

Quick Guide for Selecting Informational Texts for Upper Elementary and Middle School Students

Kathy E. Stephens, Ed.D.
LeTourneau University

Abstract

Information-based books are available in abundance and popular with students enrolled in the upper elementary and middle school grades. With a growing emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), teachers are including informational texts in the classroom. Preteens are expected to think critically, read more complex texts, and build stronger vocabularies; information-based texts can help students in all these areas. Effective resources are needed as teachers select nonfiction and informational literature. By using the short checklist based on specific characteristics, teachers can assess texts, completing the selection process with confidence and ease.

Keywords: *informational text, STEM, checklist*

In the world of children's and adolescent's literature, the information-based genres have become tremendously popular with students, teachers, and parents. Recent reports from publishers of popular children's and adolescent literature have indicated significant growth in the nonfiction market (Rosen, 2015). With an increased emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) along with a renewed focus on the national and state instructional standards to emphasize nonfiction and informational texts, educators are including more nonfiction in their classrooms. Effective resources are needed to help teachers select appropriate nonfiction and informational literature. Checklists that are based on specific characteristics can be practical tools to assist teachers in choosing quality nonfiction and informational books for elementary and middle school students.

Why Informational Texts?

Reading experts and researchers frequently debate the labels, nonfiction and informational texts (Barnatt, 2010; Smith & Robertson, 2016). According to one resource in children's literature, "Nonfiction books are classified as biography and informational... and informational books are called nonfiction in adult publishing" (Tunnell, Jacobs, Young & Bryan, 2016, p. 65). However, they also noted that while genre organization and labels are important, none of the divisions are "watertight" and do not particularly matter to children as readers. Various state standards refer to the genres with both nonfiction and informational designations (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2010; Texas Education Agency, 2016). Rather than engaging in the label debate, informational texts will be used here to discuss

all nonfiction and information-based literature for children and adolescents.

According to Duke (2010), an expert in the field of informational text literature, teachers can improve reading engagement and comprehension success by including a wide variety of genres, especially with a significant number of informational texts. Studies have also shown that students' vocabulary knowledge can be strengthened by consistently including informational texts as a component of the reading routine (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008). When students' reading instruction is augmented consistently with informational passages focused on high-interest topics (i.e., weather, sports, animals), vocabulary knowledge improves (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Stephens, 2007).

Students in the upper elementary and middle school grades are expected to read more complex texts to build stronger vocabularies and to learn to think critically. School media centers and classroom libraries are typically the most widely used resources for providing students with informational materials. Shanahan (2016) created a mnemonic device, "Fabulous Libraries Can Give Satisfaction," (para. 7) to promote successful engagement and reading comprehension with informational passages. The mnemonic device emphasized key aspects of informational texts, such as differences in narrative and informational texts, locating facts within a passage, comprehension strategies, use of graphic elements, and the importance of connecting reading and writing of informational passages.

Teacher-friendly Informational Text Checklist

With the rising popularity of informational trade books, teachers search for effective instructional tools to aid in the selection process. Although teachers have long recognized the importance of incorporating informational texts to support instruction,

choosing higher quality, engaging passages can be perplexing. The quantity and availability of these books make it critical to possess resources for evaluating and choosing the best books. Teachers benefit from organizational tools such as evaluative checklists to examine characteristics of high-quality informational books and expedite book selection with confidence. Checklists may also strengthen other areas of the curriculum, including STEM-based lessons.

Informational text checklists assist both preservice and veteran teachers in selecting the books needed for daily instructional encounters. One checklist example provides teachers and parents with guidelines for choosing informational texts for younger children (Stephens, 2008). The checklist, presented in Figure 1, is designed to help educators select informational texts for elementary and middle school students and examines the elements included in books with higher reading levels. Informational texts for older students are written with more complex topics and vocabulary, making the selection process even more critical. The checklist focuses on five key elements: content accuracy, topic relevance, organization, photographs and illustrations, and graphic data. Each survey element includes questions related to that element.

The Checklist Elements

Content Accuracy

Facts supported with valid sources.

Informational texts written for older students should be based on dependable sources and clearly cited. While some readers may enjoy these texts for pleasure reading, other students access them as part of inquiry projects and research assignments. Resources should be reliable and valid. Bias and didacticism should be minimal or avoided in informational texts written for children and adolescents. Examples of informational texts with sufficient citations and accurate sources include *The Usborne Introduction to Genes and DNA* (Claybourne,

2015). This internet-linked text has numerous sources all cited in the Acknowledgements. It also includes a table of contents, index, glossary, and plenty of illustrations. *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown,

2015) is another excellent book on this topic and age level. The book is written using a modified graphic novel approach, increasing the curiosity factor for the reader. Numerous sources were utilized and noted.

