

NONFICTION WRITERS DIG DEEP

50 AWARD-WINNING CHILDREN'S BOOK AUTHORS
SHARE THE SECRET OF ENGAGING WRITING



SARAH ALBEE | CHRIS BARTON | DONNA JANELL BOWMAN | MARY KAY CARSON | NANCY F. CASTALDO | JASON CHIN
LESA CLINE-RANSOME | SETH FISHMAN | CANDACE FLEMING | KELLY MILNER HALLS | DEBORAH HEILIGMAN | SUSAN HOOD
GAIL JARROW | LITA JUDGE | JESS KEATING | BARBARA KERLEY | HEATHER LANG | CYNTHIA LEVINSON | MICHELLE MARKEL

EDITED BY MELISSA STEWART

CARLA KILLOUGH MCCLAFFERTY | HEATHER L. MONTGOMERY | PATRICIA NEWMAN | ELIZABETH PARTRIDGE | BAPTISTE PAUL
MIRANDA PAUL | TERESA ROBESON | MARA ROCKLIFF | BARB ROSENSTOCK | LAURA PURDIE SALAS | ANITA SANCHEZ
APRIL PULLEY SAYRE | STEVE SHEINKIN | RAY ANTHONY SHEPARD | ANITA SILVEY | TRACI SORELL | TANYA LEE STONE
JENNIFER SWANSON | STEPHEN R. SWINBURNE | DON TATE | LAURIE ANN THOMPSON | PAMELA S. TURNER
PATRICIA VALDEZ | SANDRA NEIL WALLACE | LAURIE WALLMARK | JENNIFER WARD | CAROLE BOSTON WEATHERFORD
LEE WIND | PAULA YOO | KAREN ROMANO YOUNG

Portions of this book were adapted from Stewart, M., & Young, T. A. (2019). Teaching the key traits of expository nonfiction with children's books. *The Reading Teacher*, 72(5), 648–51. Used by permission of John Wiley and Sons.

A portion of the royalties generated from the sale of this publication will be assigned by the editor to We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI).

Staff Editor: Bonny Graham

Interior Design: Jenny Jensen Greenleaf

Cover Design: Pat Mayer

NCTE Stock Number: 33521; eStock Number: 33545

ISBN 978-0-8141-3352-1; eISBN 978-0-8141-3354-5

©2020 Melissa Stewart.

Individual contributors retain copyright to their contributions.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the copyright holder. Printed in the United States of America.

It is the policy of NCTE in its journals and other publications to provide a forum for the open discussion of ideas concerning the content and the teaching of English and the language arts. Publicity accorded to any particular point of view does not imply endorsement by the Executive Committee, the Board of Directors, or the membership at large, except in announcements of policy, where such endorsement is clearly specified.

NCTE provides equal employment opportunity to all staff members and applicants for employment without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, physical, mental or perceived handicap/disability, sexual orientation including gender identity or expression, ancestry, genetic information, marital status, military status, unfavorable discharge from military service, pregnancy, citizenship status, personal appearance, matriculation or political affiliation, or any other protected status under applicable federal, state, and local laws.

Every effort has been made to provide current URLs and email addresses, but, because of the rapidly changing nature of the web, some sites and addresses may no longer be accessible.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stewart, Melissa, editor.

Title: Nonfiction writers dig deep : award-winning children's book authors share the secret of engaging writing / edited by Melissa Stewart.

