

Nonfiction Matters

Reading, Writing, and Research in Grades 3–8

Stephanie Harvey

Nonfiction Matters is divided into three parts: Conditions for Successful Inquiry, The Nitty-Gritty, and Getting It Down on Paper

Each part contains several related chapters. There are a number of ways to read *Nonfiction Matters*: once all the way through, part by part, or chapter by chapter. Although the book is written chronologically, chapters can stand alone, particularly for further study.

Study groups can meet after reading each chapter, each part, or the whole book to discuss issues and ideas that impact the classroom and school. Group members who have a particular interest in one chapter or part can join with another member or small group to focus more intently on specific content.

This study guide offers some questions to help focus discussion, and it suggests some actions to make the study group more interactive.

Here are some questions:

Considering that the vast majority of reading and writing done outside of school is of the nonfiction variety, do we offer enough nonfiction in our school? If not, how can we better meet the nonfiction needs of our students?

- Do we provide enough instruction in nonfiction reading and writing?
- Do we read enough nonfiction out loud?
- Do we have sufficient nonfiction titles at our disposal?
- How can we fit nonfiction in when we barely have time for everything else?
- Can we better integrate science and social studies with the language arts program through a nonfiction study?
- What, if anything, do nonfiction trade books bring to the curriculum that textbooks don't?
- Do we include enough short text in our nonfiction reading program (i.e., magazines, newspapers, columns, essays, manuals, picture books, etc.)?
- Are our students able to determine essential ideas and synthesize information in difficult expository text?
- Do our students write nonfiction that is interesting for them and for us?
- Do we engage in our own nonfiction reading, research, and writing to model the process and to learn more about a given subject?

Can using more nonfiction in the classroom help engage students?

- Are our students compelled by the work we do?
- Do they take learning seriously?
- Would they say they loved learning?
- Can we identify the passions or interests of each child in our class?
- Do we share our passions with the kids?
- Are all the students well served by the content or are we losing some to boredom and disinterest?
- Will learning be long lasting and meaningful if students are uninterested?

What about inquiry as a foundation for learning?

- What is inquiry-based learning?
- Have any of us had personal experience with the inquiry process?
- Do students in our classrooms groan when they hear the term research? If so, what can we do about that?
- Are questions valued in our classrooms?
- Do we model curiosity? How?

What about district and state mandates?

- Are there district or state standards that involve reading and/or writing nonfiction? Are we currently meeting those standards?
- Are there district or state mandated reading and writing tests that measure nonfiction reading and writing? How are our students doing on those?

Last and most important: *what are we trying to achieve in our Nonfiction Matters study group?*

Chapter Descriptions and Study Group Actions

Chapter 1 From Passion to Presentation

Chapter 1 provides a road map to *Nonfiction Matters*, including a description of the nonfiction inquiry process from start to finish. It lays out a primary theme of the book: the purpose of education is to enhance understanding. With this in mind Stephanie outlines some ideas in “Thoughts to Guide Our Practice” on pages 6 and 7.

Action

- Start a discussion that might address the following: Are we focused on helping kids understand what they learn in this school? How do we do that? Do teachers here model the process and the product at every

step? What is currently in place to encourage inquiry-based learning? What would prohibit it?

Chapter 2 Honoring Passion

Passion is contagious. In Chapter 2, Stephanie makes a case for building community by honoring student passion and providing opportunities for kids to increase their expertise in an area of special interest. An important inquiry tool, the nonfiction notebook or *wonder book*, is introduced here, as well as the concept of curatorial collections.

Actions

- Write about your passions in your nonfiction notebook and share them with other participants just as kids are asked to.
- Become curators of your own collections and share them with other participants. These collections offer a practical way to jump-start free, focused, nonfiction writing and curatorial collecting to share with students.

Chapter 3 Questions that Compel

Questions are at the heart of the inquiry process. Chapter 3 emphasizes the importance of nurturing wonder by honoring kids' questions and modeling sincere questions. The best questions come from subjects we have some knowledge of.

Actions

- Record compelling questions in your notebook and explore some of those questions through writing.
- Research the answers to your questions and share the content and the process.
- Brainstorm ways to promote questioning in your classrooms.
- Generate lists of question games and question books to add to classroom resources.

Chapter 4 Topics that Resonate: Let the Writer Choose

Students can be encouraged to choose their own topics. A student may select a topic out of the blue or work with an umbrella topic. Selecting from an array of topics under a content area umbrella can satisfy the teacher's need to have the student explore a topic and the writer's need to choose a topic of interest.

Actions

- Choose a topic you've been exploring in your wonder book and delve deeper.

- List some topics from your curriculum that you would be interested in exploring further and begin to research them.

Chapter 5 Authentic Resources

Chapter 5 lists real-world resources and tools that help support students in nonfiction inquiry. It includes some direction in funding these items.

Actions

- Brainstorm additional ideas on how to procure resources for inquiry-based classrooms.
- Invite a professional grant writer to come in and provide some guidance in grant writing.
- Generate a list of known funders.
- Have a study group or a subgroup investigate grant possibilities and try writing one.

