Navigating Nonfiction: Guidelines and TOP 5 Strategies for Helping Kids Comprehend Informational Text

By Lori Oczkus
Clad in their winter coats, wet boots, and damp gloves from an outdoor recess, fifth graders file into their classroom and eagerly take their seats, anxious to see what nonfiction titles I’ve brought today. As I open my bag, the students watch with wide-eyed enthusiasm. They practically gasp when I reach in and reveal the contents. You’d think I’d just awarded the class with ice cream, candy, or bubble gum; instead, I pull out copies of the inviting nonfiction text *Sharks* by Seymour Simon.

Have you noticed that many of your students really enjoy nonfiction topics and texts? Many of our boy readers especially love nonfiction texts. Some students—boys and girls—may even prefer reading about “real” or “true” topics (Jobe & Dayton-Sakari, 2002). This month, we explore practical ways to build on the natural curiosity of students and specific strategies to help kids better comprehend nonfiction texts.

### Problems Students Encounter Reading Nonfiction Texts

In today’s fast-paced, digital world, our students need to develop savvy for reading informational texts. The new U.S. Common Core Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010) include more content area reading and writing throughout the grades and are forcing districts, publishers, and tests to require that students be exposed to more informational text.

Although many of the nonfiction texts in schools today have improved dramatically in their appeal and accessibility, content area reading poses challenges for our students. Common problems students of all ages experience when reading nonfiction include:

- Lack of background knowledge for the topic
- Difficulty figuring out content area vocabulary
- Unfamiliarity with nonfiction text structures and text features

Students need plenty of exposure to effective comprehension strategies that help unlock meaning in informational texts, such as skimming and scanning and determining what is important.

### Real-World Reading

It is estimated that nonfiction reading constitutes 85–95% of adults’ daily reading material (Smith, 2000; Venezky, 1982). In addition, around 95% of the sites on the Internet contain nonfiction text (Kamil & Lane, 1998).

Think about what you might read in a given day and make a quick mental list of the informational texts. Your list probably includes a rich variety: web-based materials, news stories, brochures, maps, business letters, editorials, health documents, reports, directions, shopping, articles about your hobbies. The average elementary child, however, spends only 50% of his or her reading time (and often much less) with nonfiction texts. Researcher Nell Duke (2000) reports that primary students spend just 3.6 minutes per day reading nonfiction texts. The demands of our information-saturated world require that we increase students’ exposure to informational text—and teach strategies to comprehend it.
**What Effective Nonfiction Instruction Looks Like**

**Primary**

The first graders are busy recording the titles of their independent reading books on their reading logs. Mr. Paige encourages the budding young readers to read a balance of fiction and nonfiction. He invites them to think about reading more nonfiction: “Turn to your partner and tell him or her one topic you hope to read a nonfiction book about next.”

After lunch, the students gather around the rug area and eagerly listen as Mr. Paige reads aloud from Meet the Octopus by Sylvia M. James. He begins the lesson by asking students to watch as he models how to make connections to the text. He previews the text and uses the illustrations to jog his ideas: “I think I already know that the octopus uses some sort of ink to protect itself from predators. Now turn to your partners and tell one thing you think you already know.” The room is buzzing with comments: “I know they swim.” “I think that they have lots of arms.” “I think they eat fish.”

Mr. Paige asks the students to make predictions after modeling the strategy frame “I think I will learn… because…” Students talk over one another with excitement and their teacher reminds them to take turns. He continues the lesson by reading aloud from the text and pausing every few pages to ask the students to discuss what they think they will learn on that page.

**Intermediate**

The fifth graders prepare to read the science text by reading each heading and then skimming that section to come up with a logical “I wonder” question. The students work in table teams to write their wonders after each section. Mrs. Baumgartner fields the wonders and the class discusses.

Later that day, Mrs. Baumgartner meets with a group of five struggling readers for a guided reading lesson using a text on volcanoes. The students gather on the floor and discuss the illustrations as they make their predictions about what they will learn. During reading, Mrs. Baumgartner stops the readers periodically and encourages them to turn to a partner and wonder something about the paragraph they are on.

During little buddy time on Friday, the students will read aloud a nonfiction text on a topic they’ve selected based on the buddies’ interests. Later during social studies, the students work in teams on their hand motion summaries (Oczkus, 2009) for a chapter on the colonies. Each team selects five vocabulary words or phrases from the reading and creates hand gestures to represent that concept. Giggles abound as teams perform for the class, but everyone remembers the content better this way!

**Practical Guidelines for Teaching Nonfiction**

Here are some guidelines to help you teach students to use effective strategies as they navigate their way through nonfiction.

Recognize that reading nonfiction is different from reading fiction.

