

# “Really,” “Not Possible,” “I Can’t Believe It”: Exploring Informational Text in Literature Circles

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What happens when fifth graders explore informational text during literature circles? Read on to discover how they talk and write about informational text.

I chose the rack on page 76. I chose this picture because they would stretch you, or in their words you would be “stretched like a piece of taffy.” When I read this part, I thought of the torturer spinning a metal spiny thing and the person screaming for mercy. On the bright side you get taller and you know when you get cracks in your neck, well it might get all of those off. And of course, there is the bad side where you will get really sore and you will feel like you broke something and if you feel it, you probably did.

Kaitlyn wrote these words after reading *Haunted Histories: Creepy Castles, Dark Dungeons, and Powerful Palaces* (Everett & Scott-Waters, 2012), an informational text. Her job was to visualize what was happening and to share it with the students in her literature circle. As she shared facts and feelings connected with the tortuous stretching rack, other students visibly moved their bodies as though they were being stretched. Once they acted out being stretched, they engaged Kaitlyn in questions about the rack and how they only saw bad things about it and how much it would hurt. One student said, “You were very clever to talk about getting taller as a good thing.”

These conversations and writings were shared in literature circles in a fifth-grade classroom. Often, students included comments such as “I can’t believe this. Did you know this?” or “Really? How did this happen? I didn’t think it was possible.” Their conversations were expressive as they learned about information that was new and interesting to them.

Literature circles are small heterogeneous groups in which students all read the same story and each student contributes unique information about the story through an assigned responsibility (Daniels, 2006). Typically, students explore fiction—most

often, novels—in these groupings. To collaboratively contribute to the group’s comprehension, individual students are responsible for a literature circle role: connector, questioner, illustrator, summarizer, director, word wizard, and so on (Miller, Straits, Kucan, Trathen, & Dass, 2007).

Even though literature circles have traditionally been centered on fiction, teachers have recently explored how students might engage with informational text in these groupings (Wilfong, 2009). Daniels (2002) suggested that literature circles are the perfect vehicles to integrate curriculum through the authentic reading of trade books supported by students’ rich discussion. He acknowledged an added urgency to shift the text explored in literature circles from solely fiction to informational text in order to rectify the enormous emphasis on fiction prevalent in today’s classrooms and because students are expected to engage more often with nonfiction.

Teachers have systematically included informational text in literature circles. For instance, Stien and Beed (2004) initiated this shift to informational text for third graders by building connections between fiction and nonfiction. First, they used historical fiction as a basis for an exploration of biography. Then, they branched to science by using Magic Tree House books (which contain both fiction and nonfiction), and then they moved to science

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trade books. Stien and Beed noted that students learned about and enjoyed nonfiction through this process.

Wilfong (2009) wrote that literature circles that focus on nonfiction or informational text have positive results with students. She worked with a fifth-grade teacher to use a science textbook in literature circles, and they suggested that this practice better integrated textbook reading in the content areas. In comparison, Moss and Hendershot (2002) used nonfiction trade books with middle school students. They noted that nonfiction trade books shift the attitudes of reluctant readers because they are better written than textbooks and are therefore more engaging for middle-grade readers. Further, nonfiction or informational texts support students in the acquisition of factual knowledge, and students enjoy them (Kesler, 2012; Nikolajeva, 2014).

Literature circles with a focus on informational text also support close readings of text and student dialogue centered on text. Although many teachers may think close reading is only possible with short articles or snippets of nonfiction text, the literature circle itself has students reread text to answer the Director's questions or to revisit a portion of text noted by other members of the group. Moreover, each role responsibility drives students to the text to create questions, find interesting words or facts, and so on (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). As students are participating with other students in considering their questions or facts, they engage in conversation. Each person in the group understands that their personal contribution shapes the understanding of the whole text for each group member (Beers & Probst, 2013).

When literature circles are modified with the inclusion of informational text, the various student roles are changed. For instance, students would not focus on plot or characters. Rather, they might provide information about science or history (Straits & Nichols, 2007). Moreover, informational text includes a wider range of textual and visual features than does most fictional text (Belfatti, 2015). Within informational text there are nonredundant textual and visual features that require students to read and comprehend multiple modes and the relationships among them. These multimodal aspects allow

for informational text-specific roles that reflect these characteristics.

These multimodal reading challenges have been explored with students. For instance, Varelas and Pappas (2013) found that when responding to the reading of informational text, students incorporat-

ed characteristics of multiple modalities such as diagrams, images, and labels. In other research (Belfatti, 2012; Wegerif, 2006), students relied on only one mode supported by another mode; for example, they focused on words and only used images to support their textual discoveries. Both of these ways of responding included a focus on more than just text for interpretation.

We—a fifth-grade teacher (Rebecca) and a university researcher (Diane)—wondered how literature circles might be

tailored to incorporate informational text. Typically, in the reading of a novel, students build comprehension and understanding as they discuss and write about the novel from its beginning to end. However, with informational text, books often are organized into sections that are connected but discrete. Therefore, students' reading is more disparate, and connections from day to day may not be as easy to make. We also wondered about multimodal reading and opportunities for response. How would students respond to deepen comprehension and understanding for themselves and other group members? We weren't sure of all of the opportunities and issues, but we wanted to learn from students about strengths and concerns when incorporating informational text within literature circles. We believed this practical knowledge about how students interpret informational text would help other teachers as they plan for these explorations with their students.

## Getting Organized

The first task we faced, and perhaps the most challenging task, was text selection. We wanted informational texts that would be immediately appealing to students. We guessed that our 61 fifth graders would be interested in mysteries, curious phenomena, and other topics related to modern science like vampires, creepy castles, and dungeons. We selected the following books:

### PAUSE AND PONDER

- How might literature circles focused on informational text support close reading?
- How can a teacher provide current informational texts for students to explore?
- How might students create extensions of the vocabulary they identify as important to comprehension?

