Crafting Creative Nonfiction: From Close Reading to Close Writing

Cynthia A. Dollins

Converting boring, basic facts into intriguing, creative nonfiction writing can be accomplished with a little help from mentor texts.

The Common Core State Standards call for a major shift in curriculum to include extensive amounts of nonfiction texts in elementary classrooms. The expectation is that students’ reading diet will be evenly divided between literary and informational texts by the fourth grade (i.e., 50% of all texts used in school should be informational; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). In addition to being able to read increasingly complex nonfiction, students must be able to successfully write their own explanatory and informational texts. Therefore, to be college and career ready, students must be able to read, understand, and craft nonfiction.

Since the implementation of the Common Core, articles, books, and professional development sessions have emphasized ways to successfully implement close reading with students. Close reading is a process that helps readers understand both the surface and the deeper levels of complex text. The premise of close reading involves multiple interactions with text to examine what it says, how the author has said it, and what it means (Lehman & Roberts, 2014). Part of the close reading process asks students to pay close attention to the specific craft and structure the author has used in the text. Close reading can assist students in creating their own nonfiction texts that provide detailed information about a topic and can demonstrate how to use a unique and engaging style of writing. This article provides teachers a process for helping students strategically navigate children’s nonfiction books and use these texts as mentors for their own nonfiction writing.

Third-grade teacher Jane Thompson (all names are pseudonyms) worked with me to implement this writing project in order to help her students learn to transfer exemplary writing techniques from nonfiction mentor texts. She assisted students in using close reading strategies that focused on author’s purpose and author’s craft for science nonfiction picture books. This is in alignment with College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards 4–6 for Reading (see Figure 1). The students were scaffolded to examine the content the author was providing but also to look at style and organizational features, descriptive language, academic vocabulary, and point of view. Additionally, the students attended to research-identified key elements that contribute to exemplary nonfiction texts, as defined by Pappas (2006). Research shows that exposing students to the structures of different genres, such as nonfiction, helps to increase their ability to write in these same genres (Abbott, Berninger, & Fayol, 2010). Therefore, nonfiction picture books were used as springboards for the students to develop their own informational writing that included interesting facts as well as a strong authorial voice.

Mentor texts, as defined by Dorfman and Cappelli (2007), are “pieces of literature that we can return to again and again as we help young writers learn how to do what they may not yet be able to do on their own” (pp. 2–3). Graham, Gillespie, and McKeown (2013) found that students’ writing improved when they were provided strong models of the types of writing they were expected to create. Careful analysis of author’s purpose and process, as well as encouragement to emulate critical elements of texts, helped students increase their writing proficiency. Therefore, the texts used with Jane's third-grade students were carefully selected to reflect the exemplary features of nonfiction as well as narrative elements that brought a unique authorial voice to the text.

Crafting Creative Nonfiction: From Close Reading to Close Writing

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Two types of nonfiction, labeled here as standard nonfiction and creative nonfiction, were used in this project. Standard nonfiction, within the structure of a picture book, is defined as those texts that include scientific language and other features of nonfiction such as timeless present tense and generic nouns and pronouns (e.g., “snakes eat rats” versus “the rattlesnake is eating a rat”). Standard nonfiction also includes technical vocabulary such as *metamorphosis* and *chrysalis*. Creative nonfiction texts incorporate many of the same features as standard nonfiction but often add narrative elements such as story features, dialogue, and descriptive and figurative language. I shall provide specific examples of creative nonfiction later in this article.

It is important to note that the labels *standard nonfiction* and *creative nonfiction* encompass a continuum of books, and the definitions presented in this article are in no way meant to serve as absolutes. Standard nonfiction books may, indeed, include different aspects that contribute to authorial voice and reader engagement without including the specific narrative elements mentioned here. On the other end of the spectrum, there are creative nonfiction texts that overplay narrative elements and may lead to confusion about the facts of the text in the process. To help mitigate this potential issue, I carefully selected all the mentor texts to be used in this writing project, working diligently to ensure that only the best and most balanced books would serve as mentors. I consider both the standard nonfiction and the creative nonfiction represented here to be exemplary texts.

