



The Capacity Building Series

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Why non-fiction writing?

With the exception of attendance, opportunities to develop skills and abilities in non-fiction writing is the “number-one factor” associated with improved test scores.

(Reeves, 2002)

Non-fiction writing is the most widely read genre in the world.

(Kamil & Lane, 1997).

Studies have shown that academic achievement in a range of subjects and fields relies heavily on informational reading and writing.

(Duke, 2004)

Elementary school children of both genders (not just boys) will choose to read non-fiction over stories nearly half the time, a finding that surprises many teachers

(Kletzien & Szabo, 1998)

SECRETARIAT
SPECIAL EDITION # 5

NON-FICTION WRITING FOR THE JUNIOR STUDENT

Non-fiction writing, sometimes called “informational writing,” is distinguished from other types of text by its purpose – namely “to communicate accurate, credible information about things, events, people, constructs, concepts and theories” (Ministry of Education, 2006c, p. 79). Fountas and Pinnell suggest that the purpose of non-fiction writing is to “inform or persuade,” whereas the purpose of fiction is to “entertain and involve readers (or listeners) in stories of life” (2001, p. 393). The line between the two can be a fluid one – consider documentaries and docudramas. Yet, by and large, fiction, “fashioned in the author’s imagination,” is not held accountable to standards of evidence, whereas non-fiction, “based in fact,” needs to be documented and verified by other sources (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, p. 399).

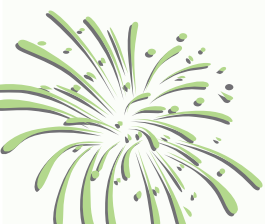
Multiple Benefits

Studies have shown that exposure to informational texts such as textbooks, reports, manuals and biographies has many benefits, including increased enthusiasm for recreational reading (Duke, Martineau, Frank & Bennett-Armistead, 2003) and growth in the ability to read and write not only informational text but also other genres (Purcell-Gates & Duke, 2004). Non-fiction writing is associated with higher test scores in reading as well as in mathematics, science and social studies (Reeves, 2002). As Bearne (2002) argues, non-fiction writing builds students’ comprehension of content through such processes as hypothesizing, questioning, exploring, reflecting, explaining, describing, persuading, evaluating and reflecting. In short, non-fiction writing helps students think systematically and thoroughly about the world.

Because of the many benefits for students, non-fiction writing should be taught in all areas of the curriculum, in all grades. For junior students, effective literacy programs provide writing opportunities based on topics that relate to their interests and that engage them in using print, electronic and visual media to gather and express new ideas and information.

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Good writers ...

- use clear and focused language
- keep their reader (audience) in mind
- are aware of writing conventions

Additionally, good non-fiction writers ...

- are able to choose the right sources for their writing
- must be accurate – information should be verifiable
- consider which text forms to use to convey their message

Fact or fiction? ... helping students understand the difference

- Create a general statement that differentiates fiction from non-fiction. Make sure the language used is understood and appropriate for students.
- Over a lesson or several lessons, choose a mix of short pieces for the class to read (e.g., biographies, short stories in first person, histories, road directions, sports stories, points of view from well-known characters, scientific explanations, etc.).
- Have students read text individually and then in pairs and/or groups to decide whether a piece of writing is non-fiction or fiction. Each group can then summarize the text and explain why they think it is one or another.
- Have the class discuss whether they agree or disagree with the group's decision and justify reasoning.
- Don't give anything away in these discussions. Just clarify points of view and re-state them if needed against whatever criteria you have used for differentiating non-fiction from fiction.
- Be comfortable with new ideas or some class confusion as the gap between fiction and non-fiction can blur quite easily.

Necessary Skills for the Information Age

Today's students are inundated with vast amounts of ideas and information – online, print and mass media. Rather than accepting what they read or listen to at face value they need to become critical consumers who can interpret, evaluate and assess information intelligently and responsibly. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) suggest that our students' quality of life will depend on their ability to read and write a wide variety of texts – in both print and non-print media. Duke reiterates this point: "In this Information Age, the importance of being able to read and write informational texts critically and well cannot be overstated. Informational literacy is central to success and even survival, in advanced schooling, the workplace, and the community" (2000, p. 202).

