

Some Notes on Nonfiction

From Donelson and Nilsen pp. 251-184

- Nonfiction falls into four major categories: information books, literary nonfiction, biographies, and self-help books.
- Interest in reading nonfiction often begins around fourth grade and grows during adolescence.
- Interest in reading nonfiction crosses ability levels; one study showed that nonfiction made up 34 percent of the leisure reading of academically able teenagers and 54 percent of the control group's leisure reading.
- Nonfiction makes up a larger proportion of boys' reading than of girls' reading
- Remedial readers prefer informative nonfiction and read "primarily to learn new things."
- Students choose nonfiction for a variety of reasons often unrelated to school
- The purpose of reading nonfiction is guided more by the student than by the type of book.
- There is sometimes a blurred line between fiction and nonfiction—nonfiction writers often use similar techniques and devices as fiction writers and fiction writers will often include "real" people and settings.
- Literature is more than a simple recounting or replaying of events. It is a distillation and a crystallization. Good writers of nonfiction do not simply record everything they know or can uncover.
- Nonfiction can be difficult to evaluate since it changes quickly with our society, but some general guidelines are included below:

TABLE 9.1 SUGGESTIONS FOR EVALUATING INFORMATIVE NONFICTION

A good piece of informative writing usually has:	A poor piece of informative writing may have:
A subject of interest to young readers, written about with zest. Information that is up-to-date and accurate.	Obsolete or inaccurate information or illustrations. Even one such occurrence causes the reader to lose faith in the rest of the book.
New information or information organized in such a way as to present a different point of view than in previously available books.	Evidence of cutting-and-pasting in which the author merely reorganized previously prepared material without developing anything new in content or viewpoint.
A reading level, vocabulary, and tone of writing that are at a constant level appropriate to the intended audience.	Inconsistencies in style or content, for example, college-level vocabulary but a childish or cute style of writing.
An organization in which basic information is presented first so that chapters and sections build on each other.	An awkward mix of fiction and nonfiction techniques through which the author unsuccessfully tries to slip information in as an unnoticed part of the story.
An index and other aids to help readers look up facts if they want to return to the book for specific information or to glean ideas and facts without reading the entire book.	A reflection of out-of-date or socially unfair attitudes, for example, a history book that presents only the history of white upper-class men with a title and introduction that give the impression that it is a comprehensive history of the time period being covered.
Adequate documentation of the sources of information, including some original sources.	A biased presentation in which only one side of a controversial issue is presented with little or no acknowledgment that many people hold different viewpoints.
Information to help interested students locate further readings on the subject.	In how-to books, frustrating directions that oversimplify or set up unrealistic expectations so that the reader is disappointed in the result.
In how-to-books, clear and accurate directions including complete lists of the equipment and supplies needed in a project.	
Illustrations that add interest as well as clarity to the text.	
A competent author with expertise in the subject matter.	

From Donelson & Nilsen, 2005, p. 259