

Dead or Alive: How Will Your Students' Nonfiction Writing Arrive?

Why is it that the same kids who write wonderful stories in our classes too often write dead, dull research reports? The writer of this article discovered one good reason for this: students and their teachers need to recognize that the skills that elevate nonfiction are the very skills demanded to write strong fiction.

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It is 12:17 P.M. In exactly one minute, the first wave of my fourth grade science class will burst through the door, bringing with them from the playground their sweaty smells and pounding hearts. They will crash into their seats, belongings flying, and gaze at me with dirt-streaked faces, trying to pretend they have not been racing. They are mostly boys— active, creative, boisterous, argumentative.

As I pour over their project portfolios, I review the culmination of a month's research and writing on Louisiana swamp animals. The portfolios are a vehicle for collecting a variety of entries that include field notes, writing explorations, research information, interviews with experts, poetry or literature selections, and, as we are a magnet school for the arts, one or more art components. There is much to celebrate. I recall the busy days of research with open books covering every inch of the tables and kids happily sharing what they had discovered on the Internet. I smile as I read Robert's interview with Ranger Edwards from Jean Lafitte

National Park. Robert was shocked to find out that "his animal," the nutria, is not only the mascot of the New Orleans Zephyrs minor league baseball team, but an imported pest that is devouring the valuable marsh at an alarming rate. I am pleased to see that Philip has written a beautiful haiku about the habitat of the snowy egret.

The final element of the project was a nonfiction piece reflecting what had been learned about the animal that each student has chosen to research. And with this part of the project I was not pleased. How could such a lively, inquisitive bunch deliver writing that was "dead on arrival"? For instance, John wrote:

The pelican has many survival behaviors, also. One of the fishing behaviors is to flap its wings to attract fish into shallow water. Then it catches and eats the fish. The pelican also has the survival behavior of diving to catch fish. It can sight fish from up to sixty feet above the water.

Like most of the other writers, his piece was correct, informative, and dull. This had to change. I decided to make nonfiction writing the focus of my research over the summer as I participated in the advanced institute of my writing project. I needed to find a way to help students so their writing sounded more like *National Geographic* and less like *World Book Encyclopedia*. I read everything I could get my hands on about nonfiction writing. As I was reading and putting together a teaching demonstration to present to my colleagues in the advanced institute, I experienced an epiphany. Most of what I had learned in the writing project about writing fiction turned out also to be true of writing nonfiction. As I read JoAnn Portalupi and Ralph Fletcher's *Nonfiction Craft Lessons*, it became evident to me that the tools of the fiction writer—such as writing with voice, using strong verbs, showing rather than telling, and varying sentences—were also tools that should be used when writing in the content areas.

As I began a new school year, I couldn't

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wait to try some of the strategies I had discovered during the advanced institute. I remembered the passage that John wrote last year on the survival behaviors of brown pelicans. I wasn't sure, at the time, how to help him. But when Marcus wrote an equally dull and lifeless passage about jaguars, I knew just what to do. Marcus wrote:

The jaguar is the biggest and strongest cat in the rainforest. The jaguar's jaw is strong enough to crush a turtle's shell. They also have very powerful legs for leaping from branch to branch to chase prey.

I started with a focus lesson that comes from *Nonfiction Matters* by Stephanie Harvey. In this demonstration, the teacher shows the students two samples of writing and asks which one they would enjoy reading the most. Here are the two samples.

National Geographic:

Turtles poured out of the surf in wave after wave through the darkness. Heaving, huffing, gasping, turtles plowed the coarse black sand with their noses, laboring on to the shore.

World Book Encyclopedia (1996):

Female sea turtles do not normally leave the water, except to lay their eggs. The females often migrate thousands of miles or kilometers to reach their breeding beaches. They drag themselves onto a sandy beach, bury their eggs, and then return to the sea. (157-158)

The first passage is full of movement. The second has the turtles dragging themselves onto the sandy beach, and that's

about it. I also showed Marcus the following passage from *Everglades* by Jean Craighead George. Using these samples as models, Marcus would be able to paint a



picture for the reader, inspired by some of the precise action verbs that George uses:

*Everyday a blizzard of wood storks **dropped** into the grass, **dined** on the snails, crabs, bugs, and fish. A profusion of pink flamingoes **hunted** in the shallow mudflats. Hundreds of miles of roseate spoonbills **vacuumed** the ponds and shallows with their sievelike bills. (12)*

In another focus lesson on specific nouns and precise verbs, Harvey cleverly refers to nouns as "stuff" and verbs as "what stuff does" (160-161). A brainstorming session with the class generated this list to help Marcus:

Stuff (Nouns)	What Stuff Does (Verbs)
jaguar	leaps, pounces
jaguar's legs	pump
jaguar's teeth	crush
jaguar's mouth	devours

Marcus revised his passage as follows:

As the sun disappears from the heart of the forest, the jaguar leaps through

the underbrush, pumping its powerful legs. It spies a gharial gliding down the river. The jungle cat pounces, crushing the turtle with his teeth, devouring the reptile with pleasure.

