’s Wednesday, it’s time to edit.”), but as an ongoing process of writing and perfecting (“I just wrote a sentence, changed a word in it to a better one, and checked its capital letters.”). For all phases, writers should expect to have opportunities to observe modeled writing and focused minilessons, to experience individual and group coaching from their teacher, and to work in collaboration with their peers. The sample lesson ideas in the following section show you what the teacher-to-writer experience might look like.

### PLANNING AND RESEARCH: GETTING READY TO WRITE

During planning and research, writers gather facts and explore the content that will fuel their nonfiction writing. Three major objectives—research, recording of data, and understanding of the text type—need to be considered during this phase of the writing process.

- **Research:** Writers need to gather facts and academic vocabulary to infuse into their writing. The goal is to immerse writers in the content that they will be writing about and to ensure that they have rich and diverse opportunities to gather facts for their writing. (Please see "Research Tools" at the back of the *Explorations in Nonfiction Writing* lesson book. It provides additional information about research stations and strategies for gathering content.)

*“At first, I was a bit dubious about teaching my young learners to write descriptive reports, persuasions, and nonfiction narratives. Imagine my surprise when I saw that even my most ‘tangled’ readers and writers could research, take notes, and craft quality nonfiction texts. I knew I had them hooked when, on one rainy day, seven children approached me with their research notebooks in hand and asked, ‘Can we research during recess?’”*

— KELLY BOSWELL,  
TEACHER AND  
AUTHOR

- **Recording Data:** Writers need a variety of accessible strategies for recording the facts related to their topic. As facts are gathered, nonfiction writers need to know how to create diagrams and sketches, add labels, or jot down important words and phrases.
- **Understanding Text Types:** Nonfiction writers need to think about their purpose and know which text type (writing form or genre) they will be using when they begin to draft. If they are writing a report, they will need lots of facts and details. If they are creating a "persuasive poster" on protecting sea turtles, they don't have room for a lot of facts, but they do need to use their research time to select a small number of compelling ideas. The text type that writers will use to present their work has an influence on research and planning. See the "Purposes and Text Types: Nonfiction Writing" chart on page 13 for examples of text types that lend themselves to specific purposes.

### Focused Minilessons to Support Planning and Research

TARGET UNDERSTANDING	LESSON SUGGESTION	SAMPLE THINK-ALoud LANGUAGE
Determine Importance	Use a nonfiction selection and think aloud about facts that are highly important and facts that aren't so important. When writers learn to determine importance, they remember more and write with clarity.	<i>Writers, as I look through this book on snakes, I see that it shows the long, thin body of the snake—no arms and no legs. It also says that a few snakes can swim. I need to decide which fact is more important before I write in my research notebook. I will choose "no arms or legs." That is what makes a snake, a snake! Writers need to determine importance and select the most important ideas—not just interesting details.</i>
Note Taking: Gathering Ideas from a Visual or the Text	Show writers how you look at a photograph and identify a detail, then jot a key word on a sticky note or in a research journal.	<i>Writers, as I look at these photographs, I am noticing that the scales on the snakes all have patterns. Look at the different patterns on each of these. Watch as I turn to the page for description in my research notebook. Now, I will write patterns. That will help me remember this important fact.</i>
Sketch to Remember	Show writers how you look at a passage or a photograph and identify several details. Then, model how to create a sketch that reflects the information, adding labels so academic vocabulary is showcased for the writers.	<i>Writers, I keep thinking about the patterns on the scales of these snakes. I wrote the word patterns. I also think a sketch would help. Watch as I sketch the white stripes that cross the body of this green snake. A sketch will help me remember, especially if I add a label that says scales.</i>
Identifying a Text Type to Suit the Audience and Purpose	Think aloud to show writers how you consider your purpose and select a text type for your writing.	<i>Writers, I need to think about the purpose for my writing, who it's for, and what kind of text I want to write. For this project, my purpose is to inform first graders about different kinds of snakes, so I am going to create a book about snakes. If my purpose was to warn children about snakes on the playground, then I might choose a poster or a big sign.</i>

“Written words on the page are not a pre-requisite to being a writer. Think it—Draw it—Tell it—Write it!”

— MATT GLOVER,  
AUTHOR OF  
ALREADY READY  
AND ENGAGING  
YOUNG WRITERS








### DRAFTING: GETTING IDEAS ON THE PAGE

Drafting that is based on top-quality research and planning will heighten writer productivity and solve the age-old dilemma of kids not knowing what to write. If writers spend adequate amounts of time immersed in researching their topic, taking notes, making sketches, and thinking of their audience, they will be burning to put their pencils into action and write!

As drafting begins, it is helpful to have some tools readily available to support the drafting process. Kindergarteners and first graders, plus emergent second-grade writers, benefit from having sentence strips with lowercase letters in front of them as well as picture-alphabet cards to support them as they construct words. Writers at all grades benefit from having a personal list of high-frequency words as a quick-reference tool tucked into their writing folder. You will find all of these tools on the *Resources* CD-ROM.

All these tools support one teaching goal for drafting: keep moving. It’s easy for beginning writers to get stuck—struggling to write a word, scrambling for an idea, trying to remember what’s next. Your challenge is to provide the drafting strategies to keep writers writing.

Picture-Alphabet Chart

Aa 	Bb 	Cc 	Dd 	Ee 
Ff 	Gg 	Hh 	Ii 	Jj 
Kk 	Ll 	Mm 	Nn 	Oo 
Pp 	Qq 	Rr 	Ss 	Tt 
Uu 	Vv 	Ww 	Xx 	Yy 
Zz 				

Alphabet Strips

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

### High-Frequency Words

a n and are as at	N no not now
ig boy but by	O of on one or out
	P play puppy
	Q
	R run
m	S said school see she
G get girl	T that the their them then there they this to
H had have he her him his how	U up
I I if in is it	V very
J jump	W was we were what when where which will with
K kitten know	X
L like little look love	Y you your
M make many me mom my	Z

## Focused Minilessons to Support Drafting

TARGET UNDERSTANDING	LESSON SUGGESTION	SAMPLE THINK-ALoud LANGUAGE
Sketch to Stretch	Show writers how to read a bit, then record facts in a sketch with labels.	<i>Watch as I divide my paper into four sections. Each section is a place for a sketch that will help me remember facts. I read about a butterfly laying her eggs. Then, in section 1 on my paper, I am going to create a sketch about the way a butterfly lays her egg on a leaf. As I draw, I will show the leaf much larger than the egg. I will also add labels for the leaf and the egg so I can remember those important words. The next page of this book shows the caterpillar hatching from the egg and starting to eat the leaf. I will use section 2 to create a sketch that focuses on hatching.</i>
Stretching Words (for beginning spellers)	Model how to say a word slowly, stretching out the sounds and writing the sounds you hear.	<i>Listen as I say snake very slowly and write the sounds I hear. I hear /s/ at the beginning. I hear /k/ at the end. Listen as I say it slowly one more time. Can you hear any other sounds? When we are drafting, it is important to stretch words and write the sounds we know so we can get our ideas on the page.</i>
Each Syllable Needs a Vowel (for developing spellers)	Use clapping to help writers hear the syllables in a word and remind them that each syllable has a vowel.	<i>We know that each syllable has a vowel sound, so it is helpful to count syllables when you are writing. Let's clap the word smell. We clapped once, so we know we need to have one vowel sound in that word. Watch as I write, smell. The /e/ is the vowel that we hear in smell. Let's try swallow. Snakes swallow their food whole.</i>
Turning Notes into Sentences	Show writers how to turn notes into sentences.	<i>Writers, when I was researching I wrote the word smell and the word tongue. These are both important as I learn about snakes. Watch as I use these two words to write a sentence: Snakes use their <u>tongue</u> to <u>smell</u>! I will draw a line under my two special words to show that they are important. The words we select from our research can help us make great sentences.</i>
Using Action Verbs	Model choosing among alternative verbs.	<i>I want to tell that snakes eat their food whole. I could use the word eat, or I could use swallow, gulp, guzzle, or gobble. As a writer, I need to decide which one has more action. Listen and decide which sentence gives you the clearest mental picture: Snakes eat. Snakes swallow. Snakes gulp . . . I agree! Watch as I write: Snakes gulp their food whole.</i>

