
Igniting a Sense of Wonder



Helping Students Find Joy in Informational Texts By Linda Hoyt



As I reflect back on my early years in education, I know that one of my greatest professional transitions has been helping learners discover the joy that can be found in reading informational selections. Because my own school experiences with informational learning were lackluster, I was insecure with nonfiction texts... I wasn't sure how to help children develop a passion for reading about the real world.

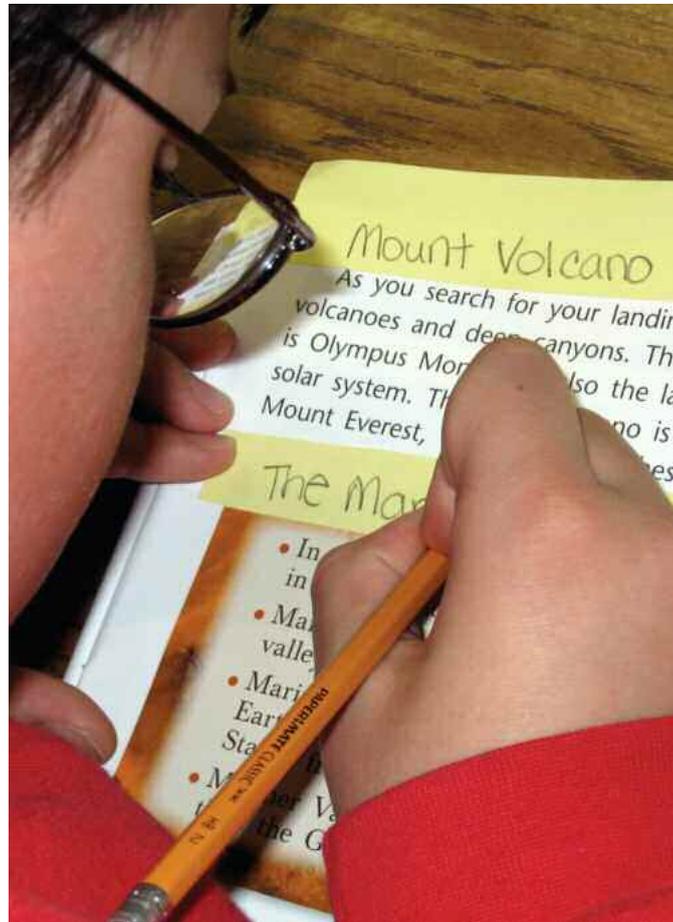
Luckily, as a parent and an educator, I learned to observe. I watched children emerge from the media center or the public library clutching books on snakes, insects, hot rods, butterflies, ballet dancing, or football. I witnessed their joy as they poured over pages with shining eyes and the glow of self-worth shimmering around them. They showed me that nonfiction books could be the books of their dreams—books that allow them free rein with their intrinsic sense of wonder about the world. With intriguing informational sources in hand, I watched learners erupt with literate vigor—engaging in authentic inquiry, while cultivating the ability to attend to messages in print and visual sources.

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What a gift they shared! The children taught me that learning about the world is a gift we give ourselves. And how important that is because informational sources fill our lives. Everywhere we look there are descriptions, explanations, newspaper and magazine articles, directions, street signs, recipes, letters, maps, menus, emails, persuasions, and so on. To be successful in school, in the workplace, and in our personal lives, readers must learn to understand this wide range of text types so they can navigate them with comfort and purpose—gaining control over the unique structures, linguistic features, and visuals that comprise the heart of nonfiction texts. It is essential that we find ways to link children's natural sense of wonder to the very text types that will govern the majority of reading they do throughout future schooling and in the workplace.

The Common Core State Standards, along with grade-level expectations from most states, situate literacy and language development squarely within the content areas (Common Core State Standards 2010, Brozo 2010; Stead and Hoyt 2012). This means that learners of all ages need to develop strategies for seeking and recording information from multiple sources, along with strategies for synthesizing and writing about their learning. They need to take a critical, analytical stance—reading numerous titles on the same topic to compare and contrast the quality of the visuals, to notice points of view, and to evaluate the quality of the information presented.

I believe children of all ages can engage in vigorous, high-level literacy experiences with nonfiction if we take careful steps to ensure their success.



Tips for Success with Informational Literacy

- Share your energy, interest, and passion for informational text. Let kids see you express excitement and your desire to investigate and learn.
- Remember that informational read-alouds engage and inspire learners by extending content understanding and building enthusiasm for inquiry. Because language patterns in informational texts are vastly different from those of oral speech—and most certainly different from fiction—read-alouds bring these language patterns to learners in comfortable, nonthreatening ways while providing a window into how a proficient reader engages with content-specific reading.
- Be picky about the informational resources you present to students. Entice them with the best of the best by choosing selections with gorgeous visuals, fascinating diagrams, well-labeled illustrations, and beautifully crafted language. Invite learners to journey with you into the work of Seymour Simon, Nicola Davies, Steve Jenkins, Doreen Rappaport, Robert Burleigh, and the other greats of nonfiction writing.
- Think aloud and model how to: generate intellectually honest questions about a topic, vigorously challenge the authenticity of the content, analyze the perspective of an author, and compare two books on the same topic.

- Model how to use strips of sticky notes to mark important ideas in a passage or visual, create diagrams and sketches to retain important ideas, record key words, take effective notes, and merge content from multiple sources on the same topic.
- Demonstrate the power of rereading. Tightly packed concepts take time to process, so slowing down and/or rereading can be one of the most powerful tools for readers. Rereading is an essential component of the close readings required by the Common Core and an effective tool for deep comprehension.
- Share the sensory images you construct as you read. Give readers a window into how you are processing and holding on to key ideas.
- Surround investigation of a subject with many modes of interaction so print-based knowledge is linked to digital texts, video, realia, writing, speaking, and presenting.
- Provide time for learners to read broadly on a topic so they develop a coherent base of knowledge and subject-specific vocabulary.
- Set the stage for deep thinking by encouraging collaboration, both between partners and within small groups.
- Scaffold accountable discourse and analysis of informational texts by supporting the use of stems such as

I wonder . . .

I noticed . . .

I can infer . . .

What did you notice . . .

What key ideas did you identify?

Which points did you think were most important?

An important point for me was . . .

I realized that . . .

This selection helped me to see that . . .

Additional questions that come to mind are . . .

If we were to summarize the key points, I think we should mention . . .

The perspective of this author suggests that . . .

If we were to look at this from another viewpoint, we could consider . . .

What conclusions might we draw?

A fact in the text that supports my position is . . .

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Informational texts are windows into the intricacies of our world—opportunities to better understand the subtleties of nature, varying historical perspectives, and ways in which we can construct a better future. When knowledgeable teachers weave a tapestry of inquiry around intriguing topics and well-crafted resources, children are empowered with a sense of wonder while building an internal foundation for success with informational literacy.