In order to become critical consumers of information, students need to learn how to ask questions purposefully, not only finding sources to answer their questions, but considering those sources in terms of bias and perspective. Instruction in research methods and inquiry goes hand and hand with instruction in informational writing. Students need to be able to use a wide variety of print and non-print resources and make decisions about the credibility of sources of information. They need to become adept in the analysis of text; critical literacy skills give students the tools they need to think more deeply about the texts they read and the texts they create.

Engaging Students

Giving students a choice to read and write about things that fascinate them, to conduct inquiry based on their own questions and their own research and to present to an interested audience increases motivation (Jobe & Dayton-Sakari, 2002). It also leads to a sense of empowerment (Fredricksen, 2001; Preller, 2000). Students become more interested, purposeful, knowledgeable, confident and active in both reading and writing (Caswell & Duke, 1998). In the junior division, especially, opportunities to engage students in non-fiction writing increase as students begin to develop strong opinions about controversial issues.

Students should write to answer questions that are important to them.

Students tend to copy information when writing is not focused on questions of interest to them (Anthony, Johnson, & Yore, 1996). When student writing is focused on authentic questions, teachers can shape both the inquiry and the writing task. Using such strategies as webbing and/or charting, teachers can tap into what students know and want to know. These strategies help the teacher to determine what is needed to support student understanding and the development of inquiry and writing skills.

Non-fiction writing is only as effective as the information and understanding on which it is based.

"Inquiry is the heart of learning in all subject areas" (Ministry of Education, 2006d, p. 29). The ability to locate, question and validate information allows our students to become independent, lifelong learners (Ministry of Education, 2006d, p. 29). Research, problem solving and inquiry processes in all curriculum areas are key to providing students with a road map for engaging with informational reading, viewing and writing. How we ensure that students have sufficient and accurate knowledge on which to base their work is a critical question for all educators.

A critical literacy stance is needed so students can navigate complex multi-media texts in a purposeful fashion.

As students gather information to support their ideas, they should be challenged "to question the authority of texts, exploring issues of bias, perspective and social justice" (Ministry of Education, 2006a, p. 63). In turn, when responding to and/or presenting information, students need to determine whether their own points of view



are “balanced and supported by evidence” (Ministry of Education, 2006d, Writing; Specific Expectation 2.5). In the writing process, students should begin to question what they believe, consider other points of view and reflect on multiple perspectives in a diverse world.

Students need to consider which text forms best meet their purpose(s) and best engage their intended audience.

Information is positioned within the dynamics of the relationship between the writer and the audience: “What is it I want to communicate and why?” “What is it my audience wants or needs to know and why?” “Will it be better to make a placard, write a letter, create a report, produce a graph, or write a poem or rap?” Having opportunities to write for a variety of audiences helps students anticipate questions and frame information in light of the intended audience. It also provides students with incentive for communicating as clearly and effectively as they can.

Creating a Culture of Inquiry to Support Non-Fiction Writing

Developing a culture of student-centred inquiry within the classroom is an effective way to engage students in non-fiction writing that focuses on the points just discussed. Here, students begin the learning process through inquiry, bringing their own prior knowledge to bear on the task and engaging in a process that both validates their experiences as well as exposes them to new challenges.

- Start with general or broad issues in the curriculum that are easy to break into smaller, more specific parts (e.g., the environment, transportation).
- Choose issues that are contentious or have more than one potential viewpoint (e.g., transportation in urban communities or stories that present ethical dilemmas).
- Plan backwards from the finished project.
- Co-develop rubrics with students to guide their work.
- Plan for resources (e.g., library or internet) that students will need in order to complete their inquiry. Find websites that will work well for students’ literacy skill level and topic. The more planning you do, the smoother the research will go for your students.
- Use brainstorming to elicit as much prior knowledge and specific content as possible as well as to allow students to learn from one another.
- Generate a list of questions either by yourself or as a whole class or guide students/ student groups to generate a list of questions based on the brainstorm.
- Repeat the above for each step in the inquiry. Encourage students to share ideas and strategies used to find information.
- Celebrate and model the learning process in ways that re-inforce student inquiry and active learning.
- Be patient and keep at the process as it may take a few tries or even a whole year to develop a culture of inquiry in your classroom.
- Have students work on developing questions in other subject areas. Do not underestimate how long this may take. Developing good questions needs to be explicitly taught, modeled and re-inforced.