Description: Champaign, Illinois : National Council of Teachers of English, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Celebrated authors share essays that describe a critical part of the informational writing process that is often left out of classroom instruction, helping students to craft rich, unique prose"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020027095 (print) | LCCN 2020027096 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814133521 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780814133545 (adobe pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Children's literature—Authorship. | Creative nonfiction—Authorship. | Creative nonfiction—Technique. | English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Elementary) | English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Middle school)

Classification: LCC PN147.5 .N66 2020 (print) | LCC PN147.5 (ebook) | DDC 808.06/8—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020027095>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020027096>

Contents

GUIDE TO CHILDREN'S LITERATURE BOOK AWARDS	xii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xiii
INTRODUCTION	1
<i>Why We Wrote This Book</i>	1
<i>The Evolution of an Idea</i>	2
<i>How to Use This Book</i>	4
CHAPTER 1 Choosing a Topic	9
<i>Getting Started</i>	9
<i>Essays by Mentor Authors</i>	13
EXPLORING LIFELONG PASSIONS TO WRITE AND ILLUSTRATE NONFICTION	
BY LITA JUDGE	15
A SCIENTIST IN SEARCH OF ROLE MODELS BY PATRICIA VALDEZ	18
WHIZ KIDS, UNDERDOGS, AND REAL-LIFE FAIRY TALES BY SUSAN HOOD	20
THE PICTURE BOOK BIOGRAPHY: CONNECTING INNER TRUTHS BY DON TATE	23
FACING OUR PAST, HEALING OUR FUTURE BY LESA CLINE-RANSOME	26
THE HEROINES OUR CHILDREN NEED BY MARA ROCKLIFF	29
CONFRONTING CHALLENGES THROUGH NONFICTION BY TERESA ROBESON	32
NONFICTION STORIES HAVE FEELINGS TOO BY MICHELLE MARKEL	34
A TRUE BOOK BABY: THE TEN-YEAR GESTATION OF <i>Nine Months</i>	
BY MIRANDA PAUL	37
WRITE YOUR PASSION BY LAURIE WALLMARK	40
OLD STORIES MADE NEW BY RAY ANTHONY SHEPARD	42
LET YOU SHINE THROUGH BY SARAH ALBEE	45
A GLIMPSE OF LIVES NOT LIVED BY MARY KAY CARSON	48
THE YELLOW CHALK CIRCLE BY GAIL JARROW	51

	CHOOSING SUBJECTS FOR NONFICTION BY ANITA SILVEY	54
	FINDING MY “REAL” WRITING BY STEVE SHEINKIN	57
	<i>In the Classroom</i>	59
CHAPTER 2	Finding a Focus	63
	<i>Getting Started</i>	63
	<i>Essays by Mentor Authors</i>	66
	HARRIET AND ME BY BARBARA KERLEY	68
	I AM NOT A ROBOT BY LAURA PURDIE SALAS	71
	CONNECTING THROUGH BIOGRAPHY BY BARB ROSENSTOCK	74
	MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE FOR ALL BY TRACI SORELL	77
	A LIFE OF ASTONISHMENT BY JESS KEATING	79
	THE ART OF CRAFTING NONFICTION BY JASON CHIN	82
	WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH A GIFT LIKE YOURS? BY CHRIS BARTON	85
	ARE KIDS TOO TENDER FOR TOUGH TOPICS? BY CAROLE BOSTON WEATHERFORD	88
	GETTING AT THE SOUL OF NONFICTION MEANS FACING YOUR FEARS BY SANDRA NEIL WALLACE	92
	A ROAD MAP TO NATURE BY ANITA SANCHEZ	95
	I TELL TRUE STORIES BY TANYA LEE STONE	97
	WONDER OF WEIRD BOOKS BY KELLY MILNER HALLS	100
	ANIMALIA BY PAMELA S. TURNER	102
	THE INVITATION BY KAREN ROMANO YOUNG	104
	LIFELONG SCIENCE LOVER BY JENNIFER SWANSON	107
	MY ANGUISH ABOUT THE VIETNAM WAR AND WHY I KEEP WRITING ABOUT IT BY ELIZABETH PARTRIDGE	110
	<i>In the Classroom</i>	113
CHAPTER 3	Making It Personal	117
	<i>Getting Started</i>	117
	<i>Essays by Mentor Authors</i>	122
	ABOUT A BIRD BY JENNIFER WARD	124
	EXPERIENCE IT! NONFICTION WRITING AS A PERSONAL JOURNEY BY HEATHER LANG	127
	SHARING WONDER AND THE LAYERS BENEATH BY APRIL PULLEY SAYRE	130
	DIGGING TUNNELS: A STORY WITHIN A STORY BY BAPTISTE PAUL	133
	ON NOT KNOWING, AND THE BEAUTY OF VERY, VERY BIG THINGS BY SETH FISHMAN	136
	INSPIRED BY NATURE: NEAR AND FAR BY STEPHEN R. SWINBURNE	138
	ONLY CONNECT BY DEBORAH HEILIGMAN	141
	TELLING TRUE STORIES WITH MY WHOLE SELF BY CANDACE FLEMING	144

