

## 5 Kinds of Nonfiction: Getting Started

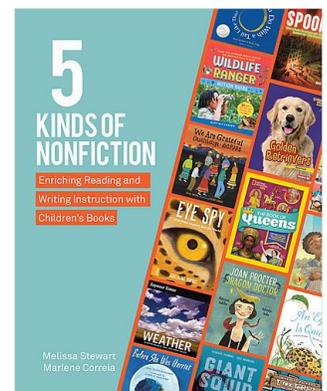
### Why did you create the 5 Kinds of Nonfiction classification system?

In the past, there was just one kind of nonfiction for children—traditional survey (all-about) books that provide a general overview of a topic. But the genre has changed tremendously over the last two decades, evolving into a wide range of visually dynamic books with engaging texts that can inspire as well as inform young readers.

As a writer, I wanted to understand these changes so that I could determine what kinds of manuscripts publishers would be most likely to acquire.

I began thinking about ways to classify books in 2012, but it wasn't until 2017 that I came up with the 5 Kinds of Nonfiction. I posted it on my blog to see if it resonated with anyone else, and the response was incredible. To date, that original blog post has received more than 500,000 hits.

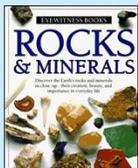
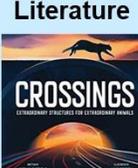
Because so many people find the system useful, literacy educator Marlene Correia and I wrote [\*5 Kinds of Nonfiction: Enriching Reading and Writing Instruction with Children's Books\*](#).



### Why is the system useful to educators and students?

We're used to dividing fiction into categories like mystery, realistic fiction, and historical fiction, but in the past, we've just lumped all nonfiction together. The 5 Kinds of Nonfiction brings clarity to the wide world of nonfiction by breaking it into groups with specific traits.

## 5 Kinds of Nonfiction

Active	Browseable	Traditional	Expository Literature	Narrative
				
Commercial Nonfiction			Literary Nonfiction	

Once students understand the characteristics of the five categories—active, browsable, traditional, expository literature, and narrative—they can predict the kind of information they're likely to find in a book and how the information will be presented. That can

help them identify the best books for a particular purpose (early stages of research, later stages of research, mentor texts in writing workshop, etc.) as well as the kind(s) of nonfiction they enjoy reading most.

**Can you briefly explain the five different categories?**

Sure. I’ve created category feature cards to help. You can print them out and share them with students.

**Traditional Nonfiction**



- Survey (all about) books
- Overview of a topic
- Part of a large series
- Clear, straightforward language
- Expository writing style
- Description text structure

Developed by children's book author Melissa Stewart. For more information, please visit [www.melissa-stewart.com](http://www.melissa-stewart.com)

**Browseable Nonfiction**



- Eye-catching design, lavishly illustrated
- Short blocks of straightforward text
- Can be read cover to cover or by skipping around
- Great for shared reading
- Expository writing style
- Description text structure

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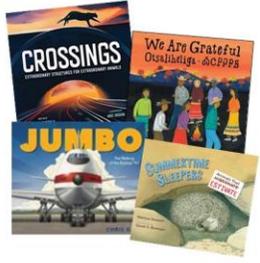
**Narrative Nonfiction**



- Narrative writing style
- Tells a story or conveys an experience
- Real characters, scenes, dialog, narrative arc
- Strong voice and rich, engaging language
- Chronological sequence structure
- Ideal for biographies and historical events

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**Expository Literature**



- Expository writing style
- Specialized topic presented creatively
- Strong voice and rich, engaging language
- Innovative format
- Carefully chosen text structure
- Ideal for STEM concepts

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**Active Nonfiction**



- Highly interactive and/or teaches skills for engaging in an activity
- How-to guides, field guides, cookbooks, craft books
- Clear, straightforward language
- Expository writing style

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## Do all nonfiction books really fit neatly into one of these 5 categories?

Most do, but there are definitely books that cross categories, and that's a good thing! I've written more about these Blended Books on my blog and in [5 Kinds of Nonfiction](#).

## So if these categories don't encompass all the books being published today, why are they useful?

Because as students try to make sense of the wide world of nonfiction, it helps to have general categories that are easy to understand. Then, as children become more sophisticated readers and thinkers, they can explore the exceptions. The idea of students debating the various ways a particular nonfiction title might be classified makes my heart sing.



## Can you say a little more about how books from each category can be used in the classroom?

Yes, great question.

Traditional nonfiction provides a general overview of a topic, so it works well early in the research process when students are “reading around” a topic.



Once students have focused their topic, browsable nonfiction is a great choice. It's full of text features that allow students to easily find specific information. It's also bursting with fun facts that can enrich student writing.

Expository literature makes the best mentor texts for informational writing because it has a range of text structures and typically features a strong voice and rich language.

Active nonfiction is ideal for makerspaces. And books in this category can make good mentor texts for procedural writing.

During social studies lessons, narrative nonfiction can help students get a strong sense of a time and place. It can also help them understand a person's motivations.

During science lessons, narrative nonfiction can be used to model the scientific process, while expository literature is great for exploring scientific concepts. It often helps students think about science content an innovative way that captures their imagination and fuels their curiosity.

## Do students prefer one category more than others for independent reading?

Different students are naturally drawn to different kinds of nonfiction books. Here are some examples:

“I like browseable books because you have a lot of choices about how you read. It’s like the potluck dinners at my church.” —Matthew, fourth grader

“I like narrative nonfiction because it has characters and a story that’s a real situation.” —Miles, second grader

“My favorite category is active nonfiction because you get to do things while you read. That makes me feel calmer.” —Jack, fourth grader

“I like expository literature because it has facts plus it can make you think about something in a new way.” —Rowan, fourth grader

This range of preferences highlights why it’s so important for students to be exposed to a broad array of nonfiction during read alouds, book talks, and instruction.

**Research shows that many children prefer nonfiction. That might surprise some adults.**

**Can you explain why young readers like nonfiction so much?**

People of all ages love facts, stats, ideas, and information! That’s why the TV show *Jeopardy!* is so popular, and it’s the reason the *Guinness Book of World Records* is a best-seller year after year.

In the adult publishing world, nonfiction sales are strong because when readers have the power to select their own books, they often choose nonfiction. Why should children’s reading preferences be any different?

**If a child is new to reading nonfiction, where do you suggest they start?**

With a topic that fascinates them. All children are naturally curious. It’s so important to offer them a steady diet of nonfiction titles that can fuel their passion for learning about the world and how it works.

This [Book Match Survey](#) can help you identify the topics your students are most excited about.