*“It matters little if my text is perfectly edited and spelled, if what I have to say is trivial, boring, and a waste of the reader’s time.”*

— REGIE ROUTMAN,  
AUTHOR OF  
*WRITING  
ESSENTIALS*



## REVISING: POLISHING YOUR THINKING

Revision begins at the moment when you stop, reflect, and wonder. This is a moment when a writer asks herself: *Does this make sense? Will a reader understand? Is there enough detail so a reader can visualize my subject? Could I make that sentence more interesting?* This is a moment when writers need to remember that writing is about making a subject enticing to others by writing about it in the most powerful and reflective way we can manage. The simple act of pausing to consider the quality of the communication generates a powerful sense of awareness in a writer, an understanding that the writing you have created isn’t just for yourself. Someone else will read and attempt to understand what you have put on paper.

During revision, it is important that writers focus on their message: on the facts and details, on the features of the nonfiction text, on the words and the way they work together. Great caution needs to be utilized to ensure that writers don’t slip over to editing and begin to address surface level issues such as spelling, punctuation, and so on, and forget the power of the ideas.

Nonfiction writers benefit from self-reflection, peer revision, and revision conferences with a teacher. In all cases, it is helpful to have a revision checklist that helps a writer to focus on key questions about the content, sentence fluency, voice, word choice, and so on. Samples like these can be found on the *Resources* CD-ROM for you to simplify or otherwise adapt to the level of your writers.

As teachers, it is important to model not only our drafting process but also our revision process. Thinking through what we have written with our audience and purpose in mind is a way to re-emphasize audience and purpose as well as to ready writers for the most difficult part of writing, changing it to make it better.

**Revision Checklist A**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Revision Rating \_\_\_\_\_

Do your pictures go with the words on the page?

Does your writing make sense?

Did you use interesting words?

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**Revision Checklist B**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

This writing was read and reviewed by \_\_\_\_\_ (the author), \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.

Does your writing make sense?

Could your partners visualize your subject?

List the three most powerful verbs you used: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.

When you were revising, did you:

- Add details?
- Insert additional sentences?
- Delete any words?

Did you rewrite any sentences to make them more interesting? What did you do?

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Revision Checklist A

Revision Checklist B



## Focused Minilessons to Support Revising

TARGET UNDERSTANDING	LESSON SUGGESTION	SAMPLE THINK-ALoud LANGUAGE
Add Details	Show young writers how to expand short sentences that have too little detail.	<p><i>I have a sentence that says Snakes bend. I wonder what details I can add about snakes bending that will make it easier for my readers to imagine this. Watch as I revise and add details.</i></p> <p>easily and can even curl into a ball</p> <p>Snakes bend . ^</p>
Create a Strong Lead	Remind writers to revise their first sentence, if needed, to make it more interesting.	<p><i>Your first sentence is the one that will get your reader's attention, so make sure it's the best it can be. Watch as I change my first sentence to make it more interesting. Right now it says Snakes slither. I am going to create some leads that might be more interesting to a reader:</i></p> <p>If you were a snake, you could slither . . .</p> <p>Did you know that snakes can slither?</p> <p>Down in the crinkly leaves, the snake slithers . . .</p> <p><i>Which one do you like the best?</i></p>
Combine Sentences	Teach students to link two short sentences with a conjunction and a comma ( <i>and, but, so, or</i> ) to vary sentence length.	<p><i>Writers, watch as I take these two short sentences and turn them into one longer and more interesting sentence.</i></p> <p>Some snakes eat frogs.</p> <p>Some snakes eat bugs.</p> <p><i>I will change the period after frogs into a comma and add the word and. Now my sentence says: Some snakes eat frogs, and some snakes eat bugs.</i></p>

## EDITING: TUNING UP CONVENTIONS AND MECHANICS

Traditional conventions such as spacing between words, spelling, grammar, and punctuation make our writing accessible to others. Nonfiction conventions such as labels, headings, bold words, captions, and so on are distinctive to informational texts and need to be carefully considered during editing. Young writers can quickly become overwhelmed during editing, so it is helpful to target their edits by setting a limited number of goals for a particular piece of writing. For example, you might set the stage with something like: *Writers, in this piece of writing we are going to edit for spaces between words and for labels on our diagrams.* Or: *Writers, you have come so far as editors that today we are going to edit for four conventions: capital letters, periods, bold words, and headings.* If the scope is narrow enough, even our youngest writers can edit with confidence. If you are concerned about parents who want fully edited work, you might consider creating a little form like the example on this page to attach to writing samples that go home partially edited.

This writing was edited for:

- × Spaces between words
- × Labels on diagrams

Please join your writer in celebrating this fine work.

Mrs. Hoyt

As writers gain proficiency, the list of editing targets can grow to match their increasing confidence and expertise. The editing formats on the following pages, Express Lane Edits, Focused Edits, and Editing Checklists, are highly accessible for developing writers.

- **Focused Edits:** In a focused edit, writers reread once for each editing point. They read once to check for spaces between words and then read again to check for spelling. They read a third time to check for capital letters. With each editing point, nonfiction writers have a single focus and reread from start to finish with only that point in mind. This provides numerous opportunities for each writer to read—while building the understanding that editing is an important step that deserves time and attention (Hoyt and Therriault, 2007).
- **Express Lane Edits:** Jeff Anderson, author of *Mechanically Inclined*, suggests the use of express lane edits to narrow the scope of review during editing time. Like the express lane at the grocery store, an express lane edit includes only a small number of items. Writers review their work with a small number of items in mind and use a highlighter to place a tiny dot each time they find they have used the target convention correctly. If writers insert the target convention to improve their work, they get to make a dot there as well. The emphasis is on *celebrating the correct use* of conventions so it is a positive and exciting way to approach editing.
- **Editing Checklists:** Editing checklists can be helpful, but it must be remembered that editing checklists do not teach. They can only remind writers of what they already know. So with that in mind, we must remember to offer carefully scaffolded lessons in editing, and then remind writers of what they know by continually changing editing checklists to reflect their most current understandings. Here are a few examples of the handful of editing checklists you can find and adapt from the *Resources* CD-ROM.



**Editing Checklist A**

Writer \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I can . . .

- Write my name on my paper ☺
- Use sounds I know to help me spell ☺
- Reread and touch each word ☺
- Make sure my picture and my words go together ☺

**Editing Checklist B**

Author \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I can . . .