- *Case Closed? Nine Mysteries Unlocked by Modern Science* (Hughes, 2013): This book considers nine unsolved mysteries such as Hsu Fu, the City of Ubar, and George Mallory. Visual and textual information is balanced in the book. Each chapter focuses on a different topic.
- *Encyclopedia Horrifica: The Terrifying TRUTH! About Vampires, Ghosts, Monsters, and More* (Gee, 2007): The author of this book invites readers to explore the truth behind these creatures. This book is well supported with visual photographs and other text features. Each chapter focuses on a different topic.
- *The Giant and How He Humbugged America* (Murphy, 2012): Information about the Cardiff Giant mystery is shared throughout this book. There is some visual information, but it is all presented in sepia tones.
- *Unexplained: An Encyclopedia of Curious Phenomena, Strange Superstitions, and Ancient Mysteries* (Allen, 2006): This book shares various mysteries and puzzles such as hauntings, crop circles, and fish falls. Each chapter is organized around a specific topic. The text and visual information are balanced throughout.
- *Haunted Histories: Creepy Castles, Dark Dungeons, and Powerful Palaces* (Everett & Scott-Waters, 2012): This book's size and cover make it visibly different from the others. Though it appears to be fiction, the book's authors share factual information about castles, dungeons, and palaces. There are black and white drawings throughout.

Our criteria for choosing books were that the books had to be recent publications, had to be about 100 pages and include text and visual elements, and could not be part of a series where each book's format was identical. The books selected were appropriate for most of the fifth graders to read independently, and those students in each group who found the books a challenge could read them together with a partner and chat about the content during reading.

Once the books were chosen, the teacher revamped students' individual literature circle roles. They included both text-based and more visual ways to respond to the text:

- **Director:** This person developed questions at a variety of levels, from explicit information to analysis, to engage the group. He or she also was responsible for group behavior, where all students participated and listened to each other.

- **Inventor:** This person created a nonfiction text feature that the author did not include. He or she might create a graph, chart, diagram, glossary, picture and caption, map, or other text feature.
- **Mapper:** This person created a graphic organizer to share important information from reading. He or she might create a T-chart, Venn diagram, brainstorm web, timeline, sequence chart, or any other format that helped to organize information.
- **Word Wizard:** This person located new and interesting words that helped other readers understand the text. He or she figured out what the word meant in context, looked up the word to find a dictionary meaning, and explained what the word meant in fifth-grade language.
- **Nonfiction Fact Finder:** This person listed three facts discovered during reading and shared how these facts affected the topic the group read about. Later, students decided to write two facts and a lie to see if other students could figure out the lie.
- **Visual Viewer:** This person drew an image connected to the group's reading of the text. Once the image was created, he or she explained the image and its connection to reading.

The fifth graders viewed all of the books and made decisions on which one they wanted to read. The teacher honored all students' first and second choices as groups were formed. Across two fifth-grade classrooms, there were nine groups formed with six students in most groups. This informational exploration occurred over two weeks during the spring with students who had routinely participated in literature circles from the beginning of the year. Therefore, these students were familiar with the expectations of literature circles, and the only change was the use of informational text.

## What Students Taught Us

Our first discovery was how much students enjoyed reading informational text. As they viewed the books, they were anxious to get started reading, and they found it hard to select just one book. We overheard comments like "I want this one—no, this one," "I think learning about creepy castles will be fun," and "I love the cover on *Encyclopedia Horrifica*, so I have to pick that one."

We then explored how students responded to their informational text roles to learn about the individual contributions that supported each group's understanding. There were a total of 428 responses over the two weeks that students explored informational text. We decided to separate each role in determining our understandings, but this was not the way students built understanding. Within each group, each contribution synergistically influenced students' meaning construction. We often saw students participate in the Director's questions and then recursively explore new words, the Fact Finder's ideas, or the contribution of any other role to resolve conflicts or to learn more about a situation or person.

For each role, we selected an example response to share that captured the typical way students responded in literature circles. Following are our discoveries from each role.

### Director

The Director had the responsibility of assuring that all students participated in conversations about each section of reading. This student also had the challenging task of creating questions to guide understanding, from literal questions to more sophisticated ones. The questions that students developed were masterful at driving the rest of the group back to the text:

- "How would you defend the thinking of the workers that thought giants used to be real? Locate information from our book."
- "On page 13 in Chapter 1, how does that non-fiction text feature connect with the text, and explain why you think that."
- "How are aliens and humans alike and different? Find the answers in the chapter."
- "Infer why a werewolf acted like it was bloodthirsty."
- "How does the text support that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote books about Marie Celeste?"

In order to give a better sense of the flow of questions, we have included one complete list of questions from a Director. Sammy (students' names are pseudonyms) was the Director for *The Giant and How He Humbugged America* (Murphy, 2012) and asked her group the following questions:

- "How did the author describe Hull?"
- "What does the chapter 'Embarrassing Accusations' mainly talk about?"

- "On page 60, what does 'Man in miniature' mean?"
- "True or false: Stub Newell was innocent, and Hull was a weak and short man."
- "If you were a person in the year of 1848 and heard about the Fox sisters, who could communicate with the dead, would you believe it or think it was a hoax?"

Reviewing all of Sammy's questions shows how she built from level 1 or literal questions to more inferential ones. She also was masterful at varying the types of questions she offered. Many of the Directors included a variety of questions to keep their groups engaged. Finally, in Sammy's last question, she asked her group to consider what they might believe if they lived in the 1800s. For this question, students had to place themselves in a time past and only consider what a person might know at that time.

As we pondered all of the questions created by Directors, we were surprised at how they competently composed questions that moved from right-in-the-text questions to more complex ones. In creating these questions, they were able to increase the sophistication of conversation happening in the groups. Their questions were also text-dependent in that members of the group were pushed back to the text to provide answers and then to support those answers with text or visual evidence.