THE CRAZY PRIVILEGE OF WRITING NONFICTION FOR KIDS BY CYNTHIA LEVINSON	147
FINDING MY WHY BY LAURIE ANN THOMPSON	150
MY HEART IS IN MY BOOKS BY DONNA JANELL BOWMAN	153
PUTTING THE HEART IN NONFICTION BY PATRICIA NEWMAN	156
FINDING MY NEW VOICE BY PAULA YOO	159
THE SEEDS OF CHILDHOOD BY NANCY F. CASTALDO	162
HOW PRIMARY SOURCES SAVED ME (AND MIGHT JUST SAVE THE WORLD) BY LEE WIND	165
A COMPOST OF QUESTIONS BY HEATHER L. MONTGOMERY	168
FRAGMENTS OF MY OWN LIFE BY CARLA KILLOUGH McCLAFFERTY	170
<i>In the Classroom</i>	172
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CHILDREN’S BOOKS	179
PROFESSIONAL REFERENCES	187
INDEX	189
EDITOR	199

Introduction

Why We Wrote This Book

You might be wondering why a group of fifty nonfiction children’s book authors have come together to create a book for educators. After all, most of the time, we choose to write for kids.

Our motive is simple. We’ve noticed a critical gap in nonfiction writing instruction, and we’d like to help you make the student writing process more authentic.

As author Laura Purdie Salas states in her essay on page 71, “[T]here’s a common, crushing misconception that fiction is creative writing drawn from the depths of a writer’s soul, while nonfiction is simply a recitation of facts that any basic robot could spit out.”

We aren’t sure why many teachers and students seem to think that writing nonfiction requires nothing more than doing some research and cobbling together a bunch of facts, but we’d like to pull back the curtain on our prewriting process to reveal the truth. The topics we choose, the approaches we take, and the concepts and themes we explore are closely linked to who we are as people—our passions, our personalities, our beliefs, and our experiences in the world. As far as we’re concerned, putting the information we collect through our own personal filters and making our own meaning is the secret to creating engaging nonfiction.

Consider these brief excerpts from essays included later in this book:

Writing nonfiction is a highly personal experience for me—a journey. And the adventure begins with a strong connection to my topic. While the connection could be rooted in passion, it might also stem from intense curiosity ... or fear.

—Heather Lang, author of the 2017 NSTA Best STEM Book,
Fearless Flyer: Ruth Law and Her Flying Machine

I study my subject's lives, trying to understand their inner truth. I need to know what makes them tick. But I also consider what makes me tick—my inner truth. When our truths are in alignment, that's a story I feel that I can tell.

—Don Tate, author-illustrator of the 2016 Carter G. Woodson Book Award winner *Poet: The Remarkable Story of George Moses Horton*

Just as fiction authors write about themes that resonate with them, so too do nonfiction authors. My themes first have to light *my* fire with a personal connection.

—Patricia Newman, author of the 2018 Sibert Honor title *Sea Otter Heroes: The Predators That Saved an Ecosystem*

I want my books to describe scientific concepts *and* elicit an emotional response from readers. To achieve this, I draw on the connections I forged with the subject during the research process.

—Jason Chin, author-illustrator of the 2018 Sibert Honor and Caldecott Honor title *Grand Canyon*

[T]he true tales I write spring directly from my experiences, passions, heartbreaks, obsessions, fears, quirks, curiosities, beliefs, desires. Writing nonfiction is like sitting before a blank screen and scraping off a piece of myself.

