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# Read Alouds That Rock: Nonfiction Storytimes

By Patricia J. Murphy | Feb 28, 2022

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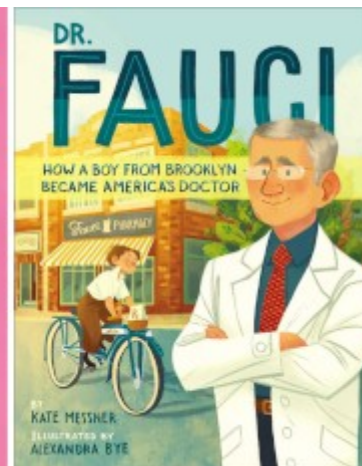
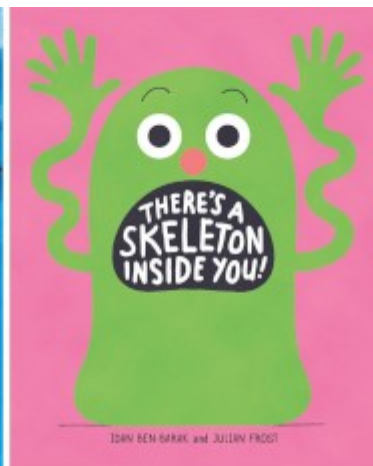
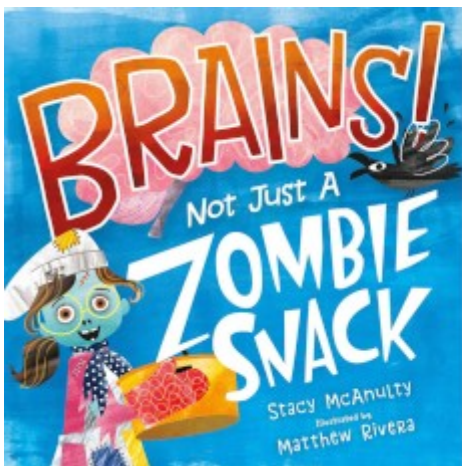
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Continuing our series on Read Alouds That Rock, we asked a number of literacy experts to share their strategies for integrating nonfiction storytimes in their work with young readers. [Click here to see our previous stories.](#)

Mark Twain once said, "Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't." We spoke with five read aloud experts and aficionados about some of the ways they share nonfiction during storytimes to engage students and help them become lifelong nonfiction readers. And, that's the truth.



**Linda Zeilstra Sawyer**, a preschool-8 school librarian and information specialist at Saints Joseph and Francis Xavier School in Wilmette, Ill., finds it essential to stay on top of the most

up-to-date and highest quality nonfiction titles for her students and teachers. This way, she can use the best nonfiction to build units of study to enrich her students' learning and their reading lives, and help her teachers meet their curricular needs. Her recent find was a no-brainer. Well, actually it's filled with brains...

"Our fifth grade was doing a whole unit on the human body, and *Brains! Not Just a Zombie Snack* by Stacy McAnulty

was a perfect fit!” Sawyer said. “I like to keep abreast of what my teachers are teaching and have books in my back pocket to support them. So, in addition to the brain book, we used *There’s a Skeleton Inside You!* by Idan Ben-Barak and the picture book biography *Dr. Fauci: How a Boy from Brooklyn Became America’s Doctor* by Kate Messner.”

In addition to brains, bones, and biographies, Sawyer stirs things up with National Geographic Kids’ Weird but True series for learning fun and games, “I turn the fun facts into quiz questions—and tie them into what my students are learning in class. This makes for great games.” Sawyer also handpicks nonfiction selections from her state’s award lists (e.g. Bluestem, Monarch, and Caudill lists) for her school’s yearly Battle of the Books, a reading incentive program for students in fourth through eighth grades.

And as for the nonfiction units Sawyer creates, she builds upon larger-than-life topics that she finds fascinating—and she knows her kids will dig, too. “With our fourth graders, we read a few books about Sue the T. rex dinosaur and the paleontologist who found her,” Sawyer said. “And we watched a video with one of the scientists from the University of Chicago who was part of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago team who helped reconstruct Sue!”

Sawyer believes that building greater awareness and showing the value of nonfiction can help create life-long learners—and better readers. “Nonfiction is important because kids can learn so much from it,” she said. “And reading it regularly can help improve vocabulary, comprehension, and build momentum, sustainability, and endurance.”

For Sawyer, it’s never too early to plant nonfiction seeds. “My feeling is that if you can start them young and build an appreciation for non-fiction, hopefully, it will grow.”

**Kelsey Skrobis** distinctly recalls that it was a nonfiction report that she wrote on the state of Alaska that made her leave the comfort of the Midwest and move to Anchorage many years later. Today, she is the youth services librarian and juvenile nonfiction selector at the Anchorage Public Library, where she chooses titles for kids up to 18. Skrobis tries to dovetail her picks with what the area schools are teaching to ensure that the library has the necessary titles for the themes and topics their students will be studying. And she often chooses nonfiction for storytimes with second graders and younger students.