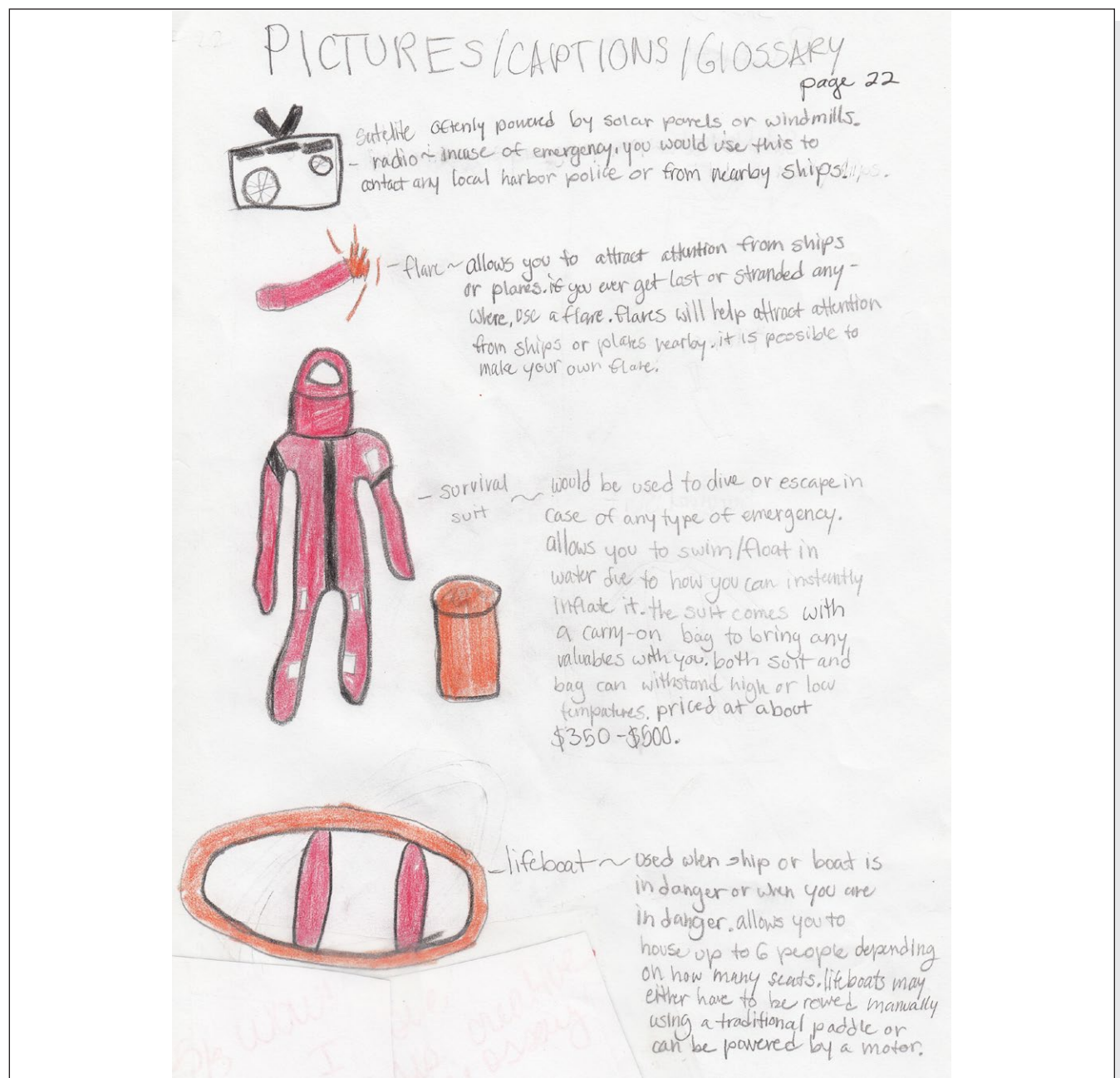
### Inventor

The Inventor was expected to create a text feature that the author did not include. The students made their knowledge of nonfiction text features clear as they composed charts, graphs, captions with illustrations, and glossaries. They did have favorites, though; Inventors most often created pictures with captions or glossaries. We included one example for each feature that represented how students formed these features.

Ann designed a very interesting glossary, including visual representations with her explanation of vocabulary words. She ensured that other students could gain this knowledge of important words in multimodal ways through text and images (see Figure 1).

Melanie provided detail in her illustration and caption (see Figure 2). Her image showed Newell's house and the crowd of people around it, and she provided a caption describing it. She also included her reasons for the feature and how she constructed it. She was clear in her