—Candace Fleming, author of the 2014 Orbis Pictus Award winner, *The Family Romanov: Murder, Rebellion, and the Fall of Imperial Russia*.

Simply put, to create high-quality nonfiction, writers need to have skin in the game. They need to dig deep and find a personal connection to their topic and their approach. If your students' nonfiction writing seems dull and lifeless, it's probably because they don't feel invested in the process or the product. Our goal in writing this book is to change that.

The Evolution of an Idea

To be honest, for a long time even we didn't fully understand or appreciate this important aspect of our creative process. Since nobody ever talked about it, we didn't recognize that it's something we all have in common.

That began to change at the 2017 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention in St. Louis, Missouri. I was fortunate to participate in a panel titled "The Secret of Crafting Engaging Nonfiction" with two of the most talented children's nonfiction authors of our time—Candace Fleming and Deborah Heiligman.



Candace Fleming, Alyson Beecher, Deborah Heiligman, and Melissa Stewart at the 2017 NCTE Annual Convention.

During our discussion, which was moderated by educator and children’s nonfiction enthusiast Alyson Beecher, we dove deeply into what fuels our work and why we routinely dedicate years of our lives to a single manuscript. As we compared our thoughts and experiences, we came to realize something critically important—each of our books has a piece of us at its heart. And that personal connection is what drives us to keep working despite the inevitable obstacles and setbacks.

Several other nonfiction authors attended our presentation, and afterward they praised our insights. That conversation helped us all understand our creative process in a new and exciting way.

Because I wanted to share this new-found knowledge with teachers and students, I developed a writing workshop to help young writers enrich their prose by adding a piece of themselves. The initial results were phenomenal. When students in grades 4–8 spent time analyzing and synthesizing their research, they were able to make meaningful connections, which allowed them to present the material in unique and interesting ways.

Around the same time, Laura Purdie Salas, one of the authors who attended our NCTE presentation, contributed to a post titled “Nonfiction Books and the Creative Process (Part 1)” on the Lerner Publishing Group’s blog (Hinz, n.d.). In this piece, Laura bravely described how her childhood feelings of embarrassment

and shame about her family's strict rules and unusual behavior motivated her to write *Meet My Family! Animal Babies and Their Families*. I was so intrigued by Laura's comments that I invited her to write a more expansive essay on this topic for my blog, *Celebrate Science*.

Because Laura's post, "Nonfiction Authors Aren't Robots," was a huge hit and my student workshop was working so well, I wanted to explore how nonfiction authors are personally connected to their work even more deeply. I decided to host a yearlong blog series in which a wide variety of award-winning authors discussed this topic from their point of view. The results were amazing. Not only did each writer have something uniquely fascinating to say, but many of the contributors also reported learning something valuable about themselves and their creative process while writing their essay.

After I'd published about a dozen of these blog posts, educators began suggesting that I compile them all in one place so that they'd be easier to access and explore as a group. They also asked for teaching strategies to help students approach nonfiction writing in a similar way. Those requests eventually led to this book. Because an NCTE panel played such a pivotal role in developing the ideas presented here, it's deeply satisfying that NCTE is our publisher.

How to Use This Book

Thirty-eight of the mentor essays included in this book are adapted and updated from the posts that appeared on my blog during the 2018–19 school year. The rest were written more recently to help round out the collection.

We have no doubt that the essays can be used in a variety of ways to enrich

Defining Nonfiction

Different people define the term *nonfiction* in different ways. In this book, we've adopted a broad definition, which includes expository nonfiction/informational writing, narrative nonfiction, memoir, graphic/comics nonfiction, fact-based poetry, and fact-based pseudonarratives (Englert & Hiebert, 1984). We chose this wide-ranging definition because it represents the spectrum of children's books available to you and your students and because the writers of these books all engage in the kind of prewriting process we're interested in sharing with educators.