Selecting Informational Texts for Older Children and Adolescents

_____ **Content Accuracy**

Did the author support the facts with ample sources? Are the sources current and acknowledged within the text?

_____ **Topic relevance**

Does the main topic easily attract the reader's attention? Is the content written in a way that is interesting and relevant to the age of the reader?

_____ **Organization**

Is the book logically organized? Is the important information easy to find? Are the organizational elements obvious within the text (i.e. table of contents, index, headings, key words)? Does the author effectively guide the reader's attention with headings and subheadings?

_____ **Photographs and Illustrations**

Are the facts clearly supported with attractive photographs or illustrations? Is there an adequate number of photographs or illustrations to hold the reader's attention?

_____ **Graphic data and presentation**

Does the graphic data connect directly to the topic? Is the graphic information easy to follow and comprehend? Do the labels and captions direct the reader's attention and clarify the information?

Figure 1: Checklist for Selecting Informational Texts for Older Children and Adolescents

Topic Relevance

Engaging, relevant topics. The topics addressed in informational texts should be engaging and include facts that are intriguing to the reader such as *First Flight: The Story of the Wright brothers* (Jenner, 2003). The content should also invite the reader to think critically and delve into the topic as in books like *Witches: The Absolutely True Story of Witches in Salem* (Schanzer, 2011). Well-written informational

texts address issues that raise the curiosity of readers or cause students to ask questions. Informational texts with exciting topics include *Design & Fly Paper Airplanes* (Top That! Team, 2003) and *Creating the X-Men* (Buckley, 2000).

Organization

Logical, simple organization. Reading the text should be almost effortless regarding the

organization of the material presented. When reading or skimming the book, the important information should be easy to locate. Readers should find answers to questions related to the main topic as the facts are presented within the text. One example of an informational text with a strong organizational structure is *100 Inventions that Made History* (DK Publishing, 2014). When examining the book with the checklist, it satisfies all the categories. This book includes a table of contents, index, many captions, and sidebars. Besides the organizational strengths, it connects to preteens with topics and trivia of interest to them.

The organizational elements (i.e. table of contents, index, headings, key words) of the informational text should be obvious to the reader. The author should guide the reader's attention with headings and subheadings. The series, *National Geographic Kids 125 True Stories of Amazing Animals* (National Geographic Kids, n.d.) is an outstanding example of informational texts with excellent organizational elements. This series also provides the reader with numerous topics, real-life illustrations, photographs, and intriguing facts. National Geographic is known for its reputation as a powerful resource in the STEM areas.

Photographs and Illustrations

Adequate number of attractive, interesting illustrations. Photographs provide the richest evidence of credible, authentic information to the reader. When examining informational texts, the facts should be clearly supported with attractive photographs or illustrations. The photographs should be clear, large enough, and not overcrowded or busy. Captions and labels should be included to enunciate details of the photographs. There should be an adequate number of photographs or illustrations to hold the reader's attention. Photographs play the role of providing visual support of the facts; they should describe or reinforce the content. Seymour Simon is an expert in the genre of photographic

informational literature for children and adolescents, primarily in science. He has authored more than 200 texts dedicated to causing children to get interested and excited about topics related to the field of science. His book title topics include meteorology (weather, storms, lightning, tornadoes, hurricanes); the human body (heart, brain, lungs); animals (wolves, sharks, gorillas, penguins); transportation (trucks, trains) and the universe, to name a few. Simon's lengthy list of publications and awards for writing demonstrate his lifetime passion for his work. Students, educators, and parents have recognized Simon as being consistently known for his powerfully captivating and high-quality publications.

Graphic Data and Presentation

Easy to follow graphic information directly linked to the topic. Charts and figures add value to the presentation of facts but must be thorough and well-defined. They should supplement the text while elaborating significant details. Labels and captions, critical links between content and graphics, must direct the reader's attention and clarify the information. One example of an informational text with strong graphic data includes *They Changed the World: Bell, Edison and Tesla: Campfire Graphic Novels* (Helfand, 2014). This novel, focused on three important inventors, is written in the graphic novel subgenre, making it very attractive to preteens. Embedded in the novel the reader will also encounter how-to instructions for experiments and other data presented graphically. *Animals by the Numbers: A Book of Infographics* (Jenkins, 2016) is written entirely using graphs and charts. This informational book, designed primarily for older elementary and early middle school students is filled with trivia and facts.