- Leave spaces between words ☺
- Place a period at the end of a sentence ☺
- Add exclamation marks ☺
- Use capital letters at the beginning of a sentence ☺
- Reread to check my spelling ☺

**Partner Editing Checklist E**

Author \_\_\_\_\_

Peer Editor \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

We have reviewed this work to check for:

- Spelling ☺
- Capitalization
  - Beginning of sentence ☺
  - Names ☺
  - Titles ☺
- Punctuation
  - End of sentence (. ? ! ) ☺
  - Complete sentences ☺

Besides making the editing process manageable for all your writers, you'll want not only to teach the conventions (capital letters at the beginnings of sentences, question marks at the ends of questions, and so on) but also to model strategies like the ones below to carry writers through the editing process.



<b>Focused Minilessons to Support Editing</b>		
<b>TARGET UNDERSTANDING</b>	<b>LESSON SUGGESTION</b>	<b>SAMPLE THINK-ALoud LANGUAGE</b>
Reread and Touch Each Word	Teach writers to touch each word in their writing as they read aloud to ensure that they have written as many words as they are saying when they read their work.	<i>Editors need to reread and check to make sure all the words they need are on the paper. I think I wrote: Snakes have a long, thin body. Watch as I touch each word and say my sentence very slowly. Snakes . . . have . . . Oops! The next word is long! I forgot to put in 'a' for "a long, thin body." Touching each word helped me notice the missing word. I'll write the word a before long.</i>
Use Resources to Confirm Spelling	Model how to return to a resource and check spelling of an important word.	<i>Writers, I used the word snake several times in my writing, so I want to be really sure that I spelled it correctly. That is what good editors do. Watch as I touch and count each letter in the word snake in this picture book. There are five letters in snake. Now, I am going to check my writing and make sure that each time I wrote snake, I included the same five letters: s-n-a-k-e.</i>
Write in Complete Sentences	Teach writers two key questions to use in testing their sentences: Who or what did something? What did they do?	<i>I am ready to check my sentences to be sure that they are really sentences. Let's start with Snakes smell with their tongues. Does it tell who or what did something? Yes! Snakes. Does it tell what they do? Yes! They smell with their tongue. This is a sentence, so it is okay to give it a period at the end. Using the key questions is a big help.</i>

“Good writers are aware of the importance of presentation. Final copy can serve as a welcome mat or as a barricade to the reader.”

— RUTH CULHAM,  
AUTHOR OF  
USING PICTURE  
BOOKS TO TEACH  
WRITING WITH  
THE TRAITS

## PUBLISHING: SHOWCASING YOUR WORK AND SHARING IT WITH AN AUDIENCE

Publishing is the final moment when a writer, like an artist, unveils the creation and offers it as a gift to others. At that moment, the work should be as compelling to the audience and as true to its purpose as it can be. Attending to presentation will make it so. Presentation is about appearance, making a text appealing to the eye of a reader. Presentation is the place where the words, the spacing, the features, and the pictures intersect. It is like the icing on a cake or the moment of final performance at a recital.

However, when presentation is not given the attention it deserves, barriers can arise between writers and readers, affecting comprehension and appreciation of the work. While we never want to communicate a stronger interest in presentation than in content, presenting work to others is a subject to be taken seriously as careful handwriting, spelling, conventions, spacing, and visuals are an expectation of future schooling and the workplace.

In preparing to publish, we can help writers look closely at mentor texts, noticing spacing, visuals, fonts, and type sizes. As writing coaches, we can help primary writers tune into the needs of a reader and wonder: *How will this look to a reader? Have I provided a reader with nonfiction writing that is attractive and visually appealing? Does the work include visuals and text features? Is it formatted for easy readability? Will I feel proud when a reader picks this up?*

**Note:** If your district does not have an adopted curriculum or expected format for handwriting, a list of helpful tips on handwriting instruction is on the *Resources* CD-ROM.

Oral presentations need to be prepared as carefully as written forms. If the work is to be read aloud to a partner, a small group, or a larger audience, then oral presentation of the work becomes an essential element. If nonfiction writing is to be read aloud, then it should be rehearsed to ensure that oral reading is fluent and expressive. Writers may benefit from reading to a partner and asking for feedback about fluency and expression. They may also benefit from reading their work into a tape recorder, then replaying the tape to reflect on pacing, expression, and fluency.

Some strategies for improving written presentation follow.

## Focused Minilessons to Support Publishing

TARGET UNDERSTANDING	LESSON SUGGESTION	SAMPLE THINK-ALoud LANGUAGE
Spaces Between Words Clarify Word Boundaries	Show writers how to focus on spaces between words.	<p><i>I am getting my final copy ready to present and I realize that I have a problem. My sentence says: Batshangupsideowntosleep. There are so many letters, I can't read this. Watch as I recopy this and add more space between each word so my reader will know exactly what I am trying to say.</i></p> <p>Bats hang upside down to sleep.</p>
Handwriting Is Important	Compare sloppy handwriting and copy that is neatly presented.	<p><i>Writers, I have a problem. I was writing really fast and my draft is so messy that I know it isn't my best. Since I am presenting this work, I need to recopy and focus on my handwriting. Watch as I write slowly and really think about the shape of each letter. I will use this handwriting guide (see handwriting guide on the Resources CD-ROM) to help me remember how to form each letter. When we publish our work, handwriting is important.</i></p>
Page Layout Is Important	Model how to use space on the page.	<p><i>Writers, I have noticed that our mentor books use space on the page in interesting ways. Sometimes they place illustrations at the side of the writing. Sometimes photographs are at the bottom of the page. When I look at my writing, I realize that I want to present my writing in a way that looks like our mentor books. I am getting ready to publish. Watch how I plan the space for a side illustration, a bottom picture—and then text boxes for my words. This will really look great!</i></p>

“Rereading is the glue that connects the stages of the writing process. Writers continually reread what they’ve written, and this rereading changes at each stage of the authoring cycle.”

— RALPH FLETCHER,  
AUTHOR OF *WHAT  
A WRITER NEEDS*

### FOR ALL PHASES OF THE PROCESS: REREADING

Of the strategies and routines that cross phases of the process, *rereading* may be the one with the greatest power to lift and enhance writing quality while stimulating literacy development in readers and writers. In her much-loved *Lessons from a Child*, Lucy Calkins describes how she counted as one first-grade writer reread her writing thirty-six times within a single writers workshop.

Writers need to learn that rereading is one of the most powerful tools we have as writers. Rereading positively influences all phases of the process and is seen by some experts as the “glue” that binds the process together. Rereading sketches and notes while researching and planning reminds writers of their key questions and solidifies content understandings. Rereading during drafting helps a writer to maintain the flow of a message, to ensure that sentences make sense, and to check for sentence fluency. Rereading during revising and editing helps writers to look deeply into their own work while considering craft and conventions. Rereading during publishing and oral presentation scaffolds fluent and expressive oral reading.

As coaches of nonfiction writers, one of our essential roles needs to be modeling and encouraging the continual use of rereading as a strategy that focuses research, enhances the quality of sentence structure, improves overall clarity of communication, and keeps nonfiction writers highly connected to their topic.