K–12 nonfiction reading and writing instruction, and we encourage educators to integrate them into their lesson plans in whatever way makes sense to them. For example, some of the essays can serve as mentor texts as students write personal narratives. Others can be used to model the spirit of inquiry. We'd love to hear your creative ideas for integrating the essays into your curriculum. Feel free to tag us on social media and let us know how our ideas have inspired you. Nothing makes us happier than hearing that we're helping educators develop more powerful pedagogy.

The specific focus of this book is helping

educators who work with students in grades 4–8 gain a stronger understanding of three steps in the prewriting process that don't seem to get enough attention in most classrooms—choosing a topic (Chapter 1), finding a focus (Chapter 2), and making a personal connection (Chapter 3). By providing a sneak peek into how professional nonfiction writers think and how they work, the mentor essays offer insights that will empower you to teach these important aspects of nonfiction writing more effectively.

A Note on Organization

Each of the three chapters in this book is divided into three parts, as shown in Figure 1. A section that includes sixteen or seventeen essays by mentor authors is sandwiched between a Getting Started section that provides helpful background information and an In the Classroom section that suggests tools, tips, teaching strategies, and activities to help you put the ideas discussed in the essays into practice.

It's important to note that while the mentor essays have been sorted into three groups, many of them could have been placed in one or both of the other categories. The location of each essay is based on which step in the prewriting process it seems to focus on most.

Please also note that the mentor essays are snapshots. They reflect each author's thinking on a particular day about a particular book or group of books. To help you and your students get a sense of how a writer's work style varies over time, and based on the demands of different books, I have included a variety of personal experiences in the Getting Started and In the Classroom sections.



FIGURE 1. Organization of chapters

These anecdotes are meant to broaden the presentation and provide additional insights into the prewriting processes of professional writers.

Although it may seem like the three steps we’re focusing on—choosing a topic, finding a focus, and making a personal connection—are distinct and should occur in a specific order, in reality they’re interconnected and difficult to tease apart. The truth is that writing is messy, and it’s recursive. As you read the essays, you’ll discover that sometimes nonfiction writers have a focus in mind before they select a topic. Other times a personal connection inspires a writer to choose a particular topic or focus on a specific theme or concept. And, in fact, in some cases, one or more of these “prewriting” steps may not occur until after a writer has begun drafting their manuscript.

Teacher Timesaver Tables

This book is bursting with ideas and insights from many of today’s leading nonfiction authors. Ideally, you’ll eventually have a chance to read all the essays. But because time is such a precious commodity, you should feel free to dip in and out of the essays in a way that meets your interests and needs.

To help guide your reading, at the beginning of each Essays by Mentor Authors section you’ll find a Teacher Timesaver table with helpful information about the essays and the books each author writes. By consulting this table, you can quickly discover the grade level(s) that each author writes for, the format of their books—picture book (PB) or long form (LF)—and the content area the books address. The table also includes a brief summary of each essay. Here is a sample entry for Chapter 1, which explores how writers choose a topic:

Author	Grade Level	Book Format	Content Area	Essay Highlights
Lita Judge	4–5	PB	STEM	Lita’s nonfiction books grow from an exploration of deep and lifelong passions. She chooses topics based on her experiences studying living and extinct animals in the field.

This table will help you identify the best two or three essays for your specific needs as you prepare a lesson. As you read the essays you’ve selected, think about how the authors’ ideas and experiences can enrich your reading and writing instruction.

If your students don’t usually think about the people behind the nonfiction books they read, the essays will give your class a chance to hear the authors’ voices and understand their motivation for writing particular books.

If you do an author study of one of the writers included in this book, sharing their essay can help your class feel more connected to that person.

If you use books written by these authors as mentor texts in writing workshop, the essays can bring a new dimension to your lessons. By revealing how professional nonfiction writers think, the essays can help demystify the writing process for students.