**Key Elements of Nonfiction**

Pappas (2006) identified four common elements of standard nonfiction that can be taught to help focus students’ attention as they read and craft nonfiction. These include a topic presentation, which is the introduction to the topic; descriptive attributes, which are characteristics of the topic, such as color and size; and characteristic events, which are what the topic does—the concrete, tangible actions of the topic. Characteristic events include the processes, actions, or events that the topic is engaged in. For example, honeybees clean and polish cells, nurse larvae, collect nectar, and make wax. The fourth common element of standard nonfiction is a final summary that restates the main ideas of the topic. Pappas also identified eight optional elements of nonfiction picture books: prelude, category comparison, historical vignette, experimental idea, afterword, addendum, recapitulation, and illustration extension. Although these elements of nonfiction are not considered exhaustive and other elements were taught in Jane’s class within this unit (i.e., index and

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**Figure 1**

**College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Craft and Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R5</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main thrust of the teaching was focused on Pappas’s research. Throughout this writing project, students were asked to emulate the specific mentor texts provided in the classroom. Both Jane and I acknowledged that these texts would help support students’ writing endeavors but could also potentially limit their craft if they adhered only to these texts. Therefore, Jane discussed this with the students and pointed out that these texts were not the only way to write creative nonfiction. She told students that once they understood the tenets of this type of writing, the class would explore alternative writing styles in future endeavors.

To introduce third-grade students to the four common elements of nonfiction (i.e., introduction to topic, descriptive attributes, characteristic events, and final summary), Jane read aloud *Bats* (Gibbons, 1999) in its entirety to allow students to hear the text without interruption. Her intention was to have students focus on the information presented, the author’s message, and author’s craft. The text was then read aloud again, this time stopping periodically to record the common elements as defined by Pappas (2006) on a class graphic organizer. I had decided to add one of the optional elements, category comparison, to the graphic organizer because I felt this helped students think at a deeper and more critical level. If students were able to compare and contrast different types of the topic, it seemed logical that they would develop greater depth of understanding of that topic. For example, if a student can identify the similarities and differences between the queen bee, drones, and worker bees, he or she has a better understanding of the interdependence of the colony of bees.

On subsequent days, the students read books aloud in small groups and then completed graphic organizers listing the four common elements plus the one optional element of nonfiction. Following this gradual release of responsibility (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2011), students were eventually charged with the task of completing graphic organizers by themselves using a different text. Figure 2 shows the organizer that Zack completed for *Spiders* (Gibbons, 1993b).

I had specifically chosen mentor texts that exemplified quality standard nonfiction and that included scientific language and the common elements of nonfiction. At this point, Jane and I did not provide the students with creative nonfiction texts that often include elements similar to narrative texts (Gutkind, 2001). Instead, we introduced creative nonfiction picture books later, when students had a strong understanding of the key elements of standard nonfiction. My purpose for this decision was to ensure that students were hearing and reading nonfiction that would resemble many textbooks and journals that they would encounter later in

**Figure 2**

**Student Chart for Elements of Nonfiction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name(s)</th>
<th>Zack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Book Title and Author</td>
<td><em>Spiders</em> by Gail Gibbons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic Presentation</th>
<th>Descriptive Attributes</th>
<th>Characteristic Events</th>
<th><em>Comparisons</em></th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spiders may appear to be scary but most of them don’t hurt people. There are about 30 thousand different kinds of spiders.</td>
<td><em>Most are brown, gray or black. Some have bright colors. They can be as small as a speck of dust or as big as a dinner plate.</em></td>
<td><em>Some males do a dance to bring an insect to the female.</em></td>
<td>Spiders are not insects. Their bodies are different from insects in many ways. Spiders have two parts, eight legs, eight eyes.</td>
<td>Spiders can be interesting to watch. Scientists are still discovering new kinds of spiders and learning more about them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Exoskeleton - hard outer shell | Spiderlings spin silk and let a breeze carry them away. As they grow, they molt. Many weave webs. | Insect three parts six legs, two eyes. | | |

Glossary of key terms:

- **Introduction to topic**: This section provides background information and sets the stage for the rest of the text.
- **Descriptive attributes**: These are the physical qualities or characteristics of the topic.
- **Characteristic events**: These are significant occurrences or happenings related to the topic.
- **Final summary**: This section draws conclusions and provides a final perspective on the topic.
their lives, and their grounding in these texts would thus help them to be college and career ready.