**Figure 1**  
**Inventor's Multimodal Glossary**



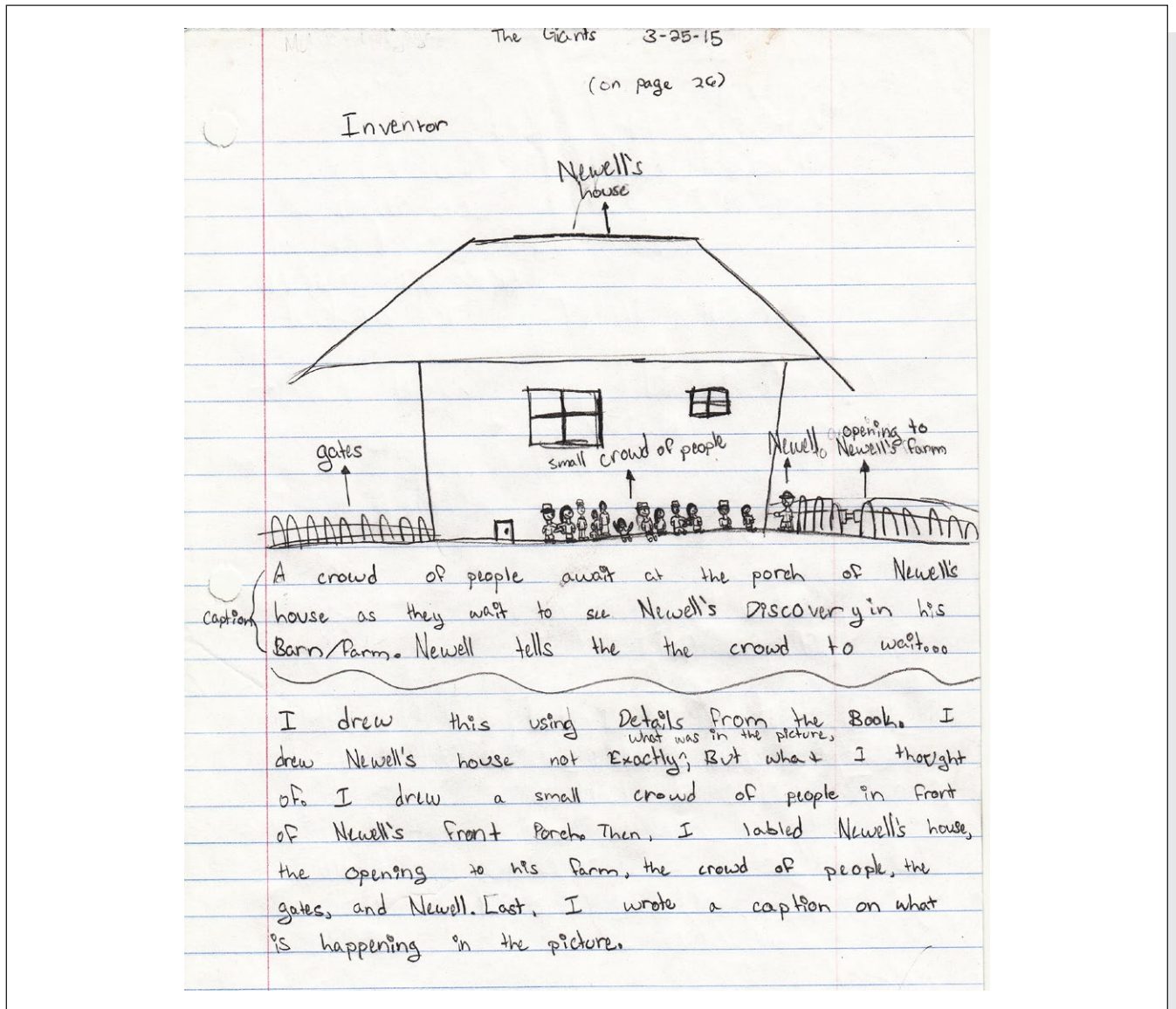
description that she used details from the book and her own interpretations of the text in her visual representation.

Through viewing and reading these text features, it was clear that students appreciated connecting text and images. Even in a feature like a glossary, they supported their text with images.

### Mapper

The Mapper's responsibility was to create a graphic organizer to help students understand the content of what they had read. Similar to the Inventors, Mappers preferred graphic organizers. They most often generated T-charts, sequence or timeline charts, and brainstorm.

**Figure 2**  
**Inventor's Illustration and Caption**



We chose three representations from the Mappers' examples to share. The first is by Abbie, who compared the Bastille with King Ludwig's dungeon (see Table 1). The comparison covered two pages, so we have reconstructed it here for ease of examination. Abbie appreciated how the T-chart let her compare two dungeons. She also noted how her own knowledge changed: she had thought all dungeons were real, and now she knew that was not true.

Macy fashioned a timeline to show what happened to Joshua Gee on Friday the 13th. Within her timeline are all of the superstitions that Joshua

dealt with in this single day. Macy asked her teacher if she should add anything else to her timeline, and her teacher prompted her with a question about superstitions (see Figure 3). Macy's timeline triggered extended conversation around superstitions and how they developed.

Marcus created a brainstorm about El Dorado. He knew that the brainstorm supported his revealing of numerous facts about El Dorado or Shangri-La. It was apparent that Marcus clustered the facts he garnered from his reading in this web (see Figure 4).

**Table 1**  
**Mapper's Comparison of Dungeons**

The Bastille	King Ludwig's dungeon
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Is a dungeon</li> <li>■ Started as a fortress</li> <li>■ Held political people, rebellious writer, embarrassing people, insane people, and people in debt</li> <li>■ Used torture devices such as the rack, thumbscrews, the iron maiden, shackles, a gibbet, the Minister's chair, scavenger's daughter, impressment, isolation, and scold's bride</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Not a dungeon</li> <li>■ Uses scary lighting</li> <li>■ Uses theatrical paint</li> <li>■ Uses props</li> <li>■ Used for parties more than for torture</li> </ul>
<p>WHY? I chose to do this t-chart because there were 2 dungeons in these pages and each was different from the other. So I decided to show these dungeons from their differences. I thought it was interesting when the book said that Ludwig's dungeon was fake because I thought all the dungeons were real, not fake.</p>	

Students were wise in their selection of graphic organizers and clearly knew how to match the function of the organizer to the information they shared. For example, they chose brainstorms when they had facts to share, a timeline for a sequence, and a T-chart or Venn diagram for comparisons.

### Word Wizard

Each day, each Word Wizard chose two words to share with his or her group. There were a total of 159 words explored. We grouped the words into three major categories: (1) content-specific words like *archaeologist*, *Anasazi*, or *shogunate*; (2) content-related words like *toxins*, *plague*, or *monument*; and (3) adjectives or verbs like *gullible*, *tantalized*, or *skeptical*. When thinking about tiers of vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002), students did not choose Tier 1 or basic words. Most of the words they chose to focus on were Tier 2, or words that are found across multiple disciplinary domains. Students also chose Tier 3 words that are specific to a disciplinary domain or only learned within a specific topic.

The Word Wizards were asked to share a word and to acknowledge its meaning in the text. Some,

like Dylan, were very precise. Dylan wrote, "My word is voraciously. It means very eager in an activity. In the book Nicholas Clapp was reading voraciously (a lot) to get ready to explore a lost city."

