Introduction to
*Explorations in Nonfiction Writing*

from Tony and Linda

We undertook the creation of this resource because we both have devoted many years to opening the door to nonfiction for teachers and students. We believe that children should be surrounded by nonfiction reading and writing from the very beginning. Not only does nonfiction reflect real-world demands—to meet standards, to communicate information, to build world knowledge—but exploring nonfiction can also capitalize on our learners’ curiosity and their fascination and willingness to learn about the world around them.

In a climate of inquiry and research, nonfiction writing flourishes. Facts and information provide an infinite pool of ideas to write about. Writing for a specific audience and purpose—to inform, narrate or retell, instruct or lay out a procedure, respond, or persuade—gives momentum to those ideas.

Immersion in nonfiction writing does not happen by chance. It requires a dynamic teaching environment in which nonfiction writing is regularly and explicitly taught, not touched upon occasionally or extrapolated from a creative writing process. The unique features and thinking that go into creating nonfiction texts demand teacher modeling and gradual release of responsibility for writing and learning to the students.

Perhaps most important, nonfiction writing has the power to transform a classroom: to generate energy and excitement in all learners and to meet every writer where he or she is, no matter how experienced or inexperienced. When children are constantly engaged in thinking and drawing and writing about what they are learning, knowledge sticks.
We believe that young writers deserve:

- Extended, in-depth writing projects that allow them iterative practice of the entire writing process
- Brief, intensive writing tasks that build their fluency in writing a variety of text types
- Opportunities to study mentor texts—professional models and models constructed with their teacher—in order to discover the characteristics and features of a variety of written forms
- Authentic writing experiences—messages they want to communicate to an audience they care about for a real purpose—that infuse them with enthusiasm for writing
- Time to research topics they are passionate about—to immerse themselves in print and other media, to ask and answer questions, to explore collaboratively and independently
- Clearly scaffolded instruction that begins with teacher guidance and culminates in the students’ independent approximation of a form
- Assessment with explicit expectations that makes students partners in their own learning: self-assessment for writers, formative and summative assessment for teachers
- Frequent opportunities to share and celebrate their accomplishments as writers
The Extended Writing Units (EWUs) and Power Writes you will find in each section of this lesson book are meant to be teaching models, not prescriptions. It is essential to remember that the topics presented in each are simply suggestions—possibilities for you to consider. You may want to take advantage of the organization and content provided and use them just as they are written. However, we also encourage you to personalize them and make them your own!

The real goal of this resource is to give you examples that assist you in linking nonfiction writing to the interests of your students and your curriculum. The following walk-throughs will highlight the teaching framework for all the lessons. By all means, use this framework to teach whatever content works for your class. If an Extended Writing Unit is on the planets but you have terrific resources and a curriculum goal that focuses on life cycles of insects, change it! Slip your own topic into the session framework, and go for it! The structure and focus points of the Extended Writing Unit will work just as well with your topic as the topic you find here. If a Power Write is about writing directions on how to build a circuit board, feel free to switch it to how to solve a math problem, how to play safely on the playground, or how to read a book.

We would love nothing more than to hear how you have personalized the EWUs and Power Writes to create a powerful support system that is finely tuned to the needs of your students and your curriculum. When you infuse a strong writing emphasis into content learning, your students will remember more while at the same time thriving in an atmosphere where writing is a tool for content retention.

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