

GENRE STUDY OF NONFICTION WRITING: FEATURE ARTICLES, EDITORIALS, AND ESSAYS

At the conclusion of an inquiry into geology, I had asked my students to sum up their individual discoveries so they could share them with each other. The idea of creating a geology magazine emerged from our study, so we immersed ourselves in studying the structure and elements of a feature article. The kids were excited about this idea. They planned to distribute the magazine to parents and students in the school. Kids applied for various editorial and managing positions as they each worked on writing their own articles. The magazine came together beautifully and was very well received. The kids had worked very hard, but one thing was missing. Although all the students had independently chosen to study one aspect of geology, and thus were interested in their topics, only a few had become passionate about them. This was evident in their writing.

Very few of the articles had *voice*. The authors had imparted lots of information, but the writing was lifeless. Anyone reading it could tell. After the geology inquiry, the study of the writing itself had been rushed, with little attention paid to developing voice. The kids were missing from the writing—their passions, their personalities, and, most important, their voices.

Rethinking the Nonfiction Genre Study

The following year, I decided to take on nonfiction writing again. With the support of my leadership group, and Isoke Nia in particular, I knew that I would have a collegial setting in which to plan and work

through the study in my fourth-grade classroom. I enlisted the help of Elsie Nighosian, the teacher in our library, who had also been a wonderful support for my literacy work. Elsie and I met weekly to plan how we could best work together to bring about a study of nonfiction that went beyond the traditional school report.

It was at one of our weekly meetings that Elsie and I began planning the study. We asked ourselves, “What do the kids need to know in order to be authors of nonfiction?” We came up with a list which I immediately took to Isoke, asking for her feedback.

As always, Isoke’s words were few and direct. “Where’s the genre study?” she asked. Looking at our list, she saw that we had focused mostly on the gathering of information. We had considered ways for kids to use both primary and secondary research, and we had planned ways to teach them skimming strategies and help them learn how to prepare surveys, questionnaires, and letters. We had thought through so many of the all-important research strategies, but we had left any mention of voice at the bottom of our list. It was there, at the very bottom, that the genre study lay.

In Randy Bomer’s book *Time for Meaning* (1995), he warns us not to get caught up in the act of teaching our kids only how to research, or they will be immersed in only that type of writing, and they will ultimately take on that sound in their own writing. I quickly realized that if I did not want the same results as before—lifeless, voiceless writing—I had to treat this study of nonfiction as I would any other genre,

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by closely studying the genre itself, not just the tools to inform the writing.

Elsie and I decided that we would split the work in half. She would take on the research strategies during the library period, while I would use the writing workshop to study closely the elements of craft particular to nonfiction (see Figure 1: Genre Study versus “Learning-to-Learn” Strategies).

Launching the Genre Study

I began the study by asking my students what they thought about nonfiction. Most of the kids had a similar response. Nonfiction was “boring.” Many thought that nonfiction was true stuff, and many more thought that it could be found only in encyclopedias or in books for young children. As the students began recalling “Eyewitness Books” read in earlier grades, however, some began to entertain the idea that nonfiction may not have been quite so boring. One willing soul, Albert, actually con-

fessed to being a nonfiction reader: “I read about airplanes. I can never get enough. I’m especially interested in bombers from World War II.” Some of the other kids then became aware of their own nonfiction reading; still, it was clear from the conversation that most of my students had been reading fiction chapter books and very little nonfiction. Even Albert was more a fan of fiction writing than of the books he could find on his interest.

We began by looking for nonfiction in our classroom and at home. It was my intention to invite kids into the genre by making them a part of the gathering process. The samples brought together by all of us would better reflect our interests as well as the realm of possibilities for nonfiction.

Our nonfiction collection grew quickly. We easily filled baskets with newspapers, information books, magazines, and even encyclopedias. I told the kids I wanted to share with them a book I really liked that was nonfiction. I read aloud *Dia’s Story Cloth: The Hmong People’s Journey of Freedom* (Cha, 1996).

Just as with any other read-aloud, once I finished reading, I waited quietly for the students’ reactions. The kids began to talk not only about the story but also about the way it was written. “It’s written like a story.” “It’s not boring.” “She’s writing about her family, her ancestors.” From the kids’ noticings we grew our conversation on nonfiction. We decided to continue looking at other nonfiction titles, paying attention to the way in which the author informed us.