**Comparing Standard and Creative Nonfiction**

To reinforce the differences between standard nonfiction and creative nonfiction, twin texts were used. Twin texts are defined here as two books on the same topic, one standard nonfiction and the other a hybrid or creative nonfiction. (Table 1 provides a list of twin texts.) For example, after students read and completed graphic organizers for the standard nonfiction book *Frogs* (Gibbons, 1993a), the creative nonfiction book *Growing Frogs* (French, 2003) was read aloud. Jane then led a class discussion about the similarities and differences between these two books on the same topic. A large Venn diagram of the twin texts was created to reinforce the similarities and differences. Figure 3 shows the completed diagram. Throughout the unit, various narrative elements were highlighted in several different creative nonfiction texts. Projecting each of these books in the classroom helped facilitate discussion of their unique narrative elements. The three specific narrative elements taught were point of view, dialogue, and descriptive and figurative language.

From the book *The Skeleton Inside You* (Balestrino, 1989), for example, the class examined how the author sometimes switched point of view to include a personal narrative:

> Once I pushed my nose flat against a bakery window to look at some cookies. My nose didn’t hurt, and it didn’t break off. It came back to the same shape. Push your nose flat. It will bend too, because it has cartilage inside it. (p. 13)

After referencing other sections that included different points of view, a discussion was held about the author’s purpose for writing in this way. Students recognized that the author’s main purpose was the same here as for most standard nonfiction; that is, to inform the reader. The students were then led to surmise that the inclusion of first- and second-person narrative was a style choice by the author to help make the content more relatable to the reader. By using brief anecdotes, the author helped the reader personally connect to the information presented.

Dialogue, another narrative element, was presented to the students during the reading of the creative nonfiction text *Yucky Worms* (French, 2010). The author artfully weaves verbal interactions between a grandmother and a grandson to entertain as well as inform the reader about the habits of worms:

> “But what does it eat? Dirt?” I wanted to know.
> “It eats tiny, tiny stones and bits of dirt,” Grandma told me, “but worms eat other things too, like rotting leaves and flowers and fruit and dead insects. They especially like eating at night, when it’s cool.” (p. 10)

Jane discussed with the students how they could replicate this author’s craft by embedding facts within a story. They, too, could have a child interacting with a parent or grandparent who is able to answer questions about the animal they had chosen to write about.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonfiction</th>
<th>Creative Nonfiction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Monarch Butterfly</em> by Gail Gibbons</td>
<td><em>Are You a Butterfly?</em> by Judy Allen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Wiggling Worms at Work</em> by Wendy Pfeffer</td>
<td><em>Yucky Worms</em> by Vivian French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Amazing Octopus</em> by Bobbie Kalman</td>
<td><em>Gentle Giant Octopus</em> by Karen Wallace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Polar Bears</em> by Gail Gibbons</td>
<td><em>Ice Bear: In the Steps of the Polar Bear</em> by Nicola Davies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Deadly Ants</em> by Seymour Simon</td>
<td><em>Are You an Ant?</em> by Judy Allen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Frogs</em> by Gail Gibbons</td>
<td><em>Growing Frogs</em> by Vivian French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bones: Our Skeletal System</em> by Seymour Simon</td>
<td><em>The Skeleton Inside You</em> by Philip Balestrino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Amazing Whales!</em> by Sarah Thomson</td>
<td><em>Big Blue Whale</em> by Nicola Davies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Honey Makers</em> by Gail Gibbons</td>
<td><em>The Magic School Bus Inside a Beehive</em> by Joanna Cole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Wolves</em> by Seymour Simon</td>
<td><em>Walk With a Wolf</em> by Janni Howker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To demonstrate how students could include descriptive and figurative language in nonfiction, Jane reread a portion of *Ice Bear: In the Steps of the Polar Bear* (Davies, 2005). Beautiful and poetic language offers a break from the many facts provided about this animal, and it adds rhythm and melody to the creative nonfiction text.

ALONE…until the paths of two lone hunters cross. They’ll wave their heads in greeting, clasp jaws so tenderly, they wouldn’t break an egg. Cautiously, they’ll try each other’s strength. Then? Play! Giants flowing in the whiteness, tumbling, beautiful as snowflakes… until they part and go their separate ways. (pp. 25–26)

Jane emphasized the power of descriptive language by saying, “No matter what you’re writing, whether it’s a story or an informational piece, you want to use the best words possible. Everyone likes to read great words and great language. These words make writing memorable.”