Questions to support a critical literacy stance ...

- What techniques did the author/producer/artist/photographer use to influence my thinking?
- Is this text presenting a balanced point of view? Whose voice is silent? Do I need to seek another perspective?
- Is this information accurate?
- This text would be different if ...? Do I agree with this text?
- Does this information make sense to me? What will help me to make sense of my ideas?
- Do I need to consult other source(s) of information?
- Does the graphic representation selected to display data influence the conclusions drawn from that data? Would another graphic representation change my conclusions? What purpose might the writer have for using a particular graphic?
- Is this information consistent with what I already know? If not, why?
- What action(s) do I need to take to verify this information? (Adapted from Ministry of Education, 2006a, p. 64)



Tapping into what students know ...

- Start the lesson with an open-ended question that connects the curriculum to some aspect of students' lives.
- Allow opportunities for students to work individually, in pairs and in small groups and share as a whole class in order to bring out everyone's experiences and support the participation of all students.
- Listen closely to students and re-state their feedback or input for clarification when needed (e.g., "When you said x, do you mean...?"). If you need to re-word for clarity, make sure students agree to your re-statement.
- Model openness, curiosity and patience to encourage students to come forth with their thoughts and to value other students' ideas.
- Move around the classroom while students are working in pairs or small groups and listen for "nuggets" that you can use in the whole-class discussion.
- Use visual prompts (e.g., charts and discussion webs) to help structure students' thinking throughout all stages of activity, from individual to whole-class discussion.

Introducing Students to Commonly Used Text Forms

Studies show that students are unfamiliar with many text forms and frames and that teachers need to teach explicitly the specific skills required for each. The following list of six commonly used text forms for non-fiction writing is adapted from the work of Wray and Lewis (1997) and the Ministry of Education (2008).

1. **Recount** – retelling of events to inform or entertain (or both)

Consists of:

- "scene setting" (opening/orientation) – "I went to the symphony with my class."
- retelling of the events as they occurred – "I studied every move that the conductor made."
- closing statement (reorientation) – "When we got back from the trip, I conducted my friends singing 'Yellow Submarine' in 4/4, 2/4 and 3/4 time, using the same moves."

Recounts are usually written in the first person, in the past tense, and in chronological order. The writer uses "doing" or action clauses.

2. **Report** – presenting precise, factual information

Consists of:

- opening general classification – "A hurricane is a type of tropical storm."
- technical classifications – "There are five categories of hurricanes based on wind speed, air pressure and danger."
- description often includes – (1) qualities (e.g., "accompanied by winds exceeding 119 kilometres/hour"); (2) parts and their function (e.g., "eye of the storm – cool air descends into the eye, creating a small centre of calm weather; eye wall – storm's fiercest winds; and spiral bands – thin clouds that surround the eye wall, where most of the rain falls"); (3) habits and behaviour or uses (e.g., "Hurricane season is from June to November. Storms happen more often and are more powerful at end of the season.")

Reports are usually written in the present tense. Focus is on groups or classes (of people or things) rather than individuals. The writer uses "being" and "having" clauses.

3. **Procedure** – giving sequenced steps of instruction for how to do something

Consists of:

- opening statement of what is to be achieved – "To download songs to your MP3 player, you ..."
- list of materials or tools needed – "MP3 player, USB cable, computer, song library on your hard drive, a program that lets you copy audio files."
- series of sequenced instructions – "First, you need to download a special program that lets you copy audio files. (Make sure you know what kinds of files you are going to copy as that will tell you what kind of copying program you need.) Second, you need to hook up your MP3 player to your computer. (To do that you need a USB cable.) Third, you need to access your MP3 via "My Computer" on your desktop. Fourth, you need to get your copying program working. (To do that you click on the "Import Media" button in the application.) Fifth, you need to find your songs already on your computer, and copy them onto the player."
- instructions often accompanied by diagrams or illustrations

Procedures are usually written in the simple present tense or imperative (do this, do that) and focus on factual content. The writer uses words that relate to time (e.g., first, then, next, before) and mainly "doing" or action clauses.



4. Explanation – showing how something works

Consists of:

- general statement – “Our digestion breaks down what we eat and drink into very small parts (nutrients) so that our bodies can feed our cells and give us energy.”
- a series of logical steps explaining how or why something occurs – “Digestion starts in the mouth, when we chew and swallow, and is finished in the small intestine when we get rid of the parts of food we don’t need. Muscles and juices in the intestines push out the food we don’t need. The juices also take out more nutrients that we turn into energy.”

