

# Policy into Practice



## What Do Classroom Teachers Need to Know About Nonfiction for Children?

Barbara Kiefer, PhD  
Charlotte S. Huck Professor of Children's Literature  
The Ohio State University

What is *nonfiction for children*? Authors of adult nonfiction would likely say that in nonfiction “nothing is made up.” But the world of children’s nonfiction books is not so tidy. Publishers and authors of nonfiction for children *do* make things up. Just take a look at the popular Magic School Bus series by Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen. The Library of Congress classifies the books as *juvenile literature*, the term it uses to indicate nonfiction. But like the authors of many other works classified as juvenile literature, Cole and Degen clearly make things up. You and I know that school buses can’t and don’t fly. But because of developing cognitive understandings, younger children may believe that trees and rocks have personalities or that machines that move might also think.

Children’s literature experts confuse, rather than clarify, the issue by using such terms as *informational books*, *information books*, and *expository texts*. And now the Common Core folks throw in the term *literary nonfiction*. (This could be to distinguish real literature from content-area textbooks written to satisfy readability formulas and state textbook adoption committees but not to provide a literary experience, increase concept understanding, or nurture the spirit of inquiry.)

*Policy into Practice* is a series of briefs created to support the efforts of districts to achieve the Ohio Third Grade Reading Guarantee. Each brief will focus on a question about literacy teaching and learning and provide a response to the question, implications for teaching, questions for further discussion, and suggested readings. *Policy into Practice* briefs are intended to support conversations among educators leading to quality instruction and increasing literacy achievement.

What then are classroom teachers to do about the increased focus on nonfiction?

First, don't be afraid to use nonfiction in the classroom. Children respond positively to hearing their teachers read nonfiction books, grouped in text sets, and to hearing nonfiction being read aloud as often as fiction.

Become familiar with the many award-winning authors and titles of nonfiction. The Orbis Pictus Award, <http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus>, and the Sibert Medal, <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/sibertmedal>, are annual awards given to nonfiction books. ALA's yearly list of notable books for children, <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists>, and journals such as *Science for Children* and *Social Education* publish yearly lists of outstanding books, many of which are nonfiction.

Help children to establish and use criteria for evaluating good nonfiction. Chapter 9 in Charlotte Huck's *Children's Literature: A Brief Guide* (2009) by Barbara Kiefer and Cynthia Tyson includes a special feature, "Guidelines: Evaluating Nonfiction Books," that is included here. These criteria include such categories as accuracy and authenticity, content and perspective, style, organization, and illustrations and format. The points covered are useful for teachers and for students. Prepare children for the many hybrid types of nonfiction by encouraging them to ask, "What's made up here?" "What's not made up?" and "How can we tell the difference?"

Recognize that not all nonfiction for younger children has features such as a table of contents, index, glossary, and charts and diagrams that children are required to know how to use. Plan to look for books for K-3 students that contain some of these features.

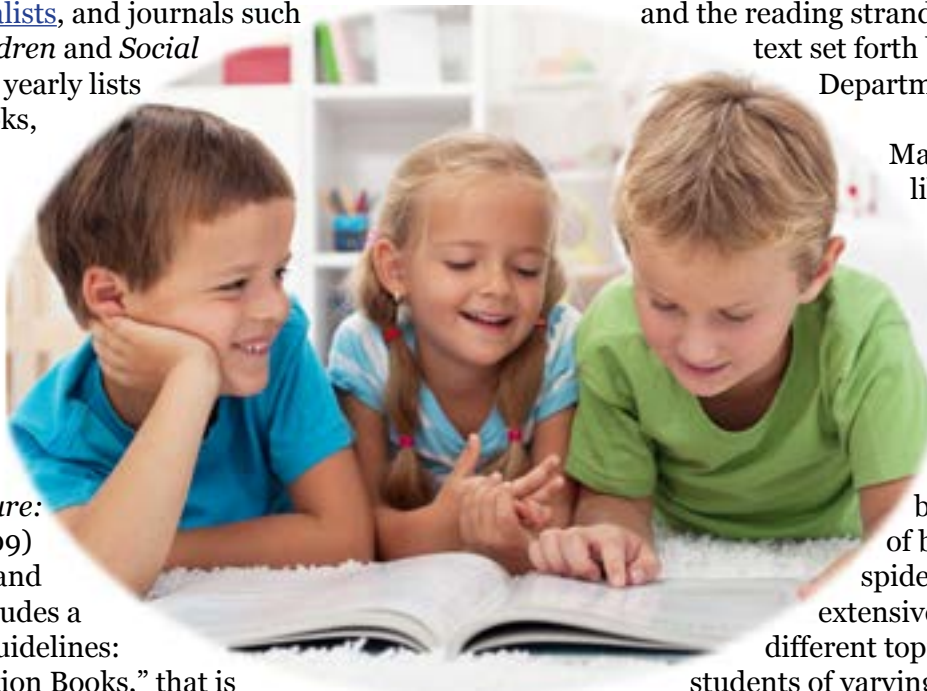
For example, Ann Morris's *Around the World* series (*Bread, Bread, Bread*) is aimed at preschool through kindergarten children and introduces a picture index at the end of each book. Charles Micucci's *Life and Times* series (*The Life and Times of the Peanut*) includes a table of contents. Gail Gibbons's many nonfiction picture books are rich in cutaways, diagrams, and labels that are typical of nonfiction writing.