**Bridging Close Reading and Close Writing**

With the knowledge they had gained from looking closely at mentor texts and analyzing key features of nonfiction, students now began to research animals of their choice so they could write their own creative nonfiction. They were to read at least three texts and identify three nonfiction elements. These three elements—descriptive attributes, characteristic events, and category comparison—comprised the minimum research on facts that students needed to include in their writing. The two other common elements identified by Pappas (2006)—topic presentation and final summary—would be required in the students’ writing, but how they were presented was up to the individual student author to determine. Additionally, referencing our mentor texts, both standard and creative nonfiction, would serve as models for students to choose how to craft their writing and present the information.

Students had access to many informational books in the classroom and to the Internet during media center time. They were also encouraged to bring information they had obtained from home. As was previously modeled for them, students were now asked to read each text in its entirety and then discuss in groups their newfound or reinforced knowledge about the topic. On another day, they reread the text and recorded the three required elements.

**Highlighting Creative Nonfiction Mentor Texts**

Jane often reviewed the elements of standard nonfiction and then talked about different narrative elements that authors use to engage the reader and
bring an inviting voice to the information. She discussed options for strategically inserting dialogue, using first- or second-person point of view (as opposed to third-person, which was most commonly used in standard nonfiction), and including descriptive and figurative language. The class brainstormed different ways to include these narrative elements. For example, during a minilesson on descriptive language, Jane provided examples of boring, basic facts and challenged the class to reword each to include more descriptive or “luscious” language, as the class began to call it.

**Boring, Basic Fact:** The ant brought the food back to the colony.

**Luscious Language:** The ant clumsily dragged the chunk of watermelon back to the starving colony.

**Boring, Basic Fact:** The butterfly came out of the chrysalis.

**Luscious Language:** At last, the colorful butterfly emerged headfirst from the chrysalis.

**Boring, Basic Fact:** Polar bears eat seals.

**Luscious Language:** White polar bears prey upon unsuspecting seals swimming under the icy water.

Another minilesson focused on including dialogue in writing. Jane cautioned the students that, since they were composing nonfiction, the animals in their writing could not talk. But, she reminded them, authors could bring their own voices into the text. Jane read excerpts from the book *Turtle, Turtle, Watch Out!* (Sayre, 2010) to model how the author periodically inserted the title phrase as a warning in the text. Jane suggested that perhaps a student author may want to warn a Bengal tiger or other animal in a similar way to look out for the poachers that were around the bend. “Be careful, tiger!” could be added to the page in a different font to indicate that the author was thinking something.

**Drafting Creative Nonfiction**

It is important to have mentor texts available to students before they write, as they write, and as they revise (Gallagher, 2014). Therefore, in this project, the students had access to the model texts throughout the writing process. They used their graphic organizers and mentor texts as they began drafting. They were encouraged to “just write” for the first draft, meaning that they were reminded to not worry about spelling or perfect wording. The goal at this stage of the process was to get their main ideas and thoughts down on paper. Students wrote on every other line of a page so that revision would be easier.

**Crafting Strong Leads**

One of the minilessons for this writing project focused on crafting strong leads. The lead in any piece of writing is the way to hook the reader from the outset. As in all aspects of this project, mentor texts were used to give the students viable ideas. While there are many ways to start a text and invite a reader in, I had selected five specific types for Jane to highlight for students: descriptive lead, question lead, interesting fact lead, comparison lead, and setting lead. Since these types of leads were used by prolific authors of children’s nonfiction, I thought they would serve as valuable models for the students’ own writing. An example of each type of lead is provided in Figure 4. The leads were read aloud, and a discussion followed that helped students understand why each lead is effective.

As students continued their drafting, they were encouraged to look closely at the opening of each mentor text and try to identify what technique the author had used. Not all leads would fit into these five categories, so students were prompted to go beyond the examples and discover how the author chose to open his or her text.

Heather, for example, decided to replicate a setting lead similar to the one used in *Polar Bears* (Gibbons, 2001). Her poetic introduction closely reflects the mentor text: “A cool breeze blows, the choppy water sways side to side. The temperature is very humid. Through the sunny scene a gigantic seal appears. But it is not a seal. It is a sea lion.”