In some cases, you may wish to share an entire essay with your class. In other cases, you may decide to select a few excerpts that complement or enhance the ideas you're focusing on. And sometimes, the essays may inform and expand your own thinking but don't need to be shared with your class at all. Since no one knows your students better than you do, you should feel free to use the essays in the way that best meets your needs and theirs.

Okay, now that you understand how *Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep* is organized and how you can use it to enrich and invigorate your instruction, let's get started!

Choosing a Topic

Getting Started



When I began doing school visits in 2003, teachers usually asked me to focus on the science content in my books rather than on the nonfiction writing process. But that suddenly changed around 2013 as schools began implementing the Common Core State Standards, which put a new emphasis on informational writing.

As I studied the new standards, I realized that they stressed the importance of craft and structure, so I developed a presentation that looked closely at text features, text structures, point of view, voice, and word choice. But at the end of my session, teachers kept asking

me questions about the mechanics of my process—how I revised, how I gathered information, and especially how I chose a topic.

Teachers told me that, in the past, they had assigned topics for nonfiction reports. In many cases, the topics were related to the social studies curriculum. Teachers would pass out a list of historical figures and significant events and expect students to choose one. According to teachers, the resulting writing was often dull and uninspired.

Teachers also told me that their current curriculum suggested asking students to write about “something they could teach” based on the age-old advice to “write what you know.” The rationale was that students would be more

engaged when they tackled a familiar topic. But once again, the results were lackluster.

I wasn't surprised to hear these stories. After all, why would kids want to choose a topic from a prescribed list? And why would they want to rehash something they already know backward and forward when there's a wide world of ideas and information out there just waiting to be explored?

I write about science because I'm fascinated by the natural world. I'm constantly encountering things that make me ask questions. And to satisfy my curiosity, I want to know more, more, more. Learning more gets me so excited that I'm dying to share my new knowledge with other people. That's what fuels my writing.



Doing research for *Seashells: More Than a Home* at Ha'ena State Park, Kauai, Hawaii.

Young writers are no different from me. When students focus on ideas they care about or information that fascinates them, when they conduct research to satisfy their own curiosity, they'll craft nonfiction that sings.

But letting young writers choose their own topics leads to a whole new set of challenges, doesn't it? For some students, coming up with ideas is intimidating, even paralyzing.

For a long time, I didn't truly appreciate the severity of this writing obstacle. But then, during a school visit in Rhode Island in 2017, I had an experience that changed my way of thinking.

As I was presenting to fourth graders, I noticed that the students were having trouble recalling the steps of the nonfiction writing process, so I decided to work with them to list the steps in order on chart paper.

We didn't get very far. Despite giving them every hint I could think of, they couldn't name the first step. They kept saying things like "Write your title." and "Choose your photos." Out of desperation, one boy suggested, "Get a piece of paper." Finally, the school librarian came to my rescue by asking, "What's the hardest part of the whole process?"

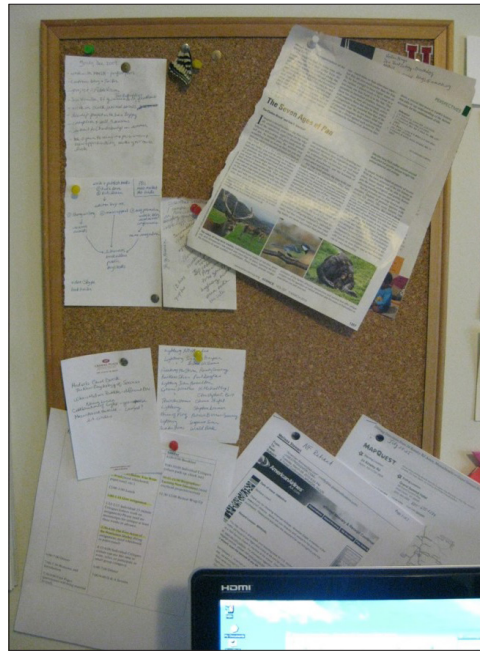
Suddenly sixty hands shot into the air. They all knew the answer—choosing a topic.

