

Literary Nonfiction vs. Commercial Nonfiction

Both adult and children’s publishers divide fiction and nonfiction books into two broad categories—commercial and literary.

Commercial fiction, written by such authors as Mary Higgins Clark, Gordon Korman, Stephen King, Mary Pope Osborne, James Patterson, and Lauren Tarshis, has mass appeal, and editors expect it to make a substantial profit. These books are fast paced with strong plots and limited characterization. Their themes are usually fairly obvious and the language and syntax isn’t too complex.

In contrast, literary fiction, written by such authors as Kate deCamillo, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike, Padma Venkatraman, and Jacqueline Woodson, is more likely to receive starred reviews and win awards. These books feature rich, multifaceted stories with well-developed characters, lush language, and complex, timeless themes.

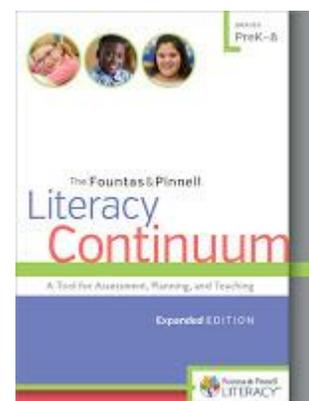
5 Kinds of Nonfiction



Similarly, commercial nonfiction for children has mass appeal. These active and browseable titles generally sell well in bookstores and mass market outlets (like Target and Walmart) with some crossover to schools and libraries.

Literary nonfiction for children, on the other hand, is more likely to win awards and is considered higher-quality writing. These expository literature and narrative nonfiction titles sell primarily to schools and libraries with some crossover to bookstores and, occasionally, to mass market outlets.

When educators use the term “literary nonfiction,” they are (understandably) thinking more about craft moves than sales potential. According to *The Fountas and Pinnell Literacy Continuum* (Heinemann, 2016), literary nonfiction is “a nonfiction text that employs literary techniques, such as figurative language, to present information in engaging ways.”



Because nearly all current state ELA standards are heavily modeled after the Common Core State Standards (even in states that never adopted CCSS), it’s worth looking at that document too. It focuses more on types or forms of writing and lists the following as examples of literary nonfiction:

- some personal essays and speeches
- most biographies/autobiographies
- memoirs
- narrative nonfiction
- some poetry
- some informational picture books

(It’s interesting that CCSS differentiates life stories—biographies and autobiographies—from narrative nonfiction. In the children’s literature community, picture book biographies are generally considered quintessential examples of narrative nonfiction because they tell the story of a person’s life.)

The 5 Kinds of Nonfiction classification system (which focuses on children’s nonfiction books exclusively and doesn’t include essays, speeches, letters, journals, textbooks, brochures, catalogs, etc.) differentiates between commercial categories and literary categories because one of its goals is to give authors, editors, agents, book reviewers, awards committee members, librarians, literacy educators, and classroom teachers a common lexicon for discussing the wide and wonderful world of nonfiction for kids. Only then can publishers understand the kinds of nonfiction books that ALL students want and need.

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