When reading nonfiction, the reader may skip around instead of reading from beginning to end, read some parts more deeply, reread often to summarize the information, or spend time studying the illustrations and other visuals. Readers have varied purposes for reading nonfiction, and those purposes affect how carefully...
they read. For example, if you are interested in vacationing in Florida, you might skim several websites before reading a text deeply. However, if you are house training your puppy or making pizza, you may read directions and methods very carefully. The reader needs to understand how the nonfiction book is organized (text structure) and its special text features, such as headings and captions.

**Teaching idea for distinguishing nonfiction from fiction.** Ask your students, “How is reading fiction different from reading nonfiction?” Record their findings on a chart. Have your students ask adults in their home why they read nonfiction and to bring in examples (e.g., maps, newspapers, magazines, how-to books, recipes).

**Teach text structures.**

Once when I asked second graders, “What is nonfiction?” Carlyn replied, “Nonfiction books don’t start with ‘once upon a time.’” Fiction books are organized around a story with a problem and solution or maybe by events or a timeline. Nonfiction texts are written to inform, describe, or report and are usually organized around basic structures: cause/effect, compare/contrast, description, problem/solution, question/answer, sequence. Cue words and phrases are often used in these structures.

**Teaching idea for text structures.**

Try using picture books to teach the structures to your students. During the predicting phase of your book, preview the reading material and help students predict the text structure. Sketch the organizer on the board or chart and ask students to help fill in after reading.

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**Cue Words and Phrases for Nonfiction Text Structures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonfiction Text Structure</th>
<th>Cues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cause/Effect</strong></td>
<td>Since, because, this led to, on account of, due to, may be due to, for this reason, consequently, then, so, therefore, thus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>How Do Apples Grow?</em> by Betsy Maestro</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compare/Contrast</strong></td>
<td>In like manner, likewise, similarly, the difference between, as opposed to, after all, however, and yet, but nevertheless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gator or Croc?</em> by Allan Fowler</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
<td>Varies with the text; reads more like fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bats</em> by Gail Gibbons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem/Solution</strong></td>
<td>One reason for that, a solution, a problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A River Ran Wild</em> by Lynne Cherry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question/Answer</strong></td>
<td>How, when, what, where, why, who, how many, the best estimate, it could be that, one may conclude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Why Do Volcanoes Blow Their Tops?</em> by Melvin and Gilda Beurger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sequence</strong></td>
<td>Until, before, after, next, finally, first/last, then, on [dates], at [time]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>How Kittens Grow</em> by Millicent Selsam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Introduce nonfiction text features.**

Nonfiction texts are loaded with reader supports that we can teach our students. Text features include the following:

- illustrations
- photographs
- labels
- glossary
- index

As you introduce each of these to students, ask, “How does this text feature help you understand the reading?”
Lori’s Top 5 Ideas for Teaching Nonfiction

1. **Word Pop Prediction (Oczkus, 2010)**
   Skimming and scanning is a useful prediction strategy that good readers use constantly before reading. This quick prediction technique encourages students to skim and scan over text prior to reading in order to identify key vocabulary and concepts they may encounter in the text.
   **Procedure for Word Pop Prediction**
   - Tell students you are going to model skimming and scanning to help them predict. Compare this to scrolling down an Internet page before reading.
   - Use a text the students can all see while you model—use a smartboard, overhead, or Big Book.
   - Place your index fingers on the top edges of the text—use finger puppets for a more dramatic effect! As you move your fingers down the text, read aloud the words that “pop” for you.
   - Invite the students to try skimming and scanning, and make predictions together based on the words that popped.

2. **“I think I will learn... because...” Predictions (Oczkus, 2010)**
   Predicting with nonfiction can be awkward for some students. Try using the frame “I think I will learn... because...” to guide students as they predict (see www.lorioczkus.com/teachers-tips-lori-oczkus.php).
   **Procedure for “I think I will learn... because...” Predictions**
   - First select a portion of text and model for students as you predict using the “I think I will learn... because...” frame. Show how text features help you predict.
   - Invite pairs of students to take turns predicting with the next portion of text.
   - Discuss predictions and return to them after reading to see if students learned what they thought they would.

3. **Flip It (Oczkus, 2010)**
   This fun technique teaches students how to sharpen their ability to ask and anticipate great questions as they read. Instead of asking students to make up questions about large chunks of text, try flipping sentences into questions first.
   **Procedure for Flip It**
   - Select a nonfiction text to model from. Tell students that good readers ask questions as they read, and they also think about what questions might be on a test of the material. Compare this to thinking while reading about what question the host might ask on the television program Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?
   - Read one sentence aloud. Pause and think aloud as you decide what kind of question goes with the sentence and pose the question. Discuss the answer.
   - Guide students to work in pairs as they find sentences to flip into questions that they then answer.
   - Reflect on questioning and how it helps readers understand the text better.