Over the course of the next few days, we read lots of great nonfiction titles. Our scope ranged from picture books to short text collections to children’s magazines. We read articles from *Sports Illustrated for Kids* and *Faces* magazine as well as articles from our local newspaper. We made noticings about each. At first, the noticings were very general, but by the second week they became more specific, and we separated them

Planning the Study	
<p>Genre Study (Immersion in Nonfiction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading nonfiction (immersion) • Gathering samples • Noticings of craft • Notebook noticings • Finding your passion • Choosing a topic • Voice • Style <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studying mentor authors • Studying craft • Drafting • Revision • Publishing 	<p>Learning-to-Learn Strategies (Information-gathering strategies that are taught outside of the genre study)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary vs. secondary sources • Interviews/surveys/questionnaires • Locating & contacting experts • Internet searches • Periodical searches • Identifying appropriate sources • Note taking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Split page; note cards; etc. • Read, think, talk, write

Figure 1: Genre study versus “learning-to-learn” strategies

into two categories: readerly noticings and writerly noticings (see Figure 2: Readerly/Writerly Noticings). We went back to many of the texts we had read before, now pouring over them as writers. We constantly asked ourselves, “How did the author do it?”

A Study of Nonfiction Tends to Take a Long Time

We had by this point decided that if we were to publish a nonfiction piece, it would probably most closely resemble a feature article. This was an easy decision. Feature articles were most like the type of writing that we could do in both shape and size.

We looked closely at interesting feature articles we found in magazines like *Girls’ Life*, *Faces*, *Calliope*, and *National Geographic World*. These were magazines where we could imagine our own writing would fit.

We began our writerly noticings by paying attention to the way information was presented. Reading through an article on mosquitoes from *Faces* magazine (Paddock, October 1996), we noticed that the author was not simply presenting lots of information, but rather he was interjecting it with what we could clearly see was his opinion. We decided to look closely at this “recipe,” trying to determine the appropriate balance between information and opinion. I put the article on the overhead and

Readerly	Writerly
<p data-bbox="110 1052 493 1087"><i>Inside and Outside Spiders</i></p> <p data-bbox="110 1089 321 1119">by Sandra Markle</p> <ul data-bbox="110 1136 610 1281" style="list-style-type: none"> • The writing causes a reaction, regardless of the reader’s interest in spiders (can be a very strong reaction). • The information is not presented as a list of facts. This keeps the reader interested. <p data-bbox="110 1337 399 1369"><i>The Bone Detectives</i></p> <p data-bbox="110 1371 321 1400">by Donna Jackson</p> <ul data-bbox="110 1417 581 1476" style="list-style-type: none"> • The topic is very interesting. It’s scary, but we’ve heard about it on television. <p data-bbox="110 1619 524 1654"><i>The Young Basketball Player</i></p> <p data-bbox="110 1656 545 1686">by Chris Mullen with Brian Coleman</p> <ul data-bbox="110 1703 610 1816" style="list-style-type: none"> • The writer gives instructions on how the game is played. • The writing is interesting and leads to conversation. 	<ul data-bbox="667 1136 1167 1337" style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduces a new “idea,” then goes on to explain it. • Repetition: Specific terms are used over and over again (i.e., web, silk, etc.) to clearly describe/explain a concept. • It has a glossary, a pronunciation guide, and photo credits. <ul data-bbox="667 1417 1149 1619" style="list-style-type: none"> • More fact than opinion. • Facts are organized in chronological (time) order. • Uses details to explain ideas. • Descriptive writing: Uses a lot of adjectives. • Author’s lead pulls the reader in. <ul data-bbox="667 1703 1138 1845" style="list-style-type: none"> • More fact than opinion (almost <i>no</i> opinion). • Lists facts. • Has pictures with captions not always directly connected to the photo topic.

Figure 2: Readerly/writerly noticings

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we highlighted (in one color) those parts that sounded like fact and (in another color) those that sounded like opinion. Surprisingly we noticed that this author had put forth more opinion than fact, always inserting just enough fact to support his opinions.