I was gobsmacked. In this school community, choosing a topic was universally acknowledged as THE most difficult part of writing nonfiction. How could that be? Why was something that's so simple for me so difficult for young writers?

A few days later, I sat at my desk contemplating this disconnect. Did I have strategies for choosing a topic? I couldn't think of any.

As my eyes drifted upward, above my computer screen, I suddenly realized that I was literally staring at the solution. I didn't have a strategy for coming up with ideas, but I did have a tool for keeping track of them—my Idea Board.

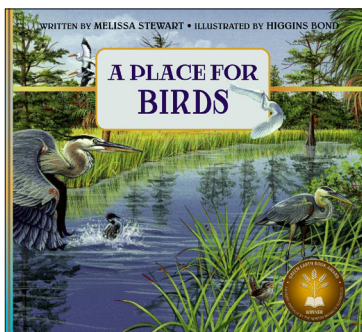
For me, ideas are everywhere. They come from books and articles I read, conversations with other people, places I visit, and experiences I have. The hard part isn't getting ideas; it's remembering them when it's time to start working on a new book.



That's why I have an Idea Board in my office. Anytime I have an idea, I write it on a scrap of paper and tack it up there. Some of those ideas lead nowhere, but others turn into books.

Here's an example. While I was writing the book *A Place for Birds*, I read a magazine article with a single sentence that blew my mind:

Hummingbird eyelashes are the smallest feathers in the world.



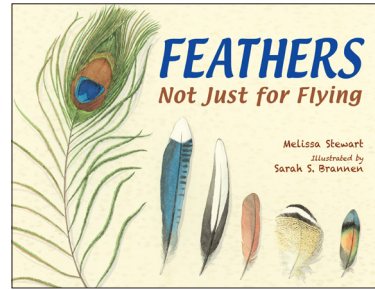
My brain instantly exploded with questions. Birds have eyelashes? And they're made of feathers? Exactly how small are they, and what do they look like?

That incredible fact also inspired me to ask a bigger, broader question: Do birds use their feathers in other unexpected ways? I was dying to find out, but I couldn't let myself get distracted. I had a deadline to meet for *A Place for Birds*.

So I tore the article out of the magazine (*Shh!* It was from the library.) and posted it on my Idea Board along with some related thoughts and questions I didn't want to forget.

As soon as I turned in the manuscript for *A Place for Birds*, I snatched that article off my Idea Board and dove into the research. And eventually, the information I gathered during my journey of discovery turned into the book *Feathers: Not Just for Flying*.

There are three things to take away from this anecdote:



1. Self-generated ideas are powerful.
2. It's important to be open to ideas *all* the time.
3. If writers record ideas as they get them, they'll always have something to write about.

Essays by Mentor Authors

Now that you know a little bit about how I get and keep track of ideas, I encourage you to take a look at what some other authors have to say about choosing topics. After all, there’s no single right way to go about this or any other step in the nonfiction writing process. Every writer does things a little bit differently, and that’s an important message for students to hear.

If you have time, you may want to read all sixteen essays, but if not, Teacher Timesaver Table 1.1 will help you identify the ones that are of greatest value to you right now.