4. **Hand Motion Summaries (Oczkus, 2009)**
   This is a student favorite! Students brainstorm keywords and phrases from the text and create hand motions or gestures to illustrate the points.

Teach nonfiction in primary grades, too!
Primary-grade students enter our classrooms full of questions about “real” topics such as spiders, rockets, and animals. Some of our youngest readers—especially the boys—prefer reading nonfiction. Duke and Bennett-Armistead (2004) tell us that it is never too early to expose children to the wonders of nonfiction.

Teaching idea for text features.
A fun way to get students to pay attention to text features while reading is to create an Interactive Text Feature Wall (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2007), where students share examples of the text features they find. Students cut text-feature examples out of kid-friendly magazines and student newspapers, then glue them on chart paper. Students decide how much space to dedicate to each feature. See a sample at www.teachingcomprehension.org.
Procedure for Hand Motion Summaries

- Select a portion of text to model. Read aloud.
- Choose five key points or words, and list them on a chart.
- For each point, make up an accompanying hand motion. Invite students to do the motions with you.
- Have pairs of students repeat the motions as they verbalize their summaries.
- Invite students to work in pairs or teams to create their own hand motion summaries.

Procedure for Pop-Up Thoughts

- Select a portion of nonfiction text to model from, and tell students that good readers think lots of little pop-up thoughts as they read.
- As you read aloud from the text, demonstrate for students as you pause and mark on sticky notes symbols for thoughts you may have. For younger students, model only two symbols in a given lesson.
- Encourage students to work in pairs or teams to mark their texts with sticky notes for pop-up thoughts. You may even assign different pop-up thoughts per table or allow students to use them all.
- Discuss as a class. Reflect on how coding thoughts during reading helps students understand nonfiction better.

Sample Pop-Up Thoughts Symbols

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Lightbulb" /></td>
<td>Something new I learned is…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Question Mark" /></td>
<td>I didn’t get…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Connections" /></td>
<td>I made a connection!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Smiley" /></td>
<td>I was surprised by…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Lightning Bolt" /></td>
<td>I realize now that…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image6.png" alt="Pencil" /></td>
<td>This is A+ writing!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pop-Up Thoughts (Oczkus, 2009)

When good readers read, they constantly think about the text and thoughts pop up: “This reminds me of…” or “I already knew that…” or “Oh, I realize now that…” This lesson encourages students to think deeply and interact with nonfiction text as they read.
Q&A
How can I encourage my students to read more nonfiction during independent reading time?
Encourage your students to read nonfiction on their own by having them keep a reading log that lists the titles and genres of the texts they are reading. Also, ask them to fill out an interest inventory. (A sample Reading Log Form and Interest Inventory are available in the October Literacy Survival Tips on independent reading)
When you confer with students, encourage them to read books, magazine articles, and online pieces about their topics of interest.

Web Resources for Nonfiction
ReadWriteThink: www.readwritethink.org
ReadWriteThink is a great resource for hundreds of free downloadable lessons in all aspects of reading. Here are some lessons to help your students navigate nonfiction:

- “Investigating Animals: Using Nonfiction for Inquiry-based Research” (Grades K–2) by Devon Hamner
- “Predicting and Gathering Information With Nonfiction Texts” (Grades K–2) by Bethany L.W. Hankinson
- “Traveling Terrain: Comprehending Nonfiction Text on the Web” (Grades 3–5) by Sheila K. Seitz
- “Using THIEVES to Preview Nonfiction Texts” (Grades 6–8) by Cynthia A. Lassonde

Scholastic 5-Day Unit Plan for Introducing Nonfiction:
content.scholastic.com/browse/unitplan.jsp?id=109
Prepare your students to use expository texts that readers of all ages encounter daily, including newspapers, brochures, magazines, instruction manuals, recipes, and maps.

Stenhouse Publishers Author Conversations: Nonfiction Mentor Texts (Podcast): www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DxCHu5QXA
An interview with Lynne Dorfman and Rose Cappelli, authors of Nonfiction Mentor Texts, recorded in 2009 at the IRA Convention in Minneapolis.

References


Lori D. Oczkus is a literacy coach, author, and popular speaker across the United States. Tens of thousands of teachers have attended her motivating, fast-paced workshops and read her practical, research-based professional books, including Interactive Think-Aloud Lessons: 25 Surefire Ways to Engage Students and Improve Comprehension (Scholastic & International Reading Association, 2009) and Reciprocal Teaching at Work: Powerful Strategies and Lessons for Improving Reading Comprehension (2nd edition; International Reading Association, 2010). Lori has extensive experience as a bilingual elementary teacher, intervention specialist working with struggling readers, staff developer, and literacy coach. She works regularly with students in classrooms and really knows the challenges that teachers face in teaching students to read! You can contact Lori through her website at www.lorioczkus.com.