Making a Case for Biographies

In the world of children's and adolescent literature, the informational text genre does not always include the sub-genre of biographies (Tunnel et al., 2016). However, for older elementary and middle school readers, the

case can be made easily to include them. School curricula often focus on important people such as world leaders, inventors, problem solvers, and historical figures. Students at this age also enjoy reading about sports figures, musicians, celebrities, and heroes. Biographies today are generally written to provide students with interesting facts and trivia. One series of biographies, *Who Was* (Penguin Random House, n.d.) has gained popularity in recent years. With more than 120 titles in the series, such as *Who Was Amelia Earhart* (Jerome, 2002), students have a multitude of choices. This series has found its way into numerous schools and classrooms as supplements to social studies and science instruction. Several other single titles including, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (Frank, 1993); *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and Got Shot by the Taliban* (Yousafzai, 2013); *Steve Jobs: The Man*

Who Thought Different (Blumenthal, 2012); and *Woodson* (Paulsen, 2007) are a few favorite biographies.

Informational texts are critical tools for educators of elementary and middle school students. The publishing industry is expanding in this literary genre. With so many more choices, this checklist simplifies the process and increases teachers' confidence in the selection process. After examining the five primary characteristics of content accuracy, topic relevance, organization, photographs and illustrations, and graphic data and presentation, teachers and even older elementary and middle school students can make more informed book choices. Good informational texts may not include all five characteristics, but the selection process can be improved by using the checklist.

References

- Barnatt, J. (2010). The power of nonfiction: Using informational text to support literacy in special populations. Retrieved from <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/every-learner/6554>
- Blumenthal, K. (2012). *Steve Jobs: The man who thought different*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Brown, D. (2015). *Drowned city: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books for Young Readers.
- Buckley, J. (2000). *Creating the X-men*. New York, NY: DK Publishing.
- Claybourne, A. (2015). *The Usborne introduction to genes & DNA*. United Kingdom: Usborne Publishing.
- Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2010). *Common core state standards for English/language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf
- DK Publishing. (2014). *100 Inventions that made history*. New York, NY: DK Publishing.
- Duke, N. (2010). *Choosing the right text: Doing what works*. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/wwc_rc_pg_rec04.pdf
- Frank, A. (1993). *Anne Frank: The diary of a young girl*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Graves, M. F., & Watts-Taffe, S. (2008). For the love of words: Fostering word consciousness in young readers. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(3), 185-193. doi:10.1598/RT.62.3.1.
- Helfand, L. (2014). *They changed the world: Bell, Edison and Tesla (Campfire Graphic Novels)*. New Delhi, India: Kalyani Navyug Media Pvt Ltd.
- Jenkins, S. (2016). *Animals by the numbers: A book of infographics*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishers.
- Jenner, C. (2003). *First flight: The story of the Wright brothers*. New York, NY: DK Publishing.
- Jerome, K. B. (2002). *Who was Amelia Earhart?* New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap Publishing.
- National Geographic Kids. (n.d.). *National Geographic Kids 125*. Retrieved from <https://shop.nationalgeographic.com/category/books/kids-books>

- Paulsen, G. (2007). *Woodson*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers.
- Penguin Random House Publishing. (n.d.). *Who was* series. Retrieved from <http://www.whowasbookseries.com/who-was/>
- RAND Reading Study Group. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Rosen, J. (2015). Is children's nonfiction having its moment? Publishers Weekly. Retrieved from <https://www.publishersweekly.com/paper-copy/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/67549-is-nonfiction-having-its-moment.html>
- Schanzer, R. (2011). *Witches: The absolutely true tale of disaster in Salem*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society.
- Shanahan, T. (2016). *What do primary grade children need to know about Informational text? Shanahan on literacy*. Retrieved from <http://www.readingrockets.org/blogs/shanahan-literacy/what-do-primary-grade-children-need-know-about-informational-text>
- Smith, J. M., & Robertson, M. K. (2016). Going beyond text features in informational text: It's more than just a table of contents and an index. *2016 Literacy Summit Yearbook*. 31-37.
- Stephens, K. E. (2007). *The Impact of a Science-Based Integral Instructional Protocol on the Motivation, Reading Comprehension, and Science Achievement of Fourth and Fifth Graders* [Doctoral dissertation]. Texas A&M Commerce, Commerce, Texas.
- Stephens, K. E. (2008). A quick guide to selecting great children's informational books! *The Reading Teacher*, 61(6), 485-487.
- Texas Education Agency. (2016). *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills*. Retrieved from <http://tea.texas.gov/index2.aspx?id=6148>
- Top That! Team. (2003). *Design & fly paper airplanes*. New York, NY: Tangerine Press, Scholastic.
- Tunnell, M. O., Jacobs, J. S., Young, T. A., & Bryan, G. (2016). *Children's literature, briefly* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Yousafzai, M. (2013). *I am Malala: The girl who stood up for education and got shot by the Taliban*. UK: Orion Publishing Group.