Over the next few days we looked at other feature articles and noticed a similar mixture including more opinion than fact. Unlike encyclopedia articles, these feature pieces relied heavily on opinion. The class came to the conclusion that this was the very reason why we had found this writing so appealing. In reading these feature articles, we not only became informed on a topic, but we got to know the author as well. One of the students, Ryan, took it a step further. He proposed that if the same author wrote on the same topic without inserting his opinion, the writing would be boring. He proved this to us by taking the article and removing all of what we had identified as opinion. He rewrote the article, using only those facts the author had originally provided, and shared this version with the class. I could not have done this better myself. The importance of opinion, or author’s voice, became a cornerstone of our conversation and of our study. We moved on to discover other ways in which nonfiction authors made their writing powerful.

On a chart like we’d used earlier in the year to notice elements of craft in other genres, we identified three categories by which we would make our noticings:

What is the author doing?	Why?	Name it:
Uses a question in the lead.	To speak directly to the reader.	Question Lead
Uses a lot of technical terms.	To sound like he really knows the topic.	Technical Terms
Quotes experts on the topic.	To support her point of view.	Expert Quotes

We began charting our noticings on an overhead as we looked at each feature article, but we quickly realized that much of what we saw resembled what we had seen in previous articles. This made sense. Elements of craft transcend subject. It would be expected that what we noticed one good author doing to craft a piece, we would see other authors doing as well.

The class decided to turn the smaller, individual craft charts into one larger chart. We needed a chart that we could refer to over and over again. Two more categories were added to this “class chart.” First, in front of our author noticings, we added a column titled Example of the Author’s Work, where we pasted a photocopy of the feature article in which we had found the example, and highlighted the key part. We also created a column (at the far right of the chart) that we named Example of Where We Tried It. Although we had not yet composed our drafts (we were just about to choose our final topics), we wanted a place where we could try out crafting techniques for nonfiction and share them with others. This column would, in effect, be the accountability and expert-source column. Not only did it send the message that all of us were expected to try what we had learned, but it also provided kids with the opportunity to find mentors in our classroom. Those who had been successful at using some technique could help someone else use it.

Choosing a Topic

Choosing a topic is the most difficult and yet most important part of the writing. I had to convince my students that they had to choose “kid expert topics” and that these topics had to be narrow.

When given the opportunity to write on any topic of their interest, most of my students have no problem choosing a topic. However, their idea of topic is huge. Many students over the years have written about

basketball, every aspect of it; or dogs, all dogs. There is nothing wrong with students exploring a topic from a wide perspective in their notebooks. However, when choosing the topic that they will pursue for publishing, it is essential that they find an angle from which they'll write on that topic.

Teaching kids to find an angle for their writing is not easy, even when they have collected pages in their notebooks around topics that they are truly passionate about. If they choose to write about a nonfiction topic with which they have had no personal experience—e.g., whales or volcanoes—it is even more difficult to help them find an angle. I found that the best way to start is by limiting kids to choosing a topic that already exists in their notebooks. This is the

same principle behind the idea of “choosing a seed” (Calkins, 1994) for any other genre. Topics come from notebooks.

Large topics abound in notebooks. The work of finding an angle comes from reflection on the topic. Kids may reflect on previously written entries in the margins of their pages, or they can make the noticings and reflections more formal (see split-page reflections in Figure 3). Ryan, a student writer, noticed that he had written many entries about basketball in his notebook. Upon rereading them, he decided that his angle would be that all basketball players really are ordinary people. But, upon further reflection Ryan realized that this was not at all why he had been writing about basketball. Fame was what intrigued

