

Nonfiction: why it's important

Find out why reading and writing nonfiction are essential.



By Connie Matthiessen

"Mom will you read to me?"

For a decade and a half I've been responding to this question with stacks of books for each of my three children. My kids grew up alongside Harry and Hermione at Hogwarts, and Laura Ingalls Wilder on the Western plains. We burned through *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Treasure Island*, and the *Inkheart* series, and — much to my chagrin — scoured every page of those *Magic Tree House* books. But there's one kind of writing that we rarely read, one that experts now recommend every teacher and parent take special pains to make a part of their children's education.

Call it the nonfiction revolution. Where children's reading and writing has mostly been composed of make believe — fairytales and talking animals and, as teendom approaches, overwrought coming-of-age dystopias — now educators, impelled by new educational standards, are extolling the importance of factual, informational reading.

Why nonfiction? Schools have always taught geography as well as literature, and science along with Shakespeare, but this mix of fiction-focused literacy with a little bit of reading and writing in other subject areas has produced spotty results. Many colleges have discovered that incoming freshman may be able to compute a math problem or analyze a short story but they can't read a complex non-fiction text or write a well-researched essay.

Indeed, a 2006 report found that only half the high school students who took the ACT exam were ready for college-level reading (numbers were even lower for African American, Hispanic, and Native American students, and those from low-income families). To remedy this education gap, experts are recommending focusing on informational texts earlier — including nonfiction books, newspapers, magazines, atlases, and other reference materials — and teaching the building blocks of non-fiction writing earlier as well.

The truth about nonfiction

With so many distractions competing for our children's time it can feel like a victory to get your child to simply open a book — any book. But recent research on education outcomes reveal that *what* kids read is equally significant. In order to create a foundation for later learning, educators now agree that students should begin reading informational texts in all subjects from the earliest grades.

These conclusions represent a growing awareness of what our education system is failing to provide high school graduates. Some 20 percent of students who go to four year colleges and 40 percent who go to community college have to take remedial courses. This lack of college readiness, in turn, contributes to the high dropout rate among college freshman — a staggering 30 percent, by some estimates.

"The clearest differentiator in reading between students who are college ready and students who are not is the ability to comprehend complex texts," the ACT researchers concluded.

The global economy has also been cited as a reason to emphasize non-fiction. "Research shows that workplace reading has become more complex in recent years," says Lisa Cebelak of the [Leadership and Learning Center](#), a consulting division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. "Jobs that demand low reading and writing skills are being sent overseas, so even entry level workplace jobs now demand higher level reading skills."

Some experts argue that non-fiction reading teaches kids how to develop more complex thinking. In his article "[Too Dumb for Complex Texts](#)," Emory University professor Mark Bauerlein explains why this type of reading is so demanding — particularly for kids growing up in an age of distractions: "Complex texts require a slower labor. Readers can't proceed to the next paragraph without grasping the previous one, they can't glide over unfamiliar words and phrases, and they can't forget what they read four pages earlier... Complex texts force readers to acquire the knack of slow linear reading...."

Nonfiction and the Common Core Standards

The importance of nonfiction reading and writing is a theme that runs through [new education standards](#) that have been adopted by most states in the nation .

The [Common Core State Standards](#) decry the paucity and poor quality of the current reading curricula: "...students today are asked to read very little expository text — as little as 7 and 15 percent of elementary and middle school instructional reading, for example, is expository... Worse still, [this reading is] too often of the superficial variety that involves skimming and scanning for particular, discrete pieces of information; such reading is unlikely to prepare students for the cognitive demand of true understanding of complex text."

In contrast, the Common Core Standards calls for a shift in the balance of fiction to nonfiction as children advance through school. [According to the CCSS guidelines](#), by the end of 4th grade, students' reading should be half fiction and half informational. By the end of 12th grade, the balance should be 30 percent fiction, 70 percent nonfiction.

Write all about it

The nonfiction revolution isn't limited to reading but extends to writing as well. According to [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NEAP\)](#)'s 2011 National Report Card, only one-quarter of U.S. 12th graders write at a proficient level, and only three percent write at an advanced level. As a result, many kids arrive at college with poor writing skills.

The reason for the writing deficit isn't a mystery: kids simply aren't getting enough writing experience in elementary, middle and high school. NEAP researchers found, for example, that 41 percent of eighth through twelfth graders had less than a page of writing homework a week.

So if your child is accustomed to "What I did over my summer vacation" and "My favorite animal," assignments, the increased writing demands may come as a surprise. The new Common Core Standards put new emphasis on nonfiction writing, including explanatory and persuasive writing, as well as writing across subject areas – including science, social studies and math.

"We know that writing helps kids learn," says Carrie Heath Phillips, a program director for the Council of Chief State Officers. "Kids should be doing more writing in all subject areas, including science and social studies. And not just a paragraph here and there, but regular writing in all their classes." (See writing samples for [fourth](#) and [fifth](#) grades.)

If all this sounds like your child is about to be hit by a ton of encyclopedia-inspired assignments, hold your fire. Though there's plenty of consensus about the importance of nonfiction reading and writing, exactly how and when it will affect your child's classroom remains to be seen. Many schools and districts today have been hit hard by budget cuts, and will have to balance the new Common Core guidelines with the demands of high stakes testing.

In the meantime it can't hurt to add some facts to your child's fairytales. After all, nonfiction isn't about limiting their imagination, but opening their minds to the world of learning, wherever it resides.

6 ways to spark your child's nonfiction reading and writing:

- **Pursue the passion:** Get books that encourage your child's interests.
- **More is more:** Offer lots of nonfiction reading material – from books and magazines to newspapers and atlases.
- **Be the bookworm:** Read a broad range of fiction and nonfiction, and talk about what you read.
- **Reality check:** Talk about connections between what your child is reading and events in the news.
- **Reasons to write:** Suggest new writing projects — from letters to grandma, to keeping a diary, to penning a play for the neighborhood kids.
- **Get the lowdown:** Ask your child's teacher if your child's reading list includes any nonfiction texts. If not, why not?