When choosing books for these storytimes, Skrobis has big asks for little ones. “The titles need to be up-to-date, have photographs, and break down concepts in easy-to-understand language while teaching vocabulary geared towards second grade or below.

One of Skrobis’s popular offerings is her “Bite-Sized Science” program, where she kicks off an exploration of a specific scientific topic with a nonfiction title. “For our Bite-Sized Science: Plants, I walked the kids through a nonfiction title about how plants grow, showed a video to talk through the concept even more, and then I read a fiction picture book where we could see the topic illustrated,” Skrobis said. “This way, I can provide a bit of everything—hit all of the different learning styles, and keep the kids engaged.”

Another one of Skrobis’s engaging nonfiction programs is “Start with Art.” These programs offer storytime friends art-filled opportunities to explore different styles of art and the artists who create them through nonfiction picture book biographies. “We might first read one biography about a particular artist, talk about the art they create, and the techniques they use. For example, we recently read about Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. We read about her polka-dotted style of art and created our own art with polka dots.”

Skrobis opts to connect the dots in a variety of ways. “With nonfiction storytime, my goal is to immerse the crowd in nonfiction through all the means I can,” Skrobis said, “whether it’s by using a variety of nonfiction titles or integrating fiction titles about the same topics to give them a foundation and let it germinate. Reading nonfiction is a nice starting

point to learning about a concept by breaking it down in a way where kids can understand it, and asking lots of questions.”

The more questions and predictions the better she said. “I think I ask more questions when I’m doing nonfiction storytimes than any others,” Skrobis said. “If the kids want to discuss things, we stop, talk, and embrace the

knowledge.” It’s also the time when Skrobis admits that she doesn’t have all of the answers.

Every storytime Skrobis intentionally tells her storytime participants that even though she is a grownup and a librarian, she doesn’t know everything; but, she knows where to find out. Skrobis said it’s one of the best parts of her day. “It’s very powerful when I elaborate that I don’t know everything, that I’m constantly learning new things, and that we can learn and find answers by asking more questions and saying ‘I don’t know!’ These words can actually lead you to another nonfiction book... and another.”

Skrobis said that these questions can also lead to a new section of the library and a world of possibilities. “I love being able to match a child who may be looking for a fiction picture book about dinosaurs, and we can take that interest and translate it to the real world with a nonfiction book,” Skrobis said. “And this just may help turn an interest into a hobby or a career one day!” Just like Skrobis’s school report on Alaska.

**Tera Torres**, the youth services librarian at Crowell

Public Library in San Marino, Calif., doesn’t take baby steps when introducing nonfiction during her baby, toddler, and preschool storytimes. She says they can’t get enough of these books, or say enough about them. And, she follows their lead.

For starters, Torres may grab early concept books for her babies and toddlers, and tie in other nonfiction books for preschoolers. “We especially like the concept books by Byron Barton, who writes about everyday things. Barton has books about machines at work, dinosaurs, and others that allow us to work some STEM into our storytimes.”

Torres also works in fiction stories and time for talking. “We will usually start with a fiction picture book and then read a nonfiction title together; but, instead of reading the nonfiction from start to finish we’ll do some ‘dialogic reading’ where we talk about what is going on in the pictures—and almost treat it like a wordless picture book at times,” Torres said. “For example, when we were doing pumpkin science, we talked about the life cycle of the pumpkin and made predictions if the kids thought the pumpkin would sink or float in the water. Like with a wordless picture book, I let them help me tell the story as we are reading.”

Torres believes the dialogic reading keeps the talkative bunch engaged and fosters early literacy, too. “I ask them questions like, ‘What do you think will happen next?’ and have a real conversation with them while reading. You can see them observing and really thinking about how to read a book.”

Torres also reads the audience while she is reading aloud to them. Depending on the age range and attention span of her storytime group, she will vary how far she’ll go into the nonfiction. “If I lean too heavily into the text at this age, I lose them. That’s why books like Barton’s early concepts, Nic Bishop’s books with their amazing photography, Antoinette Portis’s *Hey, Water!* with great vocabulary like *trickle* and *gurgle*, and Pebble Plus nonfiction offer wonderful content that gets the kids excited about all kinds of topics.”

To keep this excitement going, Torres also introduces extension activities tied to the nonfiction titles, such as building houses like the Three Little Pigs to see if they could blow them down, creating color wheels, and making seasonal crafts—plus connections. “Around Halloween, we had one child who loved bats,” Torres said. “Of course, one of our librarians walked her to the nonfiction section of the library and showed her all kinds of books. She had no idea that bats were real!”

Torres believes in fostering a real love of nonfiction for children. “It’s important because nonfiction taps their natural curiosity. For some kids, tried-and-true fiction doesn’t speak to them. They want facts!”

**Tom Bober** is a K-5 librarian at RM Captain Elementary School in Clayton, Mo., where he helps his teachers, students, and others navigate the nonfiction waters to open their minds and expand their worlds. Bober also writes, speaks, and blogs about strategies for students’ use of primary resources in their learning. His deep love of nonfiction is apparent whether he’s speaking or writing about it, or presenting it during storytimes and/or read alouds.