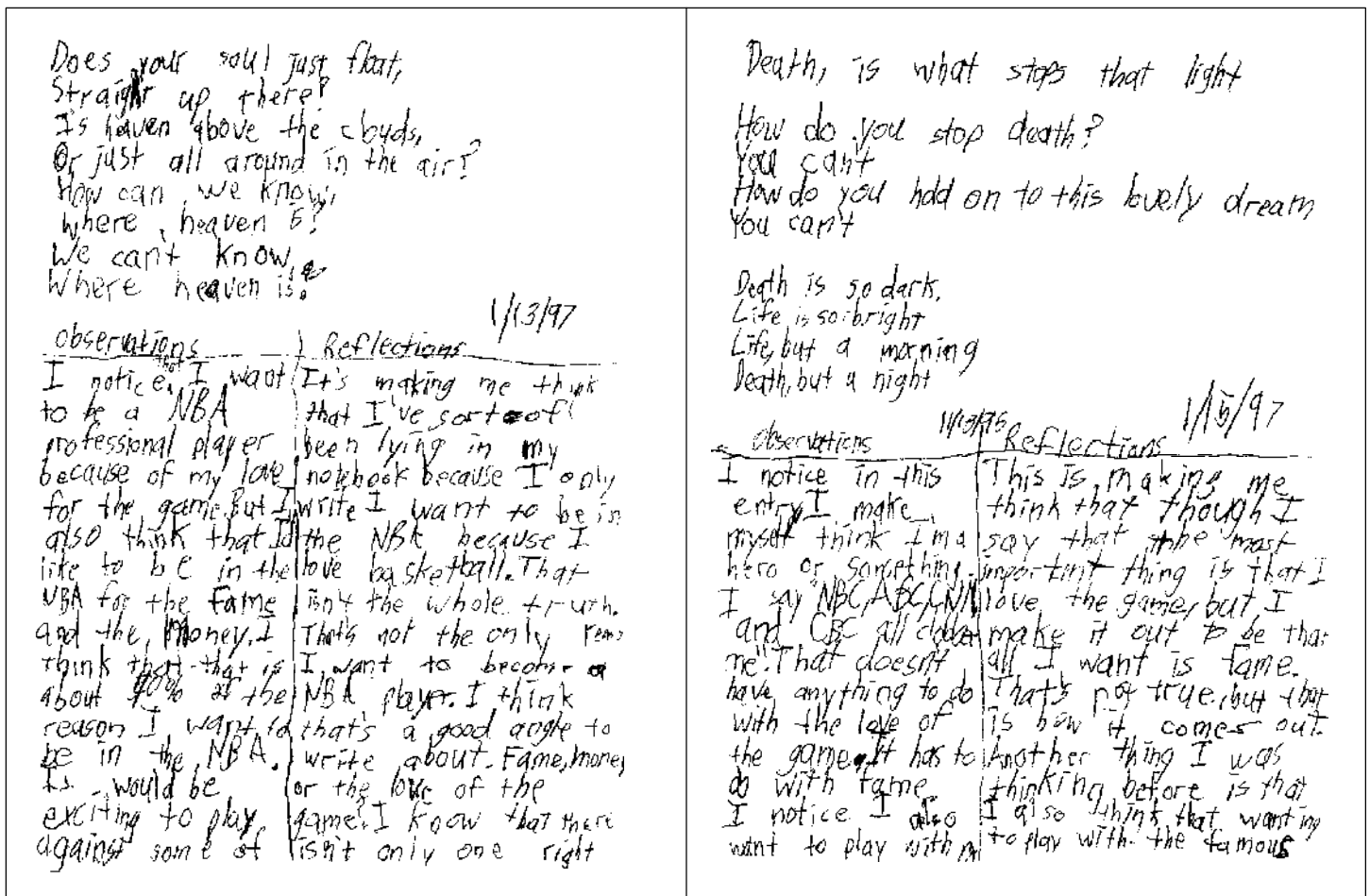


Figure 3. Two split-page reflections

We learned to react to the information—e.g., “I was surprised to find out that . . .” —and to respond to it—e.g., “I guess these kids have not yet discovered how amazing . . .”

him. He imagined being cornered for autographs, being sought out for interviews, having the big money and the fame. He decided he did not want to take all of this on. While it could have been a potentially exciting topic—“Why do kids really admire basketball players?”—it was also huge. He predicted, justly so, that it would be incredibly difficult to research.

I have also found it helpful to study various feature articles for the purpose of identifying angle. When we asked, “What about spiders does this author want us to know?” we narrowed down the topics. We asked ourselves the same question about our own writing: “What aspect of [topic] am I writing about?” Even this type of questioning is difficult for most kids. Getting at angle requires a lot of mini-lessons and even more individual conferring. It is essential that this teaching happens before kids begin to research their topics.