Alex was more detailed in his description of verification. He wrote,

*Verification means to verify or establish the truth and nothing but the truth. This impacts the text because the scientist wanted to verify if the Cardiff giant was or was not a hoax. My inference is that the giant figure is real but the fact that it is a man is not true. Then again, I made an inference and it might be wrong. A synonym for verification is proof and proof is evidence to support or disprove a claim. Therefore, the Cardiff giant may be real unless the author's message is false.*

These examples showed that students did not just write a dictionary definition. They certainly defined the word and then connected it to their reading. They demonstrated how a word supports getting meaning from the text. And some students, like Alex, defined the word and then actually used the word as they inferred the author's meaning.

### Nonfiction Fact Finder

Similar to other roles, Nonfiction Fact Finders had to identify facts and then share the facts' importance to the text. As this role evolved, several students decided to add lies rather than facts to see if members of their group could distinguish between the two. We chose a few facts from several students to better describe the facts students shared.

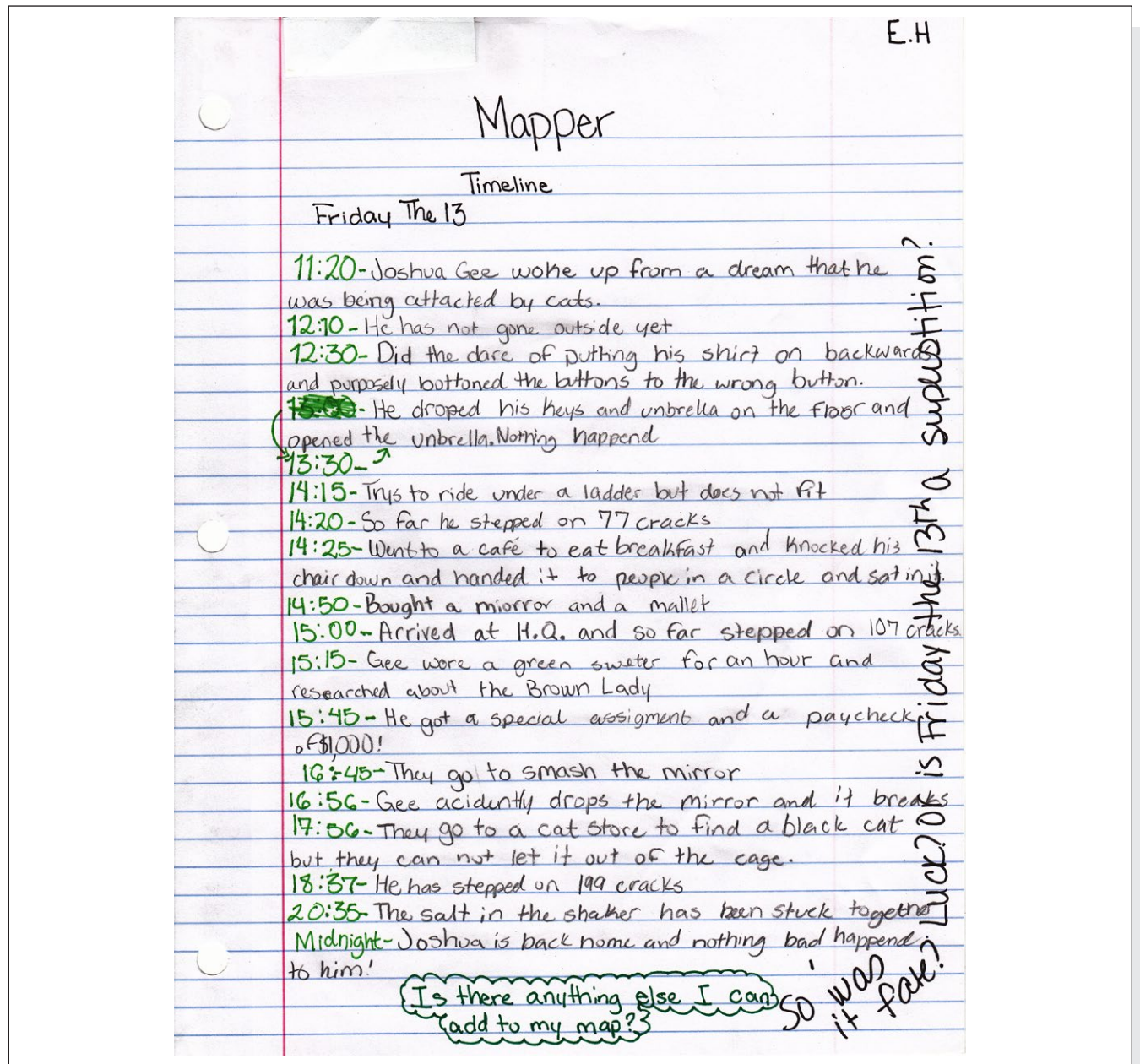
Vincent wrote about scientific forecasting. He described scientific forecasting as where "people relied on observation to predict the weather. The impact of the topic is because animals and birds really do lie low before a severe storm. They still rely on prediction."

Joshua was interested in ball lightning. He wrote: "Scientists agree that ball lightning is real. This impacts the topic because it only appears when the air is charged with electricity during or just after a thunderstorm. It is very different from normal lightning."

Finally, Marissa wrote, "To some people the number 4 sounds like the word for death. This impacts the topic because some license plates are not issued with a 4 in the sequence, and numbers on apartments usually jump from 3 to 5."

Each student shared an interesting fact and why it was important. As we watched Fact Finders talk about their facts, other students always paged through their books to find the facts and embellish

**Figure 3**  
**Mapper's Timeline About Superstitions**



what the Fact Finder shared. This role drove students back to the text to reread and discover other details about the facts.