# Setting the Stage for Nonfiction Writing: Scaffolds for Success

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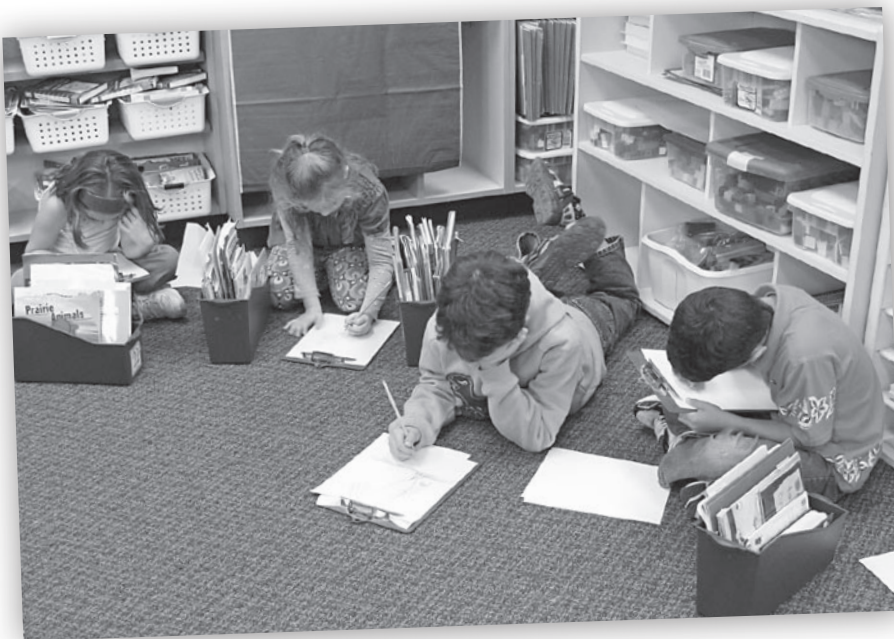
Setting up your classroom and creating workshop management tools can help your writers stay focused and enriched during nonfiction writing time.

## THE ENVIRONMENT

In a nonfiction writing classroom, the environment is an essential support system for writer development. The following are key elements that scaffold a smoothly operating workshop environment and support writers as they craft nonfiction text.

### A GATHERING SPACE

A gathering space with a carpet for the students and a low easel lets the students clearly see the entire surface of their teacher's modeled writing. A low easel is better than a tall one as the writers are closer to the text and there is a stronger feeling of community between the children, the teacher, and the text being created.



### CLIPBOARDS

Clipboards are helpful tools for guided practice. Children should often write in response immediately after the teacher models a text type. A clipboard can make that immediate practice comfortable for writers as they are likely to be sitting on the floor.



### CLUSTERED DESKS

Tables or desks should be arranged in clusters. Collaboration is essential in a nonfiction writing classroom as students need to read together and research together—and talk—if they are to effectively gather information and translate it to nonfiction writing. Gathering areas and shared spaces provide support for collaborative thinking and writing.

### A WRITING RESOURCE AREA

A writing resource area is a place where different types of paper (lined, unlined, paper of different sizes) and other supplies used in publishing are kept. This area could include staplers, a children's dictionary, a children's thesaurus, book-binding materials, card stock for book covers, and exemplars of published books written and published by students. Some teachers find it helpful to place a chart rack in this area so they can hang modeled writing charts on hangers, allowing writers easy access to the charts when they want to remind themselves of a text feature or a particular form.

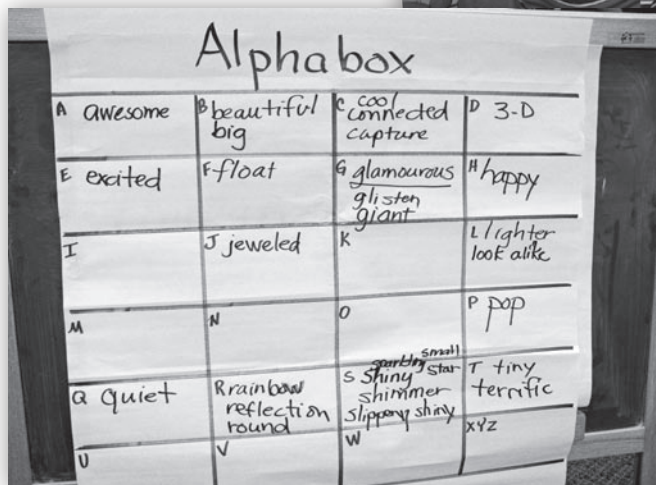
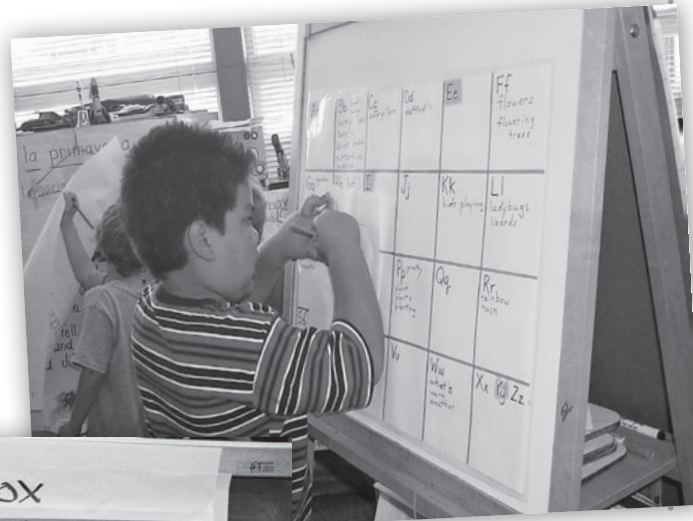


## A CLASSROOM LIBRARY

The classroom library is a central source of support for nonfiction research and writing. This is an area that should be brimming with books on a variety of topics, books that represent a range of text types and purposes. Information on organizing a classroom library and making topic-specific books accessible begins on page 8.

## WORD WALLS

Word walls have long been seen as a helpful resource for high-frequency words. But one word wall isn't enough in a nonfiction writing classroom. Young writers need visual access to a wide array of words, not just high-frequency words. If you are engaged in a study on plants, sea life, the weather, or things that float, create a topic-specific word wall into which you can insert the academic vocabulary related to the content. Then, during read-alouds, small-group instruction, research, and conversation, encourage your students to identify additional topic-related words to add to the content word wall. Some teachers like to use an enlarged Alphabox for topic specific words as these photos show. (See the *Resources* CD-ROM for an Alphabox template.).

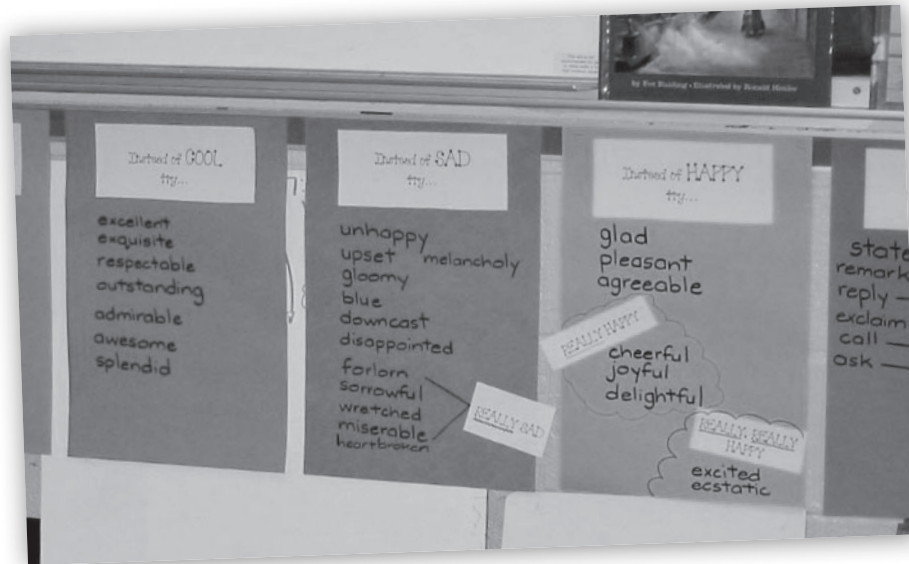


Writers use topic-specific word walls to support their writing. An enlarged Alphabox makes a great topic-specific word wall that supports infusion of academic vocabulary into nonfiction writing.