Researching the Topic

Writing that isn’t supported by fact does not make for good nonfiction. But writing that is only a list of facts doesn’t make for good writing either. The balance between fact and opinion is a fine one, as is the gathering of just the right kind of research. I found that although many of my students had had some experience using research skills, many didn’t know where to start researching the topics they had chosen.

Because a feature article presents a topic based on an angle—the author’s point of view—the information students use needs to support that angle. It is difficult, but essential, to teach students to use only information that supports their individual angle and discard whatever they’ve gathered that doesn’t fit.

Gathering appropriate information begins with drafting surveys and questionnaires and finding primary and secondary sources, but it also involves the interpretation of information. I found it extremely

helpful to put on the overhead completed surveys that we interpreted as a group. For example, what if a student thought that many other children would share her passion for guinea pigs, but the survey results indicated the opposite? We learned to react to the information—“I was surprised to find out that . . .”—and to respond to it—“I guess these kids have not yet discovered how amazing . . .”

Research is made easier by a good choice of topic. Unless kids have selected topics that they know extremely well and about which they are passionate, they will not be able to serve as experts or find supportive information easily. Topics that did not exist in the notebook prior to choosing will result in research that is distant, or report-like, and they will lack in voice.

Philip Gerard, in his book *Creative Nonfiction* (1996), explains that the difference between reporters and writers of nonfiction literature is that the writer first lives with the subject, getting to know it inside and out and forming his or her opinion from this knowledge, while the reporter researches the subject unknowingly, often from the stance of an outsider, and writes about it with that same lack of passion.

Drafting and Revising

As in any other study, kids began to draft after spending much time collecting entries and information on their topics. Keeping in mind the structure of the feature articles we had closely studied, each student attempted to draft his or her thinking and information in a feature article format.

Individual feature articles were outlined first. Kids decided what big ideas would support their point of view and listed them. The order of the ideas was not yet important; this could be handled later, as could any missing information (e.g., results from a survey, or the response to a letter to an expert). Kids immediately began thinking about their leads and worked their

way through all the information they had outlined. Because of all the genre study we had done, first drafts took only a few days.

As students began drafting, homework assignments included the close study of a specific mentor text from a magazine they admired. Students chose mentor texts based on the writer's craft—texts that had a length, a shape, and a sound that might be useful for the kind of article they wanted to write. They did not, however, choose articles on their own topics. This selection process was exactly what had been modeled for them throughout our study of the craft of nonfiction. The purpose of this work was to model for students the structure expected if they were to publish in the particular magazine they had chosen (e.g., *Sports Illustrated for Kids* or *Girls' Life*).

Once students had studied a mentor author and completed their drafts, their revision work became that of incorporating those elements of craft that we had noticed were appropriate for their pieces. This brought us back to the craft chart we had previously constructed. We searched the chart for options we had tried earlier and could now use for our revisions. The whole process of revision was easier because we had these options.

Publishing

Kids worked toward publication individually—revising, editing, and publishing their pieces to fit their chosen magazines. A student who had chosen *Girls' Life* prepared a front and back cover to replicate the real magazine and published her article in the format that *Girls' Life* used. We had set a publishing date for the entire class at the beginning of the study, and students were working toward it. At this celebration, students read their pieces aloud for the audience we had invited.

The second celebration came a bit later. Once all students were finished, the feature articles were compiled into a single

class magazine. At that celebration, we unveiled the magazine and distributed copies to adults and students in the school (we had found a volunteer who provided free color copies).

Reflection

The eight to ten weeks that it takes to study nonfiction don't come easily given my already packed schedule. Add to that the fact that I also believe it is extremely valuable to teach the same genre more than once if students are to become independent, and we are talking about a big investment of time in one genre. However, I've decided to make this investment. This does not mean that we study only feature articles. Within the genre of literary nonfiction exist many categories. I have found that if we begin with feature articles and follow up with editorials (or commentary writing) and essays, then my students get a lot more experience with many of the strategies learned from studying feature articles and from researching their chosen topics. This move from one category of literary nonfiction to another has resulted in a yearlong study of the genre that has helped my students reclaim their writing voices as they tackle a range of diverse, interesting topics.

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