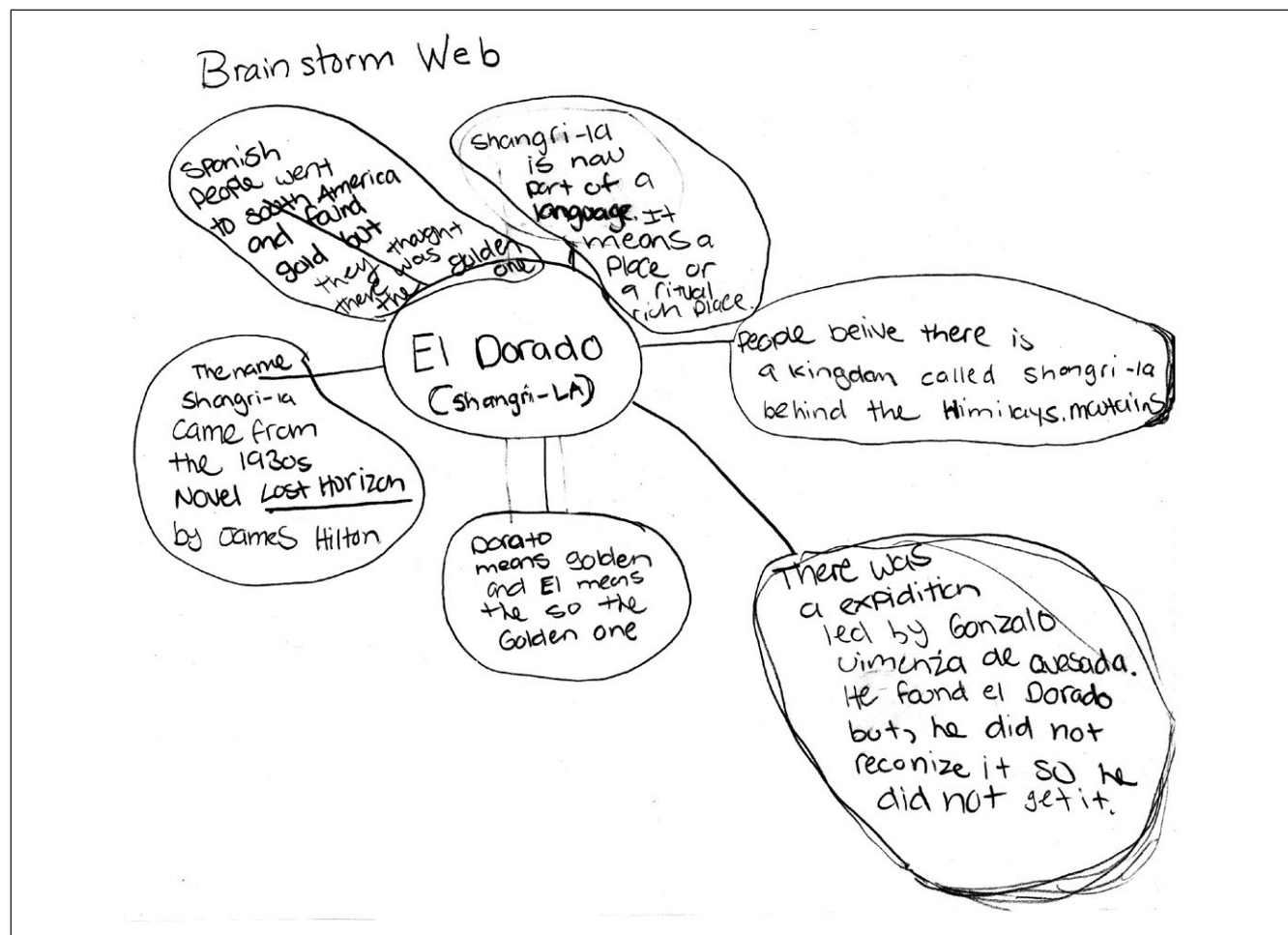
### Visual Viewer

The Visual Viewer had to interpret his or her reading by creating an image. We found that most of the Visual Viewer entries resembled scientific sketches.

We noted that students always referred to the part of text that triggered the visual response. We found it hard to find just a few representative examples, as these responses were so interesting.

The first example was created by Zack. He was interested in the torture given to enemies in combat. His illustration is sketched to connect with the text that further explained his drawing (see Figure 5).

**Figure 4**  
**Mapper's Brainstorm**



Cory shared facts about DNA (see Figure 6). Once again, his drawing is a quick sketch that showed his scientific knowledge. Importantly, his teacher can use his text explanation to help clarify his confusions about DNA.

The final example (see Figure 7) from Bryan showed his concern when the man let himself be covered by bees. He acknowledged that being stung by bees hurt but also helped the man's arthritis.

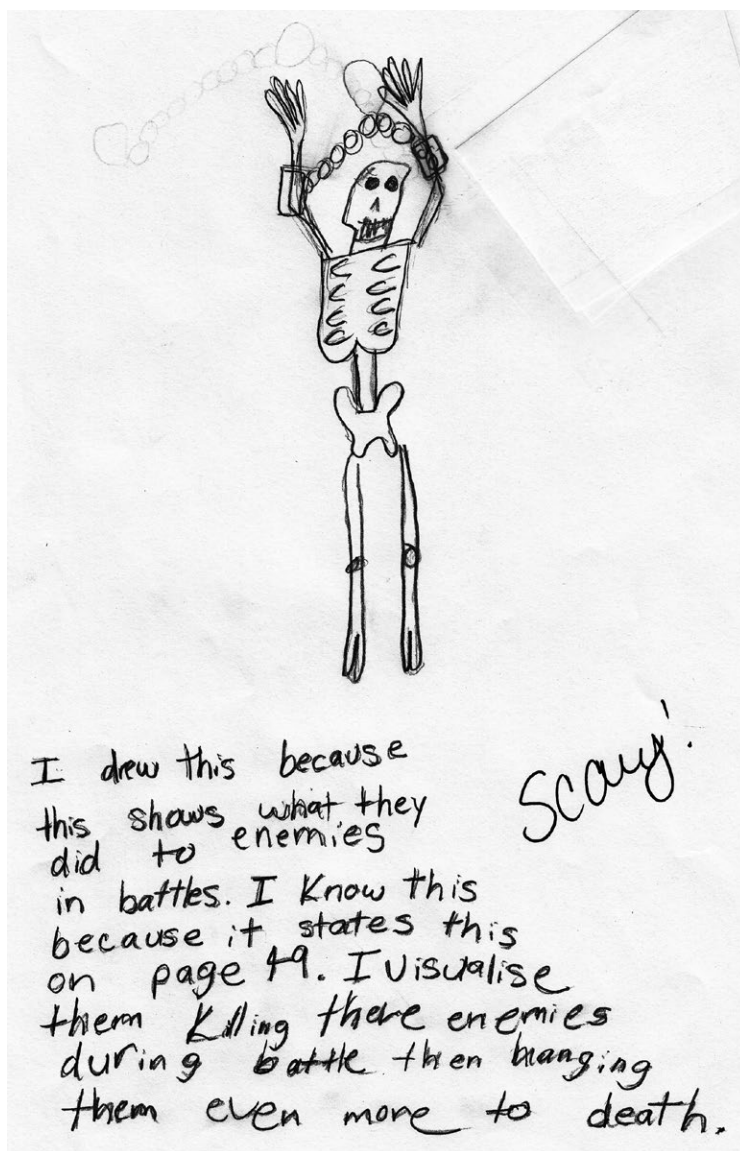
Importantly, the students used this role to quickly render a drawing and to explain what was gained from the visualization. Throughout our examination of all of these representations, we were struck by how the sketches were so similar to what real scientists would do to record important information.