Post lists of invigorating word choices to stimulate writers in selecting precise nouns, powerful verbs, and adjectives that sparkle.

“I get so excited when I walk into a primary classroom and see it is dripping in print. To create a culture in which writing is celebrated all day long, there should be words and print everywhere you look. While standing in the middle of a kindergarten room, I felt a tug at my pant leg. Two bright eyes looked up at me and said, ‘Miss, could you please move? I am trying really hard to see that word across the room.’ This young writer then found the word brown with a picture of a brown crayon and carefully included it in his nonfiction writing. This was an ‘aha’ moment for me and truly painted a picture of how classroom environments are key to the learning process.”

— CERETHA MITCHELL, EXECUTOR OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION, THOMASVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA



Visuals that make rich vocabulary visible and inviting can lift writing quality for young writers.

### SHARED TOPIC LIST

Some teachers like to hang a colorful sheet of butcher paper and a felt-tip pen at a child-friendly level in the room. Then, as they engage in nonfiction read-alouds or discuss an idea for nonfiction writing that just popped, the teacher or a student can add topics to the list. This kind of visual presentation provides wonderful stimulus for conversation about nonfiction writing. This butcher-paper thinking wall is also a great place to model how to select a specific, focused topic—rather than one that is broad and too general to be thoroughly covered. A teacher might model with think-aloud language something like: *This book on whales is amazing and is helping me to think of all kinds of things I could write about whales. But, I am not going to write “whales” on the topic list. That is too big a topic. Instead, I will do what good writers do and think of some smaller, focused topics. Here are several whale topics that would make great nonfiction writing:* How Whales Care for Their Babies; Whales Migrate; Different Kinds of Whales Eat Different Foods; Whale Sounds and Communication.



## WORKSHOP MANAGEMENT TOOLS


A few simple expectations, routines, and resources can help your writers workshop run smoothly.

### WRITERS WORKSHOP AGREEMENTS




It can be really helpful to have a set of writers workshop agreements for what students should be doing during writers workshop. If there are clear expectations about writing time and what writers should do, management and behaviors are more likely to offer the rhythms in which learning thrives. You might create this in poster format and add to it each time you model one of the writing behaviors you want to encourage during the workshop time. So, in the fall, there might only be one or two items on the list—but by spring it will be filled with positive expectations for writers workshop.

Another benefit of having a posted list of expectations and agreements is that if the sound level gets a bit high, you can ask writers to pause and hold up the number of fingers that indicates the item on the chart that best identifies their focus. So a writer who is illustrating will hold up three fingers. A writer who is researching will hold up four fingers. At this moment of truth, writers who are not engaged in their writing or have slipped into the “Don’t” category must refocus on the list of agreements and get quickly back on task.

We encourage you to create a poster outlining what writers should and should not be doing during writing time. The example shown here also appears on the *Resources* CD-ROM.



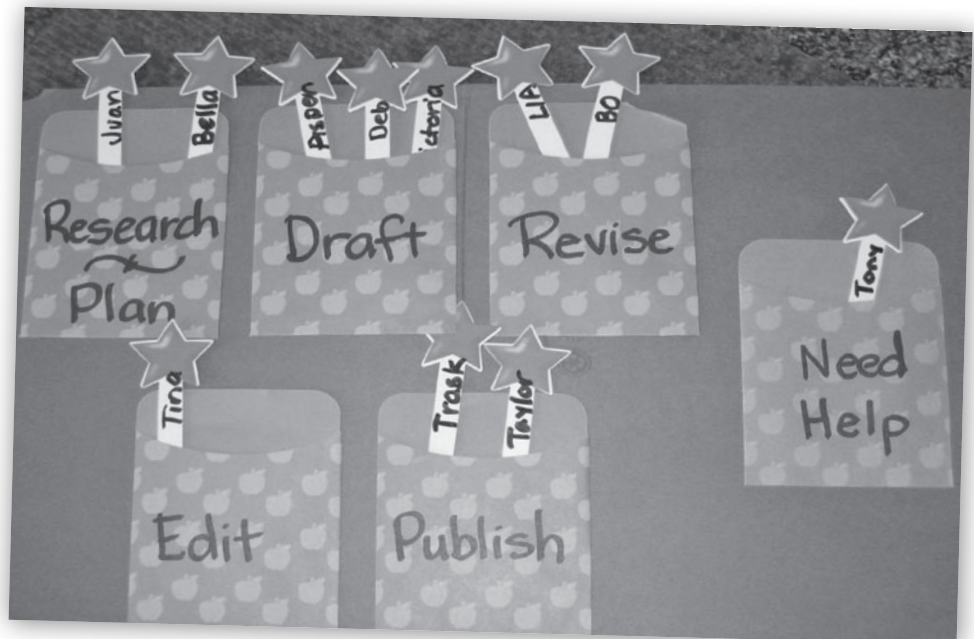
**During Writing Time**

<b>DO:</b>	
1. Write	
2. Think	
3. Draw	
4. Research	
5. Read	
6. Work with a partner to improve your research or writing	
7. Work with a partner to add details to your writing	
8. Edit your work	
9. Sign up for a teacher conference	
10. Start something new	
<b>DON'T:</b>	
Interrupt a teacher conference	
Make choices that won't improve your writing	

### A WORKSHOP ORGANIZER

Some teachers find it helpful to use a workshop organizer such as the one in the photo below. Students place their names on a tongue depressor and slip it into the pocket that represents the phase of the writing process they are currently employing. This gives the teacher a very clear understanding of which writers are researching, which ones are revising, and so on. Differentiation also becomes easier because a teacher can easily pull the tongue depressors from a phase such as “planning and research” and call those students together for personalized coaching and support. Or the teacher can pull the tongue depressors from a phase such as editing and call those writers for individual editing conferences.

Students who move their tongue depressor to “Need Help” get assistance as soon as the teacher can provide it.



A workshop organizer reminds writers of the phases of the writing process while giving teachers a clear view of writers' progress.