TEACHER TIMESAVER TABLE 1.1. A Guide to Mentor Essays about Choosing a Topic

Author	Grade Level	Book Format*	Content Area*	Essay Highlights
Lita Judge	4–5	PB	STEM	Lita’s nonfiction books grow from an exploration of deep and lifelong passions. She chooses topics based on her experiences studying living and extinct animals in the field.
Patricia Valdez	4–5	PB	Bio/STEM	As a Latina scientist, Patricia has had trouble finding mentors. She chooses to write about people who are good role models for girls interested in science.
Susan Hood	4–5	PB	Bio/Arts, Bio/SS	Susan is passionate about “true stories that are real-life fairy tales.” She writes about boys and girls whose grit and grace she admires.
Don Tate	4–6	PB	Bio/Arts, Bio/SS	Don chooses subjects that he feels connected with on a personal level. He says, “When our truths are in alignment, that’s a story I feel that I can tell.”
Lesia Cline-Ransome	4–6	PB	Bio/Arts, Bio/Sports, Bio/SS	Lesia writes the kind of biographies she longed for as a child. She chooses real people who have persevered despite racism, loss, and adversity.
Mara Rockliff	4–6	PB	Bio/Arts, Bio/SS	Mara feels compelled to write about women who have been left out of history books. She wants to show both boys and girls that “Girls can do anything!”
Teresa Robeson	4–6	PB	Bio/STEM	Teresa highlights people from the past who overcame the struggles she faces today—racism, sexism, and being an immigrant. She hopes learning about these people will help young readers tap into their own inner strength.
Michelle Markel	4–8	PB	Bio/Arts, Bio/SS	Michelle is attracted to rebels and stories of perseverance. Because she wants her biographies “to have a beating heart,” she strives to give readers a sense of the subject’s humanity, passions, and struggles.
Miranda Paul	4–8	PB	STEM	Miranda wrote <i>Nine Months</i> because she couldn’t find a book to answer her daughter’s questions about pregnancy. Miranda’s love for her children kept her inspired during the ten-year writing process.

Continued on next page

(Continued)

Laurie Wallmark	4–8	PB	Bio/STEM	Laurie writes about women in STEM because it combines two of her passions—STEM and equal opportunity for all.
Ray Anthony Shepard	4–8, 5–8, 7–8	PB, LF	Bio/SS	Ray looks for real-life stories that show ways people stood up to racial oppression. His goal is to help young readers understand the past without shame, guilt, or resentment.
Sarah Albee	5–8	LF	SS/STEM	According to Sarah, the best writing stems from who a writer is and what they care about most deeply. Many of her topics trace back to childhood experiences and curiosities.
Mary Kay Carson	5–8	LF	STEM	Mary Kay writes STEM-themed books because science has always helped her make sense of and feel connected to the world. She enjoys tagging along as researchers do their work.
Gail Jarrow	5–8	LF	STEM/SS	Gail describes herself as inquisitive and (politely) nosy. Her curiosity leads her to explore people and topics she doesn't know much about.
Anita Silvey	5–8	LF	Bio/STEM, Bio/SS	Anita chooses subjects who believe in something wholeheartedly and are truly devoted to their work and their cause. She also looks for opportunities to do interesting primary research and conduct interviews.
Steve Sheinkin	6–8	LF	Bio/SS	Steve chooses topics that will make history more appealing and memorable to young readers. He looks for true stories that can be told in a fast-paced, cinematic way.

***Key to Abbreviations**

Book Format: PB = picture book, LF = long form

Content Area: Bio = biography, SS = social studies/history, STEM = science/technology/engineering/math

After you've read the essays that seem best suited to your current needs, please turn to the In the Classroom section that begins on page 59. It provides a variety of practical ideas that can help you support students as they choose topics for nonfiction writing assignments.

In *Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep: 50 Award-Winning Children's Book Authors Share the Secret of Engaging Writing*, some of today's most celebrated writers for children share essays that describe a critical part of the informational writing process that is often left out of classroom instruction. To craft engaging nonfiction, professional writers choose topics that fascinate them and explore concepts and themes that reflect their passions, personalities, beliefs, and experiences in the world. By scrutinizing the information they collect to make their own personal meaning, they create distinctive books that delight as well as inform. In addition to essays from mentor authors, *Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep* includes a wide range of tips, tools, teaching strategies, and activity ideas from editor Melissa Stewart to help students (1) choose a topic, (2) focus that topic by identifying a core idea, theme, or concept, and (3) analyze their research to find a personal connection. By adding a piece of themselves to their drafts, students will learn to craft rich, unique prose.



Melissa Stewart has written more than 180 science books for children. Her highly regarded website features a rich array of nonfiction writing resources: www.melissa-stewart.com/.



National Council of
Teachers of English
www.ncte.org