## What Might Teachers Take Away From This Exploration

There were several benefits to students from exploring informational text in literature circles. First, students collaboratively talked about their discoveries. They wanted to hear what each student had to contribute. During listening and talking, they often went back to the text for clarification. Through just these two activities, students learned to socially engage with text and routinely participated in close readings of text.

Second, the roles supported engagement with text and staying grounded in the text. It was important to revise literature circle roles to meet the expectations of informational text. Each role built on student knowledge about informational text. Students were

**Figure 5**  
**Visual Viewer's Illustration of Torturing Enemies**



expected to create graphic organizers and text features, both important to comprehension of nonfiction or informational text. When considering vocabulary, facts, or visualization, they were pushed back to the text to justify their choices and/or representations. Each question posed by the Director encouraged students to return to the text to provide text-based or visual answers.

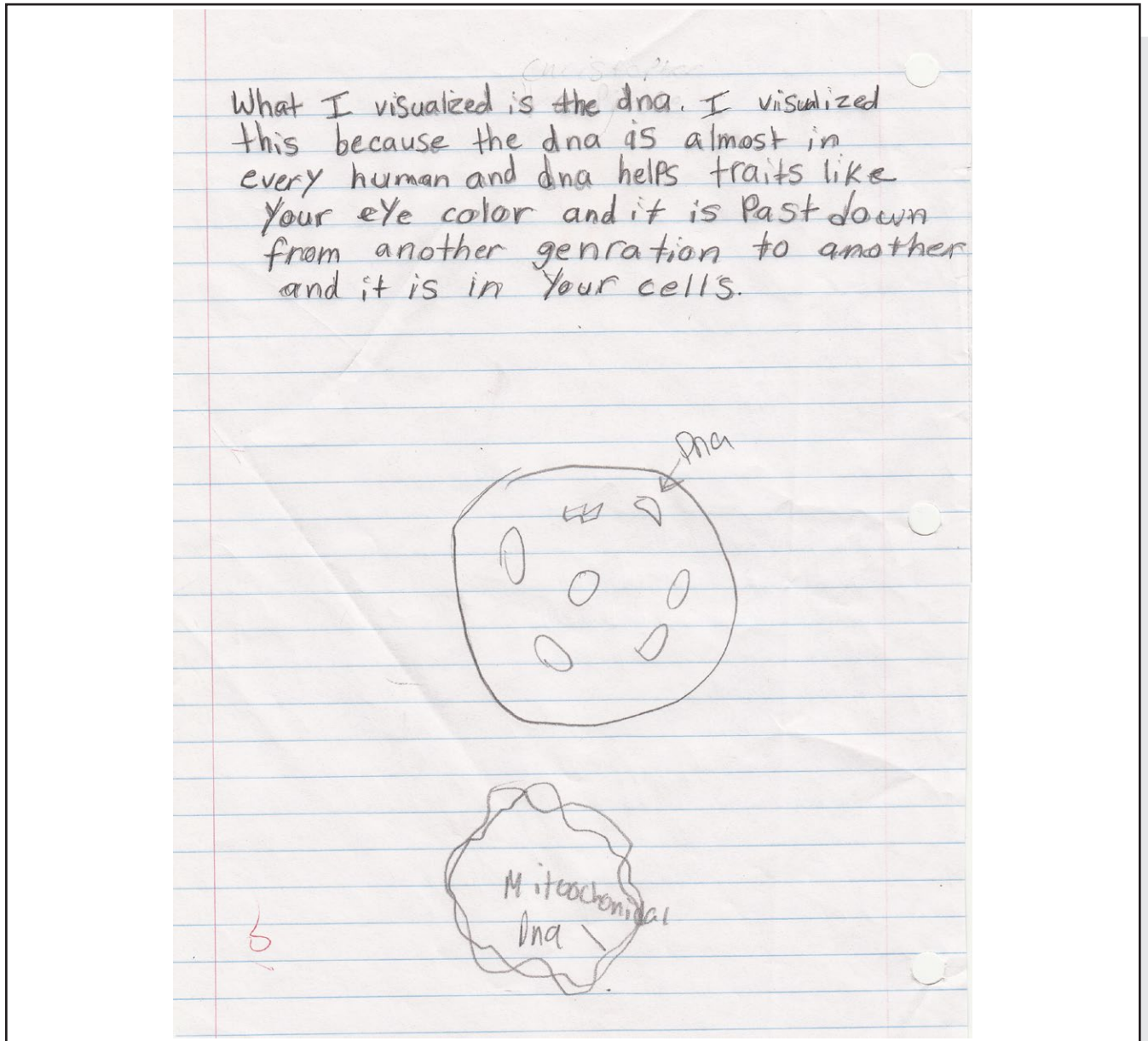
Third, the roles acknowledged the importance of multimodal understandings. Students were encouraged to include visual and textual meanings within their responses. Their responses were often similar

to the visual and textual displays in the books they were reading.