## WRITING FOLDERS

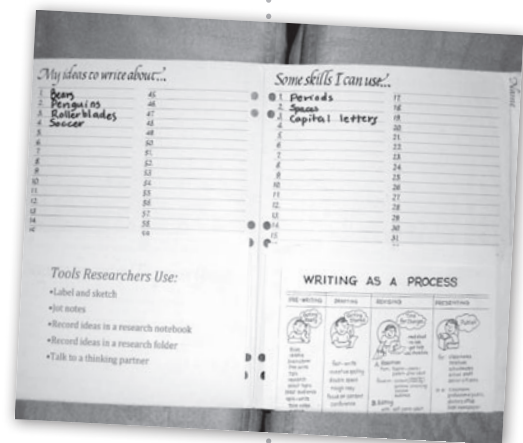
Writing folders are helpful for storing both in-process and completed drafts. With writers in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade, we recommend keeping two folders, so writers do not become overwhelmed by volume.

**A Storage Folder:** It is helpful to set up a storage folder for each writer, in which completed drafts are dated and stored. This provides a helpful case study of writer development that can be used in assessing writing growth, in conferring with a writer, or for parent conferences. These folders can be kept in a crate, filing cabinet, or other area for easy teacher access. They do not need to be monitored and controlled by the students unless they are preparing for a student-led conference and they want to show their parents evidence of their growth as a writer.

**A Folder of In-Process Work:** This folder is used by writers as they are actively researching, drafting, and utilizing phases of the writing process. A well-organized writing folder can provide an organizational boost as it provides a safe and easy-to-access place to keep in-process drafts, spelling reference lists, topic lists, research notebooks, and so on.

While an in-process writing folder can be as simple as a file folder decorated by a student, some teachers find it helpful to utilize a portfolio with pockets or to select specific support features that become a permanent part of the folder. Features that you might consider keeping in an in-process folder include the following, many of which you can find on the *Resources* CD-ROM.






- *Tools Researchers Use* is a simple list to remind writers of ways in which they can help themselves as they research. It can easily be adapted as you demonstrate new research strategies and add them to this flexible list. A copy of the list as seen here is available on the *Resources* CD-ROM.
- *Topic list:* Writers benefit from having a personal list of nonfiction topics they could write about in the future. While it is helpful to have a classroom list of writing topics, we believe there is special benefit for writers if they keep their own topic list as well. As writers read, research, and draft, they will invariably discover additional topics for writing. With a topic list in their writing folder, it is quick and easy to jot a note or add a sketch that will remind them of topics they may want to research at a later date.



### Tools Researchers Use

- Label and sketch.
- Jot notes.
- Record ideas in a research notebook.
- Save ideas in a research folder.
- Talk to a thinking partner.













### Nonfiction Writing and the Writing Process

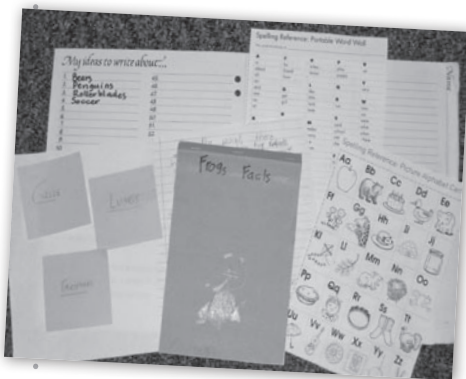
PREWRITING: PLANNING AND RESEARCHING	DRAFTING	REVISING	EDITING	PUBLISHING: PRESENTING, SHARING, AND CELEBRATING
 <p>Getting ready to write</p>	 <p>Getting ideas on the page</p>	 <p>Polishing my thinking</p>	 <p>Tuning up conventions</p>	 <p>Publishing and presenting for an audience</p>
<p><b>Think.</b></p> <p><b>Observe.</b></p> <p>Research. Get facts from pictures, books, the computer, videos, interviews, anywhere.</p> <p>Write or draw your research facts.</p> <p>Talk about your facts.</p> <p>Choose a topic.</p> <p>Think about who you are writing for.</p> <p>Think about why you are writing.</p> <p>Choose what you will write: (A letter? A poster? An report? Or what?)</p>	<p>Focus on what you want to say.</p> <p>Use your research to get the facts.</p> <p>Write the letters you know to spell words.</p> <p>Use the structure and features of the text type (letter, note, poster, report, and so on).</p> <p>Use interesting words; precise nouns; powerful verbs; sensory images.</p> <p>Use interesting words; precise nouns; powerful verbs; sensory images.</p> <p>Include nonfiction features like headings and pictures.</p> <p>Write an interesting beginning and a satisfying ending.</p>	<p>Reread and ask:</p> <p>Does this make sense? Is there enough detail so a reader can "see" what I'm writing about?</p> <p>Are facts about the same thing grouped together?</p> <p>Are the facts accurate? Does this look like my teacher's example of this kind of text? (procedure, explanation, letter, report, and so on)</p> <p>Are the sentences varied? Do they start with different words? Are some long and some short?</p> <p>Did I use interesting words? When I read this to my friends, what questions did they ask me? What can I make better?</p>	<p>Focus on one thing at a time. Read to check for spaces between words. Then read it again to check the spelling, and so on.</p> <p>Check for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Spaces between words</li> <li>-Spelling</li> <li>-Capital letters</li> <li>-Title</li> <li>-Neat handwriting</li> <li>-Punctuation, commas, exclamation points</li> <li>-Complete sentences</li> </ul> <p>Do I have clear titles, headings, pictures, captions, and so on?</p> <p>Can my friends read this? What are their ideas for making it better?</p>	<p>If your writing is a book, number the pages and make a cover, a title page, a table of contents, an about-the-author page, an index or glossary, and a page for reader comments.</p> <p>If your writing is a letter, mail it!</p> <p>If your writing is a poster, display it!</p> <p>Show off your work!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Display it in the classroom library, the school office, the library, a doctor's office, a retirement center, and so on.</li> <li>-Read it aloud to your classmates, your family, the school staff, or friends from another school.</li> <li>-Send your writing to a newspaper or an online publishing service.</li> </ul>
Reread	Reread	Reread	Reread	Reread

- A writing process tips chart like the one shown here and found on the CD-ROM is a tool that may be helpful as your writers move toward independent application of the writing process.

- Picture alphabet cards are a vitally important tool for writers. Having these cards at their fingertips enables even the most emergent writers to begin constructing words for their writing.

Picture-Alphabet Chart

Aa	Bb	Cc	Dd	Ee
				
Ff	Gg	Hh	Ii	Jj
				
Kk	Ll	Mm	Nn	Oo
				
Pp	Qq	Rr	Ss	Tt
				
Uu	Vv	Ww	Xx	Yy
				
Uu	Vv	Ww	Xx	Yy
				



- Writing folders that house works in-progress plus tools that support independence in writing help nonfiction writers.

- A *high-frequency words chart* can help developing writers get into the habit of checking a resource and confirming spelling. Writers can add their own often-used words to their personal copies—or use a personal dictionary or Alphabox.

### High-Frequency Words

A	a about all an and are as at	N	no not now
B	be because big boy but by	O	of on one or out
C	can cat	P	play puppy
D	dad do dog	Q	
E	each	R	run
F	for friend from	S	said school see she
G	get girl	T	that the their them then there they this to
H	had have he her him his how	U	up
I	if in is it	V	very
J	jump	W	was we were what when where which will with
K	kitten know	X	
L	like little look love	Y	you your
M	make many me mom my	Z	

### Alphabox Form

a	b	c	d
e	f	g	h
i	j	k	l
m	n	o	p
q	r	s	t
u	v	w	x y z

- A *personal dictionary or Alphabox* supports children’s gathering of their own personal words for writing.