Explanations are usually written in the simple present tense, using temporal (then, next, after) or causal (because, therefore) conjunctions. The writer uses mainly action clauses and an impersonal, objective tone.

5. Persuasive text – presenting an argument or a point of view, with intent to influence the audience

Consists of:

- thesis (opening statement or position) – “Polar bears should become a protected species.”
- argument (attempts to persuade using logic and appealing to reader’s emotions or morality) – “Polar bears are dying because of changes in the climate that we have caused.”
- reiteration of opening position (summary and restatement) – “Therefore, if we don’t find ways to protect polar bears, they will die out forever.”

6. Discussion – present arguments and information from different viewpoints before reaching a conclusion based on the evidence.

Consists of:

- statement of the issue and a preview of the main arguments – “There is disagreement about whether all junk food should be banned. Some say that people get addicted to junk food and eat too much of it and it causes diseases like diabetes. Others say that people have the right to eat what they want.”
- arguments in favour of, plus supporting evidence – “Many school boards have already banned junk food from cafeterias and even fast food chains have healthy alternatives to food that has too much sugar, fat and salt. Therefore junk food is clearly bad for us and should be banned.”
- arguments against, plus supporting evidence – “People should have choice in what they eat. A little junk food won’t hurt you.”
- recommendation given as a summary and conclusion – “One group wants to protect people from junk food, whereas the other group wants to protect our freedom of choice. Based on the arguments and evidence presented by both sides, I think”

Discussions are usually written in the simple present tense, using logical rather than temporal conjunctions.

For more information about text frames, please see Marzano, Pickering and Pollock (2001).

Get students writing ...

Quick Write

- first draft response to a line of text, often in response to teacher prompts
- students write for three to five minutes
- helps students overcome fear of writing

Writer’s Notebook,

- teachers launch the notebook at the beginning of the year, modeling creation and use
 - students record things they notice, observe and think about
 - helps students see that they can write entries, experiment and collect ideas
- Text Frames/Writing Template
- skeleton outline of each form of writing (e.g., explanation, persuasive text, diary, brochure, etc.)
 - organizes writing by the use of headings or connectives (e.g., first we did ..., then we did ..., and finally we ...)
 - helps students understand how different text forms work

(Ministry of Education, 2008)



Speaking and writing ...

Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia point out the supportive, prompting nature of conversation, for example, "turn taking" – somebody speaks which prompts someone else to say something and so on. This reciprocal prompting is missing from the interaction between a writer and a blank sheet of paper. Bereiter and Scardamalia's research has shown that a teacher's oral promptings during writing can extend a student's work, with no drop in quality. The prompts act as an external trigger of discourse production. Bereiter and Scardamalia suggest that students need to "acquire a functional substitute for an encouraging listener" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1985, p.97).

Helping Students Organize Their Writing

Whether they are writing a recount, a report or a persuasive text, students need to become familiar with the overall organizational structures that authors use to present information. They may not know, for example, that a narrative has a beginning, a middle and an ending or that an effective way to explain a concept is to start with simple ideas and build more complex ones from there. Some key organizational patterns that can be modelled for students include:

- Chronological order – events in time sequence
- Compare and contrast – information about similarities and differences
- Concept/definition – general information about a class of persons, places, things and events, as well as identifying characteristics or attributes
- Description – characteristics of specific persons, places, things, events
- Episode – organizes a large body of information about specific events and identifies time, place, specific people, specific duration, specific sequence of incidents, causes and effects
- Generalization/principle – organizes information into general statements with supporting examples
- Process/cause and effect – organizes information into a series of steps leading to a specific product or outcome (Ministry of Education, 2006a, p. 39-40)

It is important to emphasize to students that an author may use a number of different organizational structures within the same text form or piece of writing.

Effective Teaching and Learning Strategies

An effective writing program provides students with the knowledge and skills needed for different purposes (e.g., to inform, persuade, entertain, reflect); for different strands (e.g., functional, personal and imaginative); and for different text forms (e.g., diary, story, newspaper article, report, letter). The following is a synopsis of research-informed teaching and learning strategies that support non-fiction writing.