“When I’m reading nonfiction compared to fiction, I like to take time throughout the story to check in with my students,” Bober said. “That’s because all of the nonfiction we’re reading together usually connects with something they know about the real the world or an experience they have had. Maybe it’s something they have seen or heard about. So we take the time to talk about what they know—and what they think they know, because there may be some misconceptions that they may share.”

Bober said that the nonfiction books that he reads with his students expose them to complex topics and presents them in ways that they can understand more about the world around them. “For example, [Caldecott Medalist] Jason Chin’s *Gravity*, with its sparse words and wonderful illustrations, gave us an entry point to talk about gravity,” Bober said, “so we started talking about what we knew about walking on the moon, how things are pulled down to Earth, etc. Then, I often pull other resources: manipulatives [like a globe for gravity], videos, news stories, and images to help extend the conversation. And we have different and deeper conversations that we couldn’t have otherwise.”

He also prepares questions for students to go even deeper. “I will ask, ‘What did you just hear? What did you learn from this book and video, etc.?’ And, together, we’re pulling all of these pieces together, and becoming part of the discovery process.”

All through this process, Bober is helping his students turn the switch from “learning to read to reading to learn.” He added, “I’m also helping them analyze nonfiction content, ask questions, and discover more information.” But it doesn’t stop there. “By bringing together these assets of the world outside the walls of the school, these experiences become part of my students,” Bober said, “and at the same time, allow them to see outside of themselves.”

Outside the regular class time, Bober also hosts popular nonfiction read alouds at lunch in the school library. Offering back-to-back sections of lunch read alouds each day, Bober has just enough time to clean up the space between read alouds when the next group of kids arrives. “They are part book promotion to introduce kids to new nonfiction titles, and to different areas of the library, and to pique nonfiction interests.”

Bober believes introducing nonfiction this way allows for a more authentic experience than handing a book to a child and having them walk out of the library. “I think it’s important to have these shared experiences with students and nonfiction books—to talk about things that interest them, have conversations about what they are excited about in the books, to feel something, and to ask questions,” Bober said. “And once they start talking, they want to learn more.”

**Alyson Beecher** is the program supervisor of child development and child care programs at Glendale Unified School District in Pasadena, Calif., a writing mentor, and a former principal and literacy coach. As program supervisor, Beecher oversees preschool and before- and afterschool programming for several schools as well as professional development for their teachers. One of her responsibilities—and the one closest to her heart—is to expose her teachers to nonfiction materials and show how to use them in their classrooms. Lucky for her teachers, Beecher knows and loves nonfiction to the moon and back. She also reviews and recommends nonfiction titles on her blog, Kid Lit Frenzy.

“For me, nonfiction is so exciting. It introduces us to a world of things that we are not aware of,” Beecher said. “While I might not pick up a full-blown book on insects, I may be interested in reading a short book, and learning something new. With nonfiction, you can learn so many different things. It’s endless!”

This is the message that Beecher tries to relay to her teachers whenever she can. “Many of our schools do not have school librarians, and while our teachers are great at presenting fiction, they are often a little nervous using nonfiction. So I try to help them break down the nonfiction because some of it’s not easy to read aloud—especially to younger students like ours. And some nonfiction lends itself to longer read alouds than others.”

During a recent professional development session, Beecher brought in more than 150 nonfiction titles and shared them with her teachers. “I had them read the books and think about ways they could use them as read alouds.”

Beecher also demonstrates her thinking while reading and evaluating nonfiction titles for possible read alouds, “While I’m reading a title, I’m thinking about how

exactly I'm going to use it and asking, 'Will it be a quick read aloud? Or, if not, how can I break it down so I can read a little before lunch every day or other times?' Maybe you have a nonfiction book about women scientists and you could read about one scientist a day—or read two pages at a time.”

However or whenever her teachers choose to present nonfiction, Beecher encourages them to explore the books' breadth and depth, and mix things up with new titles. “I want our teachers to look at different formats like Steve Jenkins and Robin Page's Q&A books and others with lively and exciting texts, and to see that nonfiction can be this—and much more!”

Beecher says nonfiction books can be used to supply background information and context when reading a novel or chapter book. “For instance, when I was reading *Dreamer* by Pam Muñoz Ryan, which is about the poet Pablo Neruda, I read a picture book biography about him to set the stage,” Beecher said. “And, when I was reading *Al Capone Does My Shirts* by Gennifer Choldenko to a class, one character was describing another character as a “little Eleanor Roosevelt.” Since Roosevelt lived a long time ago, very few fourth graders knew who she was. So I read a few pages about her from a nonfiction biography for context, and we went back to reading the novel.”

Beecher believes wholeheartedly that kids benefit from a steady diet of all kinds of nonfiction. “When we only feed them fiction, we're doing a disservice to them because a lot of kids love non-fiction ” Beecher said, “When I see kids getting excited about different pieces of this nonfiction book, and parts of that one, and talking about nonfiction, it makes my heart happy—and I get excited, too!”

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