

Starting with a Question

For many years, all-about books have been the go-to informational writing project for students, especially in elementary classrooms. But it's time to rethink this assignment.

When students write an all-about book, their goal—their author purpose—is to provide a general overview of a topic, such as kangaroos or volcanoes or Egyptian mummies. This is the same goal professional children's book authors have when they write traditional nonfiction books for large series. These survey books, which are meant to offer young readers an age-appropriate introduction to a topic, feature a standard design and language that's clear, concise, and straightforward.



Traditional nonfiction books are an important part of any well-rounded children's nonfiction collection, but they don't make good mentor texts for writing workshop. Simply put, writing in a generalized way limits a nonfiction writer's ability to craft rich, engaging text.

When writers choose a topic they're passionate about and take an in-depth look at a specific idea, concept, theme, or question, they can be more playful and innovative. They can take advantage of a wide range of nonfiction craft moves to create prose that reflects their zeal for the subject. For example, they can select a format and text structure that complements their distinctive approach to the content. They can also experiment with voice and language devices. Because writers of traditional nonfiction must cover a huge amount of information in a limited number of words, they don't have the same kind of opportunities to delight as well as inform.



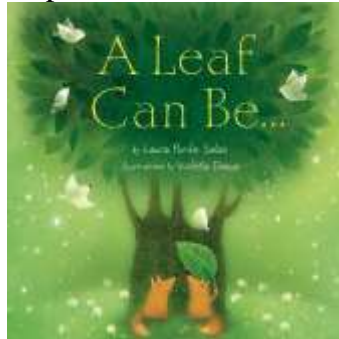
So how can nonfiction authors find a focus? One way is by starting with a question. For example, when I saw a Pinterest board with an incredible variety of seeds, I asked myself:

“How do a seed's external features contribute to its ability to survive and germinate?”

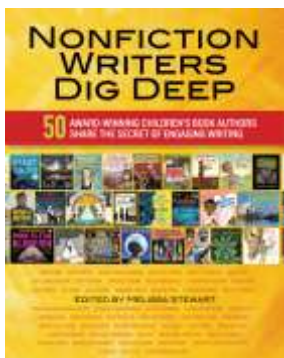
That question focused my thinking and helped me target my research as I wrote a manuscript that eventually became *A Seed Is the Start*.



Starting with a question helps other authors too. [Laura Purdie Salas's](#) favorite question is “What else?” She asks it over and over as she shapes the ideas and information her manuscript will explore. This strategy has helped Laura write terrific books like these:



[Jennifer Swanson](#) is a curious person who's always asking questions. Her books often begin with a BIG question, but she also asks herself dozens of smaller questions as she organizes information and searches for the best way to present her topic to her young audience. This technique has helped Jennifer write fantastic books like these:



How can starting with a question help your students during their pre-writing process? By building on the **Idea Incubator** and **One Amazing Thing** activities available [here](#) or at the end of Chapter 1 of [Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep: 50 Award-winning Authors Share the Secret of Engaging Writing](#).

Not only does this approach guarantee that students will have some skin in the game, a specific query will lead to more targeted note taking. It will also give students authentic opportunities to make connections between information they find in a variety of sources