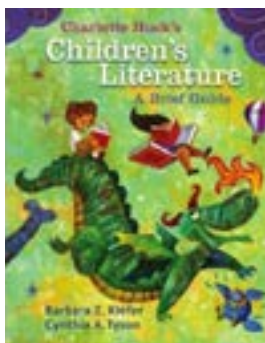
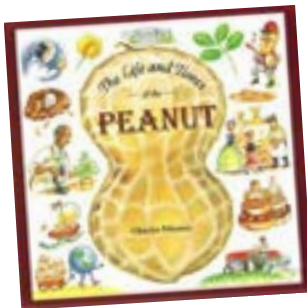
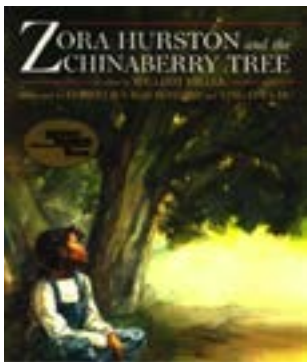
Get to know high-quality books by authors such as Gail Gibbons and series books such as the Let's Read and Find Out books from HarperCollins. The quality of nonfiction written for younger children may vary. Having multiple books on a single topic will help children evaluate books for the criteria listed above and the reading strand for informational text set forth by the Ohio Department of Education.

Make sure your school library and classroom library have strong collections of nonfiction for children. Children love to read multiple books about a single topic, often becoming avid fans of bats, whales, and spiders. Having extensive text sets on different topics allows students of varying ability to work together to research and learn.

Consider teaching through thematic units. Choosing broad themes such as "changes," "cycles," "communities," or "journeys" allows children to spend time on important concepts and ideas. Such themes also enable children to research and write their own nonfiction, using characteristics of the nonfiction they are reading. Thematic units also bring together fiction and nonfiction, so children can compare and contrast different types of texts.

What kinds of questions should you ask yourself as you search for good nonfiction books? Try these:





## Guidelines: Evaluating nonfiction books\*

### Accuracy and authenticity

- Is the author qualified to write about this topic? Has the manuscript been checked by authorities in the field?
- Are the facts accurate according to other sources?
- Is the information up-to-date?
- Are all the significant facts included?
- Do text and illustrations reveal diversity and avoid stereotypes?
- Are generalizations supported by facts?
- Is there a clear distinction between fact and theory?
- Do text and illustrations omit anthropomorphism and teleological explanations?

### Content and perspective

- For what purpose was the book designed?
- Is the book within the comprehension and interest range of its intended audience?
- Is the subject adequately covered? Are different viewpoints presented?
- Does the book lead to an understanding of the scientific method? Does it foster the spirit of inquiry?
- Does the book show interrelationships? Do science books indicate related social issues?

### Style

- Is information presented clearly and directly?
- Is the text appropriate for the intended audience?
- Does the style create the feeling of reader involvement?
- Is the language vivid and interesting?

### Organization

- Is the information structured clearly, with appropriate subheadings?
- Does the book have reference aids that are clear and easy to use, such as a table of contents, index, bibliography, glossary, appendix?

### Illustrations and format

- Do the illustrations clarify and extend the text or speak plainly for themselves?
- Are size relationships made clear?
- Are media suitable to the purposes for which they are used?
- Are illustrations explained by captions or labels where needed?
- Does the total format contribute to the clarity and attractiveness of the book?

---

\* The criteria in the guidelines are from B. Kiefer and C. Tyson, 2009, *Charlotte Huck's Children's literature: A brief guide*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009.

## Conclusion

Any teacher who has struggled to teach science or social studies using textbooks, or those teachers whose schools emphasize reading and math at the expense of science and social studies topics, should welcome the emphasis on well-written nonfiction for children. Teaching reading strategies and skills through the use of good nonfiction provides the opportunity to engage children's vibrant interest in the world around them, and at the same time it helps them meet the standards in grades K–3.

## Questions for further discussion

1. How do we and our students define nonfiction?
2. How can we help children evaluate nonfiction?
3. What big themes could we plan that will allow us to integrate fiction and nonfiction with the content-area standards?
4. What are some ways to support children's inquiry and writing in the content areas?



## Bibliography of children's books

Branley, Franklyn M. (2007). *Gravity is a mystery* (Let's Read and Find Out series). Illustrated by Edward Miller. New York: HarperCollins.

Cole, Joanna. (1990). *The magic school bus inside the human body*. Illustrated by Bruce Degen. New York: Scholastic.

Gibbons, Gail. (1989). *Monarch butterfly*. New York: Holiday House.

Micucci, Charles. (2000). *The life and times of the peanut*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Miller, William. (1996). *Zora Hurston and the chinaberry tree*. Illustrated by Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Was Hu. New York: Lee & Low.

Morris, Ann. (1993). *Bread, bread, bread*. Illustrated by Ken Heyman. New York: HarperCollins.

Selsam, Millicent E. (1998). *Big tracks, little tracks: Following animal prints* (Let's Read and Find Out series). Illustrated by Marlene Hill Donnelly. New York: HarperCollins.

## Suggested readings

Bamford, R. A., and Kristo, J. V. (Eds.). (2003). *Making facts come alive: Choosing and using quality nonfiction literature K–8* (pp. 65–78). Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon.

Colman, P. (2007). A new way to look at literature: A visual model of analyzing fiction and nonfiction texts. *Language Arts*, 84(3), 257–268.

Kiefer, B., and Tyson, C. (2009). *Charlotte Huck's children's literature: A brief guide*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Kristo, J., and Bamford, R. (2004). *Nonfiction in focus: A comprehensive framework for helping students become independent readers and writers of nonfiction, K–6*. New York: Scholastic.

Pappas, C. C. (2009). Young children's multimodal books in integrated science literacy units in urban classrooms. *Language Arts*, 86(3), 201–211.