**Revising the Writing**

After a few days of drafting, Jane called the class together to discuss revision. She asked for volunteers to share aloud a small portion of their drafts. This could be the beginning, a random sentence or two, a part that used narrative elements, or anything else the students wanted to share or wanted the class to help them with. Most of the students were familiar with the concept of revision within writers’ workshop, but Jane reviewed its purpose and contrasted it with editing, which would be done near the end of the writing process.

Three specific revising strategies were taught. When plausible, Jane used the examples that students shared to model the revision techniques. The
three revising strategies, as defined by Cunningham and Allington (2011), are adding, replacing, and re-ordering and removing. The adding revising strategy is the easiest for students, so Jane focused on this first. This strategy involves having students add words or phrases, such as adjectives or prepositional phrases, to parts of their writing in order to make meaning clearer. Jane projected short sections of writing, and the class discussed where they could insert something to improve the writing. Adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases were added.

The replacing revising strategy helps writers look closely at the words they have already included in an effort to improve the vocabulary. For example, together the class replaced the word good with impressive, ran with scampered, under with beneath, and stopped with halted.

The third revising strategy is the most complex, and sometimes students show reluctance to using it. The reordering and removing strategy involves students revising to make their writing smoother, more organized, and tighter. The class was guided to look for redundant, unnecessary information. They discussed how some sentences could be re-ordered so that ideas were grouped together, rather than isolated and appearing randomly in the writing.

Students reviewed their own writing first, doing their best to improve it. They added words and phrases, replaced “ordinary” words, and tried to remove unnecessary information and reorder different sentences or sections. It then became a collaborative activity. Students asked one another for ideas to improve their word choices. They excitedly brainstormed together and used thesauruses and online tools to find interesting words to replace more mundane ones. Suggestions flew around the room, and students borrowed ideas from classmates to use in their writing.

Reflecting on the Revision Process
I had many opportunities to hold individual conferences with students throughout their writing process and prior to the creation of their final drafts. These sessions focused on distilling their crafts for specific choices about their revising processes. When I met with students, I asked them to label which revising strategy they had used or to identify the specific book(s) that influenced their style of writing. Alyssa shared that she had used replacing revising for several different words in her text. Cold was replaced with chilly, hot became humid, and great big was revised to gigantic because she thought these sounded better and were more descriptive. She said they were luscious language instead of boring, basic words.
Like Alyssa, many of the students focused on the replacing strategy in an effort to improve their writing.

Davis decided to add specific information about what prey the cougar hunts instead of just saying it eats meat. He added to his draft, “The cougar is an excellent hunter. His favorite foods include deer, bear cubs, coyotes, rabbits, birds, and mice.” Landon stated that he used the adding revising strategy to make his writing more interesting. He noticed that his draft only had general information and it seemed boring. He added to his draft, “A really popular frog called the Bull frog like many other frogs has a long sticky tongue. This is so they can have more food in the air instead of underground animals such as worms.” His initial draft included information about the frog’s unique eyelids. Upon review, he decided to include the reason this was helpful to the frog: “Frogs have see throw [see-through] eyelids.” His final draft stated, “Frogs have see-through eyelids to see underwater so they can catch some of their prey. This also helps the frog find a nice and muddy place for them to hibernate.”

Only a few students implemented the reordering and removing revising strategy. When asked about this, Dugan shared with me that he didn’t want to take anything out. “I worked really hard on this. This is the longest writing I ever did!” Camia had written some information that speculated about what would happen if humans didn’t help the cougars and there was only one left in the world. She decided to eliminate this because it wasn’t like any of the mentor texts students had read.

Heather used the reordering revising strategy after she had read Penguins (Simon, 2007), which contained a glossary. She had initially included various technical vocabulary terms throughout the text that she thought the reader should know. She decided to move all these terms and their definitions to the end of the paper in a glossary as the mentor text had done.

Example of Student Creative Nonfiction
Camia was inspired by the mentor text Are You a Ladybug? (Allen, 2000). In this creative nonfiction text, the author poses a question to the reader and then uses second-person point of view to help the reader answer the question. Are You a Ladybug? begins:

Are you a ladybug?
If you are, your parents look like this, and they eat aphids.

