

Presentation – Writing Nonfiction for Early Teens
Panel discussion – Transforming Facts into Riveting Reading
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So, what is the difference between nonfiction and fiction books?

Surprisingly little – apart from the golden rule that nonfiction should be ENTIRELY based on fact.

If the story has been embellished with made-up events, speech etc which the author added to increase drama or interest, then that book is not just ‘fictionalized’, it IS fiction.

Apart from that, good nonfiction presents facts in a way that piques the interest of readers and makes them want to read on!

Some of the many categories of non fiction writing

Pure info books – Pure info books such as almanacs, dictionaries or books of statistics are not written to entertain or engage, but purely to inform the reader of the facts they seek. They can be very useful, but they are as interesting to read or write as a grocery-shopping list, and are rarely read from cover to cover!

Textbooks – Textbooks are full of facts, written to inform and educate. In the past they were often dull and stodgy but although the content is usually strictly controlled by the curriculum, they can (and should be) be written in an engaging fashion to make the information easier to digest.

In writing them, it is important to present the curriculum facts clearly and in a logical order – using easily accessible language. However creativity can be used in designing mnemonics to help students recall facts, or in the telling of interesting ‘stories’ to underscore factual points.

For example: A Physics student is far more likely to remember Archimedes’ Principle, if told the story of how the king asked Archimedes to help work out if his jewelers were cheating him, and of how Archimedes had a ‘Eureka moment’ in the bathtub which helped him solve the problem and formulate the principle!

Newspaper articles

The aim of a newspaper article is to present facts about an event in a clear and interesting way.

Did you know that on average people only read a newspaper for about half an hour? Most only scan the title or the opening paragraph of each article, and choose to read very few articles to the end.

For this reason, and the archaic one that newspaper editors used to ruthlessly chop finished articles from the bottom up to fit the layout, it is traditional to put the most important facts in the first paragraph – known as the lede/lead. Usually the lede contains the ‘what’ and the ‘who’ (sometimes includes ‘where’/‘when’).

Sometimes the assigned word count is too small for much more than the lede, but with longer articles the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ – i.e. the ‘heart’ of a story,

can also be explored to capture the reader's imagination and make them want to read to the end of the article.

To write an engaging newspaper article, first isolate the facts which are important for a barebones understanding of the story. This will form your lede. The rest of the facts should then be sorted in order of importance and retold around the simple story arc that explores why or how something has occurred and what impact it has on the people in the story – the human interest aspect, which leads us to empathize with the story and the people who in it - using narrative nonfiction techniques.

Informational books – encyclopedias, and books such as the Horrible History series, or kidsGo Travel guides are informational books. There is no narrative arc through the whole book as the books are generally divided into discrete chunks of info.

However, that doesn't mean you can ditch all those storytelling techniques! Instead of an overarching story arc, the book should be written like a necklace – with each individual bit written to 'tell a story' as well as inform.

Deciding which facts to tell is key (discard all which is unnecessary or boring – put them in the footnotes or a glossary if need be), as is organizing them in a logical way to ensure a smooth flow, and writing in a lively manner.

Narrative nonfiction

Narrative nonfiction most often used to write long articles or book length works. It uses many storytelling techniques used in fiction :

- The narrative is arranged in a story arc with a start, a middle and an end;
- The arc should have interesting 'plot points' - things which happen which could change the possible outcome of a story in unexpected ways. These plot points should reveal what is at stake, increase dramatic tension and reveal the human aspect of the problem
- There has to be a problem (the most engaging are the ones that the reader can relate to – often involving something fundamental such as friends, family, love, pain, hate etc) or a character goal, which drives the narrative. In nonfiction, because life is not neat, the problem is often not resolved fully, but the 'journey' that the main character undergoes to try to resolve it should be compelling enough to hook the reader to the end!
- Narrative nonfiction often features a likeable/relatable character – who will take the reader on their journey of discovery.

Narrative nonfiction uses lots of the fiction storytelling techniques – including a blending of exposition, action, speech etc. The settings and the events may be dramatized so that the reader feels they are 'in the action'. However, everything should be factually correct, including all quoted speech – which should be taken from documented sources such as transcripts, interview or memoirs of those present! Research is key!

Resources and blogs for the nonfiction writer or reader:

Uncommon Corps Blog (<http://nonfictionandthecommoncore.blogspot.hk/>)

Interesting Nonfiction for Kids (INK blog) : <http://inkrethink.blogspot.hk/>

Nonfiction book lists: <http://inkthinktank.com/>

Narrative nonfiction in journalism <http://www.poynter.org/category/how-tos/newsgathering-storytelling/>

Finding nonfiction publishers: (some good advice!) <http://www.writing-world.com/publish/bookprop1.shtml>

A good yahoo groups listserve to join for nonfiction chat and advice – is

NFforKids – to join, write to NFforKids-owner@yahoogroups.com

US Conferences for children’s nonfiction:

<http://www.scbwi.org/Conference.aspx?Con=12> The SCBWI summer conference in LA, USA in Aug includes a nonfiction track

<http://childrensnfconference.com/> nonfiction conference at SUNY, NY, USA in June

Some nonfiction US based publishers for unageted authors:

Boyd’s Mill: <http://www.boydsmillspress.com/writers-and-illustrators-guidelines>

Enslow: Send email asking for guidelines to CustomerService@enslow.com
<http://www.enslow.com/>

Capstone: [http://www.capstonepub.com/content/CONTACTUS SUBMISSIONS](http://www.capstonepub.com/content/CONTACTUS_SUBMISSIONS)
ABDO: <https://abdopub.s3.amazonaws.com/SubmissionGuidelines.pdf>

Mio Debnam is the Regional Advisor for the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators. She’s a freelance editor as well as the author of several picture books, early readers, a novel, and the kidsGo! series of travel guidebooks for kids (www.kidsgotravelguides.com). A former editor-in-chief of two newspapers for kids, she’s also had stories and articles for adults published. When not writing or reading, Mio enjoys running writing workshops for kids, eating spicy food (followed by hiking up and down hills to work it off!), and embarrassing her two children by bursting into song at inappropriate moments!