- Create an inviting classroom with flexible seating arrangements and accessible resources.
- Use writer's notebooks/portfolios.
- Use characteristics and features of different text forms to teach writing. Ensure that students read, respond to and use a variety of resources for a variety of purposes.
- Decide on the type of text form/genre to be taught.
- Focus on teaching before asking students to write in the form/genre.
- Find models or create models which clearly exhibit the features of the form/genre (mentor texts).
- Allow students time to practise skills before applying them in their own writing.
- Take a step-by-step approach to demonstrating the writing process (planning, organizing, writing, editing, and revising different types of texts).
- Teach writer's craft techniques based on the writing process and student developmental writing needs.
- Model inner dialogue (thought processes) to direct writing. Include debating, thinking about word choice and sentence structure, developing counter-arguments and employing devices such as rhetorical questions.
- Scaffold the writing process through "think sheets" and writing frameworks that provide, for example, an outline of the overall text structure with sentence starters.



- Provide meaningful writing activities that promote student ownership of the non-fiction writing.
- Support students through writing conferences (giving suggestions while the student is in the process of writing).

Two Contexts to Teach Non-Fiction Writing

Through a consideration of themes, topics, processes and skills, teachers select the learning context that will best meet the needs of their students. By framing the teaching of informational writing in different and varied contexts, teachers avoid compartmentalization and help students become fluid thinkers who can “connect the dots” across language strands and curriculum areas.

An Example of Non-Fiction Writing in a Literacy Learning Block

A junior teacher wishes to teach persuasive writing within a meaningful authentic context. A junior language class considers the questions: “How can individuals really make a difference in the world?” “What can our class do to make a difference this year?” In groups, students research information on a community or environmental project for the class to pursue. Using writing-to-learn strategies such as a KWL chart, each group considers what they know already and what they still need to find out (e.g., pros, cons, needs, costs, timelines, protocols to observe, work involved, etc.). Each group gathers their information and presents a summary of their findings to the class. Students select the project they feel the class should pursue, for example, writing a letter to persuade others to support their idea. All letters are shared and then the class selects a project by way of a vote.

An Example of Non-Fiction Writing in an Integrated Context

A Grade 4 teacher assigns a culminating task that incorporates expectations from a range of disciplines – the study of medieval civilization (Social Environmental Studies), opinion/persuasive writing (Language) and double bar graphs (Data Management and Probability). In an integrated learning context, teachers provide students with “opportunities to work toward meeting expectations from two or more subjects within a single unit or culminating activity” (Ministry of Education, 2006d, p. 23). The culminating task might require an opinion/persuasive piece of writing or a presentation which responds to the questions, “Should our life today be more like medieval culture? In what ways?” “Why and why not?” To complete this task, students must have an understanding of medieval culture. They must also learn to present their opinions and ideas to convince others. As well, graphs could be utilized to display and analyze data related to the presentation.

In both contexts, keep in mind ...

Critical literacies – Students need to consider both the intended and unintended messages that reside in the sources of information they use and which voices are present and which are not. In examining the voice and point of view of others, students are also learning to hone the qualities of their own voice.

Language strands – All the strands provide information and ideas to stimulate student thinking. For example, Oral Communication is the “‘rough draft’ talk that allows peers and teachers a window into each other’s thinking. As we talk with freshly fashioned ideas in our minds, we all witness the birth of still further ideas” (Whiton & Whiton, 2000, p.2). The Reading and Media strands introduce students to different text forms that model organizational patterns of informational text that students can draw upon to address more effectively their own purpose and intended audience when they write informational text.

Assessment tips ...

Ongoing assessment informs both the learner and the teacher. When planning and giving feedback, keep in mind the following:

- topic selection
- understanding audience and purpose
- developing content and ideas
- appropriate use of the structure and language features of the text form
- choosing appropriate text forms, structures and features
- use of higher-order thinking skills such as inferring, analyzing and making connections



Writing strand – Students need to be taught to approach non-fiction writing in manageable steps and to understand that the writing process is recursive; that is, the results of one step may require students to revisit prior ones. A polished product will touch on all parts of the process, while a less formal piece may involve fewer steps. For example, students might engage in prewriting, drafting, and rethinking and revising to check the validity of their information, and to refine their writing before sharing.

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