Chapter 6 Showing Kids How

For far too long teachers have been telling students what to do without showing them how. Chapter 6 explains the virtues of teacher modeling, mentors and experts, and kids learning from each other and from the authors they read. In Chapter 6, you'll want to note Stephanie's explanation of the gradual release of responsibility (page 52) that provides a foundation for the preponderance of instruction in the book.

Actions

- Check out and add to the Web sites that promote mentorships.
- Generate lists of specialists and experts in the school and community.
- Collect stories of role models who read, write, and value education to share with their students.

Chapter 7 Reading Nonfiction: Learning and Understanding

Nonfiction reading is reading to learn, and reading can change thinking. Chapter 7 focuses on a variety of comprehension strategies that help nonfiction readers make meaning and gain information from text. Note the use of Post-its and marginal notes to monitor comprehension when reading and the support list for struggling readers.

Actions

- Select a variety of nonfiction articles from different sources—magazines, text books, newspapers, trade books, essays, etc.—and keep track of your thinking while reading by coding in the margins and marking the text. When you finish, you can share your reading process with the group.

- Add to the nonfiction bibliographies at the back of the book.
- Create a nonfiction reading time line marking your personal history with nonfiction reading. You may remember some powerful nonfiction reading experiences to convey to your students.

Chapter 8 Zeroing In: Observation and Secondary Research

Chapter 8 stresses the need for researchers to be good observers and to engage in authentic research. Authentic research provides answers to real questions that the researcher does not know the answer to. Nonfiction research projects provide a natural opportunity for teachers and librarians to collaborate in the best interest of students. You'll also want to note Stephanie's list of challenges to Internet research (page 102).

Actions

- Think about authentic research and discuss your own experiences with research so you can share these anecdotes with your students.
- Engage in a discussion of how librarians and teachers might best collaborate on teaching and learning in a nonfiction inquiry project.

Chapter 9 Primary Research: Going Directly to the Source

Chapter 9 describes a variety of methods for collecting primary source information. We remember primary information. It breathes life into the nonfiction inquiry project and kids love it!

Actions

- Choose a partner and interview that person about their passion. You may learn more than you could imagine about a colleague, as Stephanie did in her interview with Mary (page 109). Ask another group member to script the interview that you can copy later to distribute with your class as a teaching tool.
- Check out the Bellingham, Washington, virtual museum Web site (see page 122). It is amazing!

Chapter 10 Organizing Thinking: There's No One Way

Organizing and recording thinking is the glue that holds the research process together. But there are as many organizational styles and strategies as there are people who need to organize. Chapter 10 describes a slew of strategies. You'll want to note Stephanie's discussion on page 136 of adding a third column for response to two-column note forms.

Actions

- Think about your own organizational styles, identify your personal preference, and consider why they work for you.

- Discuss why certain organizational methods seem to work better for some kids than for others.

Chapter 11 Getting It Down on Paper

Nonfiction writing does not have to be dry, dull, or boring. Chapter 11 addresses how to craft reports that are interesting and rich with voice as well as factually accurate.

Actions

- Search through magazines and trade books for examples of rich nonfiction writing to share with the group and your students. Along with National Geographic and Smithsonians, in-flight magazines are a terrific source of rich writing.
- Share stories of your own writing history. These may add some insight into your student's successes or struggles with writing.

Chapter 12 Inquiry Genres: The Wide Range of Possibilities

Chapter 12 describes nearly a dozen genres for nonfiction report writing, including biography writing, primary source writing, feature article writing, essay writing, and more. Inquiry-based classrooms are marked by diverse work products.

Action

- Discuss which form best lends itself to a certain content area or topic.

Chapter 13 Managing Nonfiction Inquiry Projects

Chapter 13 offers a few examples of management strategies that have worked in other classrooms. But teachers must trust their own instincts as to what works for them. You may want to discuss the list of management hints on page 198. They are easy and effective.

Action

- Share some management techniques that have worked for you. No one knows better than the teacher who inhabits the classroom how to best manage the situation at hand.

Chapter 14 Presentations and Assessment

Chapter 14 provides some rubrics and rubric components for ongoing inquiry project assessment and presentations. Of particular note is the segment entitled "Designing Rubrics" where the teacher facilitates the building of a rubric that is primarily designed by students.

Actions

- Design an evaluation form to give to students at the conclusion of the project so they can rate the teacher's performance. The teacher can leave space for students to add comments that are not covered by the form.
- Brainstorm additional rubric components and design a custom form for your school.

Chapter 15 A Final Word

These last paragraphs address life after the nonfiction inquiry project. With all of the time kids dedicate to these projects, they may be too important to let die on the classroom floor after a ten-minute presentation. The chapter describes how teachers and kid have found meaningful uses for these final products after classroom completion.

Action

- Engage in a discussion of how to breathe life into a project outside of the classroom. The end of the project may, in truth, be closer to the beginning.