- *Research notebooks* are a special place for writers to keep research information during an extended nonfiction writing unit. Beginning a new research notebook or folder with every new topic will allow children to accumulate a “library” of their own research and provide a repository of facts they can draw on again and again. Research notebooks don’t need to be expensive or elaborate. A handful of pages with a colored “cover” on the outside will give most primary writers plenty of space for their sketches, labels, and facts.



# Focusing on Instruction: Explicit Supports That Lift Writing Quality

Research on the impact of a gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson and Fielding, 1991)—when instruction begins with strong teaching support and ultimately leads to confident independent work—suggests that instruction designed within this model offers a measurable improvement in student achievement. Achievement levels within this teaching model are far greater than achievement levels that result from teacher assignments.

The hallmark of the gradual-release instructional model is the changing level of teacher support as students become more adept at a particular strategy or objective. The following chart reflects the level of support various instructional approaches provide and how the approaches play out in classroom practice.

Instructional Approaches				
INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES	LEVEL OF SUPPORT	SETTING	TEACHER'S ROLE	STUDENTS' ROLE
<b>Modeled Writing</b>	Maximum	Usually whole-class but can be used in small-group or individual settings	Provide models of how writers compose, using think-aloud language.	Listen and observe the teacher.
<b>Shared Writing</b>	High	Can be used in a whole-class, small-group, or individual setting	Provide demonstrations on the writing process and craft elements. Raise questions to help students understand how writers compose. Build a common text with the students.	Assist the teacher with writing.
<b>Interactive Writing</b>	High	Best used in small-group settings	Writers and the teacher share the pen, constructing a text together.	Participate fully and share the responsibility for writing words and inserting text features.
<b>Guided Writing</b>	Medium	Small group	Assist students with similar needs with their own compositions. The teacher may elect to do additional modeled writing if writers need to see another example.	Write on their own with assistance from the teacher and their peers.
<b>Conferencing</b>	High	Individual	Focus on the needs of a single writer. The writer may request a conference because of a particular need. The teacher may request a conference for assessment, additional instruction, guiding the writer through the writing process, and so on.	The writer maintains control of the pen. Teacher suggestions and comments are provided orally, or placed on sticky notes to assist the writer in retaining the information.



## MODELING: FOCUSED MINILESSON

In the gradual release model, the teacher begins by modeling—*showing rather than telling*—how to engage in the target learning. In a nonfiction writing classroom, for example, the teacher might demonstrate how to craft a few nonfiction sentences, thinking aloud with a focus on making the thinking inside of his head transparent to writers. During this time, writers are careful observers. Their job is to watch closely and pay attention to how the text is being created. They also listen to the teacher explaining what he is thinking as he writes. They watch, they listen. . . . They get the gist of what is being modeled before they are invited to join in with comments or suggestions for the writing.

As the modeling progresses, thinking partners put their heads together and reflect on what they are watching. *What did they see the teacher do? How did the teacher do it? What should they remember when they go to do this in their own writing?* A midstream pause in the modeling for partner reflection can assist writers in clarifying what they are learning and help them be better prepared to utilize the skill in their writing. Here are some examples of what modeled writing or a focused minilesson that shows rather than tells might look and sound like:

“Teach a small learnable amount. Use think-aloud language to give the observing children a window into your thinking. Let writers hear what is inside your head as you create a nonfiction text, demonstrate a strategy for recording research facts, or reread to check for sentence fluency. A focused minilesson is about narrowing the field of vision so you can truly see a fine point and study it. Then, apply the learning in a real context.”

Focused Minilesson		
INSTRUCTIONAL TARGET	SAMPLE THINK-ALoud LANGUAGE	MODELED WRITING TO CREATE IN FRONT OF STUDENTS
Bullets Are a Helpful Nonfiction Feature	<i>When I was sketching today, I tried to add lots of facts from this book on sharks. Now, I am ready to make a list with bullets, showing things I know about sharks. Watch as I make my first bullet. I make a little dot and then make it very dark. In my sketch I drew the shark's big teeth, so after my first bullet, I will write teeth. In my sketch, I also see its small eyes. So for my next bullet, I want to write small eyes. That is an important fact, and bullets help my facts stand out.</i>	Shark <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teeth</li> <li>• small eyes</li> <li>• fins</li> <li>• big</li> <li>• long nose</li> </ul>
Use Specific Descriptors	<i>As I write today, I am going to focus on bringing out lots of detail about frogs. I know that frogs have big, bulgy eyes and long, sticky tongues. I will use those details so my reader understands that these are important parts of a frog. My first sentence is A frog's big, bulgy eyes . . . Notice that I don't say "Frogs have big eyes." I am using bulgy because that helps the reader get a better picture of the frog. When we describe something, it is important to use really specific words. Bulgy is much better than big. Watch as I write about the snake's tongue. . . .</i>	A frog's big, bulgy eyes help it to catch food because the eyes allow it to see all around. As the frog watches and patiently waits, it gets its long, sticky tongue ready. When an insect approaches, the lightning-fast tongue flashes out. Snap! Yum.
Adverbs Can Make Great Sentence Openers	<i>Adverbs are especially useful because they help nonfiction writers to describe actions. With adverbs, we can write about moving slowly, cautiously, quickly, painfully, or tiredly.</i>  <i>I read about tree frogs and the danger they face from snakes, so now I can visualize a little frog sleeping while the snake creeps toward it. As I look at our list of adverbs, I am going to select quietly as my adverb for the snake. Watch as I write Quietly and then follow it with a comma. One of the tricks to this kind of sentence is to use an adverb followed by a comma, then write the rest of the sentence. For my next sentence, I will begin with Suddenly. That will show how the frog wakes up. Adverbs help us write great sentences.</i>	Quietly, the snake slithers toward the sleeping frog. Suddenly, the little frog's eyes pop open.



## GUIDED PRACTICE: WRITING AND COACHING

In guided practice, writers put their pencils to work and apply the learning. They may be drawing. They may be writing. They may be working with a partner. The important point is that they will all be thinking about the writing target that was modeled in the focused minilesson and attempting to integrate it into their writing.

Beginning writers get a lot of coaching and support during this time as they attempt collaborative or individual application. This period of guided practice is still very teacher-directed, and reteaching and coaching occur within small groups or with individuals. Guided practice provides essential opportunities for assessment as well, since writers are actively attempting to emulate the formats of the writing modeled by the teacher.

As confidence builds, students apply what they have learned with increasing independence. They need less coaching on the basics and operate at a higher level of confidence. Some writers reach this stage quickly. With others, there may still be a lot of coaching and support. But all writers understand that the goal is to stand tall and write as an individual.

During this time of active writing and coaching, the teacher may support writers in a variety of ways. The teacher might:

- *Conduct conferences* with writers, either by circulating to work with them at their seats or by calling them to a conference area.
- Meet with a small group for *guided writing*—to do additional modeling and offer coaching.
- Engage a small group of writers in a *shared writing* experience in which writers work together to construct a text similar to the one modeled by the teacher. In shared writing, the children contribute ideas freely and participate at a higher level than during the modeled writing of a minilesson. The shared writing may also become *interactive writing* if the writers share the pen and take turns adding letters, words, and text features to the text they are creating together.