In the book *Image Grammar*, another valuable resource for teachers seeking to improve their students' nonfiction writing, Harry Noden outlines five "brushstrokes" that will help young authors paint pictures with words (4). These brushstrokes, which include appositives, participles, and absolutes, are simple tools to help

students compose more interesting sentences. One of Noden's brushstrokes is "painting with participles." With this "brushstroke," I showed my student Stacy how to spice up the following sentence.

Before: *The macaw uses its sharp beak to strike intruders.*

After: *Tearing, ripping, battering, the blue macaw strikes the intruder until it is defeated.*

Deven used another of Harry Noden's brushstrokes, "painting with appositives" to make his article on howler monkeys more interesting.

Before: *The howler is a primary consumer who eats nuts and berries.*

After: *The howler monkey, a primary consumer, munches his breakfast of nuts and berries.*

Then it hit me like a pile of encyclopedias falling on my head. All of this revision was taking a lot of time out of science class, but why shouldn't we bring writers workshop into science class? Writing is essential not just in language arts, but in all subject areas. My students could benefit

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from peer conferencing and author's chair while working on their nonfiction writing pieces.

I compiled a file of strong nonfiction models to use as I conferenced with students, to show them how authors can write about science with voice and passion. By allowing choice and providing extended periods of time in class to write, I sent a message to my students: writing well about science is important, an activity their teacher values highly. What I realized during my summer research is that I already had the tools I needed to bring life to my students' science writing. I just needed to take them out and use them. As Ralph Fletcher says, "... good writing isn't produced by magic, but by learning to arrange particular words in a particular order to create a particular effect. Such writing doesn't have to be drab, dull, or unreadable. . . . When we teach students these skills, we help them master a kind of writing that will be crucial as they continue to learn about the world around them" (2).

It is now 3:15 P.M. I collapse, savoring the solitude. Glancing around the classroom, I survey the damage: Philip's dirty tissues on the floor, Andrew's glasses by the pencil sharpener, Camille's ballet shoes in the corner. (She should be back for them at exactly 3:18.) As I gather up the latest batch of project portfolios and shove them in my backpack, Camille comes crashing through the door clutching a crumpled folder.

"Back for your shoes, Camille?"

"Oh, yeah, my shoes! Thanks. And here's my project. I forgot to turn it in." Grabbing her shoes, Camille twirls from the room, slamming the door behind her. I flip through the folder she has dropped on

my lap. The cover is crooked and smudged, and the title page is at the end, but as I read, I feel like dancing!

Camille's rough draft is still on my desk. I remember how she stewed and struggled over her revisions. Here is part of it.

The white tiger lives in the grassland. It is a predator who eats bison. The white tiger is a solitary animal which hunts alone. It pounces on its prey and eats until it is tired. The tiger uses its sharp teeth to tear the bison apart.

Here is the introduction to Camille's piece after she has applied some of the focus lessons in order to revise her writing:

The raging white beast runs through the grassland chasing a delicious wild bison. Running and pouncing, the tiger bites the bison's neck and begins to tear it into parts. After the tiresome hunt it will rest before

hunting again. Traveling in packs is too noisy, so the fearless warrior travels in lonesome, quiet solitude, waiting for a chance to pounce on an unsuspecting prey.

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Mining the World of Writing Material

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Absolutely. Dolly's was by far the most interesting essay in class. While most students settled for the differences between watching a movie on a VCR versus watching one in a theater, or something just as obvious, Dolly was busy writing about her world, creating little "stories" about fruit sellers on the streets in Bombay and the air-conditioned mega supermarkets in Baltimore. In describing both, she wrote about the bustle, the smells, the sensations of each. Dolly's essay was great precisely because she began to think critically about the world around her. This is what fiction writers must master.

Students need to be encouraged to look at their lives—list the places they've visited or lived; recount the happenings in their neighborhoods; think hard about the relationships they've formed, with friends, family, or familiar people they pass on the street or on campus—and steal the rich material that hangs all around them. Once done, real writing can begin. In short, the students will figure out what's at stake, and why it's important to tell *their* stories.

The rest should be left to the movie directors.

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