When your mother lays her eggs, you are inside one of them.
While you’re in there, you will grow.
When you have grown big enough, break out of the egg. (pp. 4–7)

Camia mirrored the author’s craft and structure for her informational writing about cougars. Several aspects of her text included narrative elements to engage the audience. The beginning of her text is included in Figure 5. Camia replicated the second-person point of view that Allen (2000) used in her text, posing a question to the audience and then comparing the cougar to the reader. This is not typical of standard nonfiction but was an element taught in this unit using mentor texts for creative nonfiction. Camia also inserted dialogue (“Be careful!” and “Wow!”), another narrative element that helps nonfiction be presented in a creative way. The reader can feel the emotion from the author through these dialogic moments. Descriptive language, the third narrative element focused upon in the unit, was evident in Camia’s text. Words such as harmless, spiney [spiny], delicious, cruel, injured, and prey add sophistication to the writing.

Connecting Nonfiction and Narrative Elements
This project sought to ensure that students wrote informational texts that included the common elements of nonfiction as defined by Pappas (2006). Additionally, in order to make the writing interesting and unique, students were encouraged to use specific narrative elements as well. Many of the third-grade students were successful in including both nonfiction and narrative elements in their final writing pieces.

Descriptive Attributes
Sophie, for example, was able to combine descriptive attributes and figurative language when providing information about mice to create a unique visual for the reader: “Mice are as quiet as the wind” and “Mice are as big as six quarters!” Marcus used the narrative element of second-person point of view to describe the lion: “If you were watching and got a closer look at a lion then you should have seen what it looks like. You should have seen all the white on it tummy and gray blue eyes with dark pokedots [polka dots] on the lion.”
Characteristic Events

Some students chose to include narrative elements when discussing the characteristic events, another common element for nonfiction. Evan used figurative language in the form of a simile to describe the speed of otters. “River otters are really quick swimmers. They can paddle [paddle] as quick as a canoeist [canoeist] and that is really fast!” Sammie also employed figurative language when writing about wild horses: “One of the horses was asleep, as quiet as a mouse, and another one was loudly chomping on pieces of dry, yellow hay.” Sammie also included the narrative element of dialogue to discuss characteristic events. Many parts of her paper were written as dialogue between her and her mother. “Why is that horse moving its tail?” I asked. ‘They do that to swat the flies away,’ Mom said. ‘They also groom themselves by rubbing against rocks and trees or they roll on the ground.’”

Category Comparison

Although most of the students included some aspect of category comparison, only a few elected to embed narrative elements with the comparison. Emma used second-person point of view to talk directly to the reader as she compared the wood mouse to the squirrel. “Did you know my dear friend the wood mouse puts berries in his cheeks like a squirrel? I would never guess they have something in common with their enemy the squirrel.”

Conclusion

Using mentor texts from both standard nonfiction and creative nonfiction, third-grade students were scaffolded to learn key features of each of these types of texts. They closely examined the texts to build an appreciation of the author’s style and then work to emulate it in their own writing. Students were successful in being able to use a creative craft and structure while writing informational texts that included important facts about a chosen animal.

The students took advantage of the mentor texts to help them write creative nonfiction that was enticing for the reader. Most included the three required nonfiction elements from their notes:
TAKE ACTION!

1. Read: Read aloud both standard nonfiction and creative nonfiction. Hold discussions about the similarities and differences of the information provided as well as the craft and structure used by the author.

2. Research: Ask students to research an animal of their choice and take notes by filling in a graphic organizer.

3. Ready to Write: Invite students to draft their own creative nonfiction text about the animal.

4. Review: Provide numerous opportunities before and during the writing process for students to examine the mentor texts in an effort to emulate them.

5. Revise: Teach the three revising strategies and use student examples to model how to improve writing.

6. Revisit: Throughout the writing process, invite students to share small sections of their papers that reinforce the inclusion of standard nonfiction elements as well as creative craft and structure.

7. Recognize: Provide ample time for students to read aloud their final drafts and celebrate their exceptional writing.

8. Reinforce: Use these strategies throughout the year to emphasize the writing process and how to incorporate creative craft and structure in nonfiction writing.

descriptive attributes, characteristic events, and category comparison. Additionally, many students infused creative craft and structure through narrative elements—point of view, dialogue, and descriptive and figurative language—to make their informational writing more interesting and relatable to the reader.

It is hoped that by participating in this writing project, the students have become more empowered to implement alternatives to writing boring, basic reports that just include boring, basic facts. Instead, students can still write factually accurate nonfiction pieces while using creative craft and structure in order to bring a strong, engaging voice to their writing.

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