*“I have seen the powerful learning that results from ‘Power Writes.’ The explicit modeling and guided practice help our youngest children immensely. Writers clearly tell us ‘I got it!’ as they engage in Power Writes across the curriculum.”*

— DOREEN OSMUN,  
DIRECTOR OF  
CURRICULUM AND  
INSTRUCTION,  
HUDSON, OHIO

*“Nonfiction writing for young children is a natural fit to their curiosity and desire to imitate those around them by giving them a real-world experience in writing. They love watching their teacher write and then attempting to write on their own. This type of writing has been neglected in the school setting for too long.”*

— BARBARA  
COLEMAN,  
CURRICULUM  
SPECIALIST,  
WINGATE, NORTH  
CAROLINA

## FOCUS ON CONFERRING

A key method for coaching writers is the writing conference. Writing conferences are central to writer success as they provide one-to-one support, encouragement, and coaching that have enormous potential for lifting the achievement of nonfiction writers. While the focus and intent of each conference may be different, there are some understandings about conferring that provide predictability and consistency for writers while enhancing instruction and assessment opportunities for you.

### TIPS FOR MANAGING EFFECTIVE WRITING CONFERENCES

- Create a conference management chart listing the names of your students down the side. Each time you confer with a writer, place the date of the conference next to the child's name. Now, you have a tool that allows you to monitor at a glance to see how your conferring time is distributed across your students.

Brianna	9/8	9/14	9/26	10/16	10/17	11/1
Alex	9/5	9/10	9/13	9/27	9/28	10/1
Alina	9/5	9/8	9/15	9/21		
Marco						

- Always sit next to a writer, with the work in the hands of the child. Sitting across from a learner is a position of opposition, rather than partnership. Taking the work out of the writer's hands transfers ownership away from the writer to you.
- Ask permission before writing on a child's paper. As much as possible, leave the pencil in the hand of the child, and place your suggestions and comments on a sticky note.
- Keep conferences short and focused. Three to five minutes is plenty for most writers, especially primary-grade children.
- Invite the writer to tell you about his or her work, including the illustration. This establishes a positive tone: *We are partners, I care about you and I want to listen.* See the chart on page 45 for ways to prompt writers to discuss their work. The writer should be doing at least as much talking as you, but don't let her read the whole work aloud to you if that will eat up all your conference time. Ask for a summary! As the writer explains the work, you will have a window into what the writer knows about the topic, the goal for the piece of writing, and how much support the writer needs in order to move forward.

“The challenge is to extrapolate from this one instance something the child should do again and again as a writer.”

— LUCY CALKINS,  
AUTHOR OF  
THE CONFERRING  
HANDBOOK

“If you can’t find something good in a kid’s writing, you aren’t looking hard enough. For lack of noticing, a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day. As educators, we need to learn to love the errors and all they reveal.”

— JEFF ANDERSON,  
AUTHOR OF  
MECHANICALLY  
INCLINED

- Notice and name what you see in the writing (Johnston, 2004). When you see a writer engaging in helpful writing behaviors, point them out. Tell the writer what you see and name it. This will help him know what to repeat in future writing experiences. An example: *I see that you drew a line through this word and inserted new thinking. That is a strategy that really helps writers while they are drafting. That is a strategy you will want to use again and again. Let’s add that to the “Skills I Can Use” list in your writing folder.* Adding skills and understandings to the “Skills I Can Use” list reminds both you and the writer of topics you have addressed in conferences and serves as an ongoing celebration of accumulated learning.
- | Some skills I can use... |                 |     |
|--------------------------|-----------------|-----|
| 1.                       | Periods         | 17. |
| 2.                       | Spaces          | 18. |
| 3.                       | Capital letters | 19. |
| 4.                       |                 | 20. |
| 5.                       |                 | 21. |
|                          |                 | 22. |
- Be prepared to model a bit. It is often helpful to have a pad of sticky notes, a white board, or simply blank paper in a conferring area so you can quickly model a sentence, a revision strategy, or a way to work with alternative spelling. When you model during a conference, writers can really tune in and attend to the instruction.
  - Take notes. We like to keep a notebook with a tabbed section for each writer. Sometimes we write right into the notebook; other times we use it to organize the sticky notes about each child’s writing that we’ve written on the run. Keeping your observations and teaching notes in one place makes it easy to remind yourself about the content of previous conferences, monitor your ongoing conversations with this writer, and set goals for future conferences.
  - Be stingy with suggestions. Allow yourself only one teaching point per conference. While beginning writers are likely to present you with nonfiction writing that could use all kinds of instruction and coaching, the challenge is to consider the one tip you could offer that will most lift the future of this writer.
  - Focus the conference on creating energy for more writing. The goal should be to send a writer back to her seat bursting with enthusiasm and ready to dive back into nonfiction writing.
  - To close the conference, celebrate one feature of the writer’s work and restate the one suggestion you made for improvement so the writer leaves with those two points clearly reinforced.

## GENERATING REFLECTIVE CONVERSATIONS

A one-to-one writing conference should be a conversation, not a correction session. Conversation prompts that require the writer to reflect on and talk about his work are an effective way both to see how he is thinking about his work and to identify a next step that will lift it to the next level.

### Conferring with Nonfiction Writers: Generating Reflective Conversations

#### Starting the Conference

- How is it going?
- Tell me about your writing.
- Please share the details in your picture. I would love to hear what you have learned.
- Please read your favorite part so we can celebrate together.
- Is there anything you hoped we could work on together today?
- What are you most proud of in this writing?

#### Reflecting on the Writing or Picture

- Tell me more about \_\_\_\_\_.
- What else have you learned?
- What is most interesting to you?
- What do you most want your reader to learn about \_\_\_\_\_?
- You just shared a fact that isn't in your picture or your writing. Where do you think this new idea will go?
- As you look at this list of nonfiction text features, which ones are you planning to include in this piece of writing?

#### Focusing Questions

- Which part is most important?
- Would it help to add some headings?
- How might you put these parts together?
- Where could you put this new idea?
- How many of your sentences begin in the same way? Let's talk about some other ways you might open those sentences.
- Can you turn your beginning sentence into a lead that really catches the attention of a reader? Can you think of a different way to say this?
- What are your thoughts about your ending? Did you end with the most important things you want your reader to know and feel?
- Let's look and see how many action verbs we can find.
- How might you combine these two short sentences?
- Think about the setting for your subject. Does your writing help a reader visualize the setting?
- Which sentences do the best job of showing rather than telling?

#### Reflecting and Growing as a Writer

- What is the best part of this writing? What did you do in this writing that you will be sure to do again and again?
- How will you use the tip I gave you in our conference today? How will it improve your writing?
- Do you know what you will be doing tomorrow as a writer? Will you continue with this piece or do you have something else in mind?
- How does this writing compare with other writing that you have done?

## SUMMING IT UP: SHARING AND REFLECTING

Finally, gradual release calls for time to pause and reflect. This is an opportunity to sum up the learning—to summarize the learning target and self-reflect on what could be improved. This pause for a sum-up and reflection is critical as it gives young writers an opportunity to consider what they have learned as the brain sorts, reclassifies, and moves the learning into long-term memory (Jensen, 2008). Traditionally, reflection has also been a time when writers share a bit of their work with a partner or a small group.

Gradual release is a powerful, evidence-based support system. Guided by gradual release, we hope that you and your writers take great pride in watching the process unfold from modeled writing to guided practice to independence and reflection. From these foundations, nonfiction writers take flight.



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