Fourth, students were excited to explore informational text and enjoyed doing it in a collaborative setting. Once this exploration was complete, the books were placed into the class library. Students immediately read the books that other groups had explored. This behavior demonstrated that students independently selected informational text to learn from and enjoy.

Fifth, students developed sophisticated academic vocabulary through their reading of informational

**Figure 6**  
**Visual Viewer's Sketch of DNA**



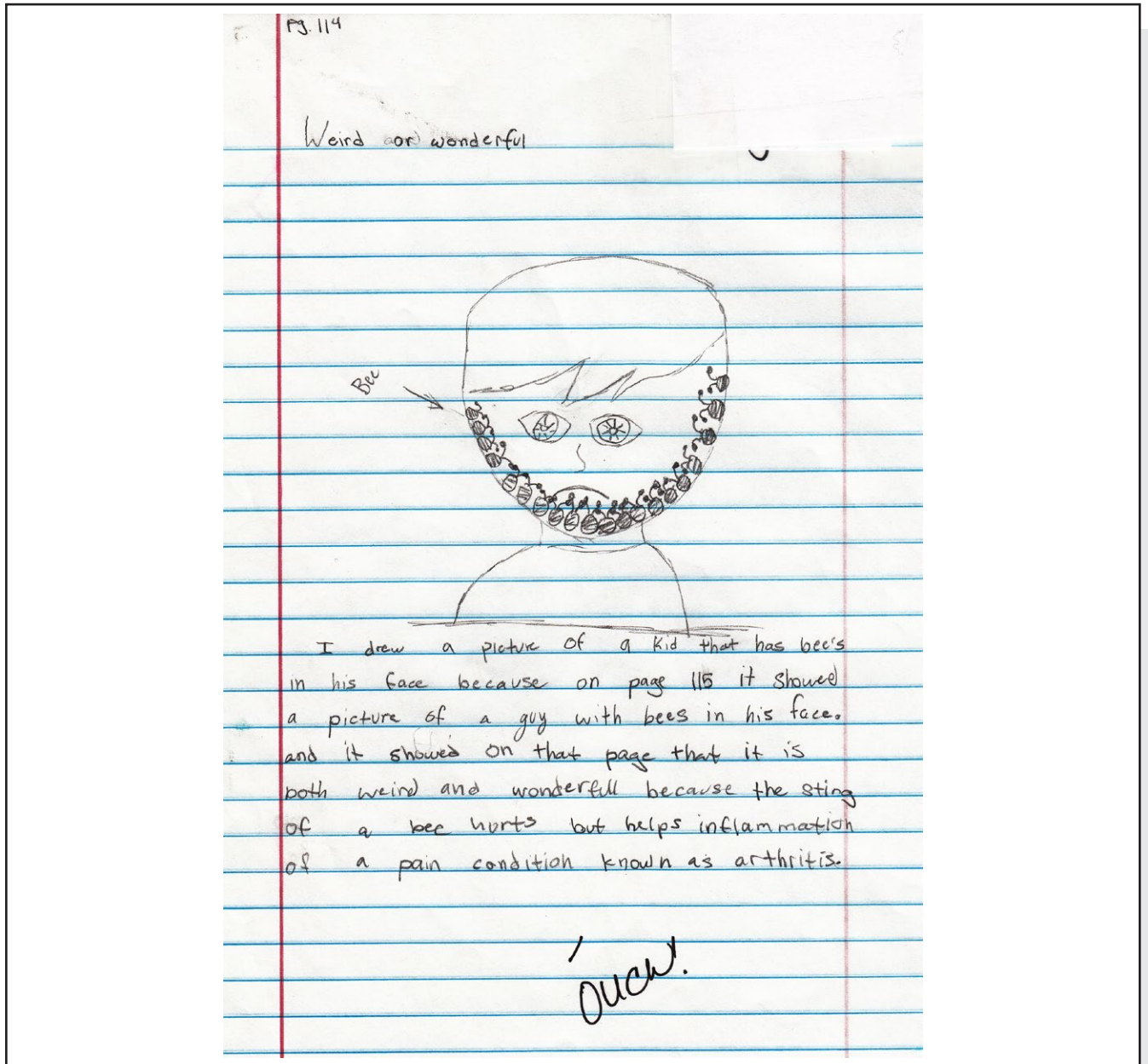
text. Each day, each group explored at least two new words that were shared by the Word Wizard in addition to the vocabulary knowledge each student gained by reading the books or that was shared by their teacher in other instructional settings.

Were there concerns? Yes. Finding current informational text was not difficult. However, the most current books are hardbound, and they are expensive. Setting up a literature circle for multiple groups requires financial resources.

Also, if we were to select books again, we would make sure that all of the books were rich with text features and other visual support. Students who read the books with less visual support were not as enamored with them as were students who read other books.

At the conclusion of this exploration, we learned that it was not difficult to transform literature circles to provide students opportunities to engage with informational text. Importantly, once students

**Figure 7**  
**Visual Viewer's Drawing of Man Covered in Bees**



understood their roles and responsibilities in literature circles, the change of genre was easily implemented. We discovered how much students liked learning about factual material, and in particular for this choice of books, how fiction was or was not supported by science. Carefully choosing informational texts supported students' engagement, and students even continued reading these books after the literature circles were completed. Finally, we

learned that by exploring informational text within literature circles, students acquired knowledge of facts and vocabulary, participated in close readings of text, learned to support their responses with text evidence, and enjoyed the entire experience. All of these outcomes support the literacy expectations for teachers as they develop and extend students' knowledge and acquisition of literacy skills and strategies in motivating and engaging instruction.

## TAKE ACTION!

1. Become familiar with different types of nonfiction or informational text. Create a text set around a topic that would be interesting to students.
2. Decide on potential jobs that students could do as they read and talk about the texts.
3. Think of Internet or digital connections to support students as they explore informational texts.
4. Practice creating questions that students from all literature circles might explore together as a class.

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