NONFICTION CRAFT LESSONS

Teaching Information Writing K–8

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to Don Murray,
who continues to inspire us
with his passion for the craft of writing

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This book was also nourished by ongoing conversations with our colleagues Ann Marie Corgill, Martha Horn, Lynne Herschlein, Marianne Norman, Franki Sibberson, Artie Voigt, and Cyrene Wells.

Our four boys—Taylor, Adam, Robert, and Joseph—continue to teach us a ton about the power and pitfalls of information writing.

On the videotape "The Writing Workshop: A World of Difference" (Calkins and Harwayne 1987), Martha Horn has a writing conference with a little boy who is writing about trains. "This is a teaching book," he explains with all the purpose and seriousness of a *New York Times* reporter. This book has been inspired by that boy and thousands of young nonfiction writers like him. We have worked with these kids all over the country, and seen up close their intense desire to question, research, understand, and explain the world around them. As much as anything else, they have shown us the enduring importance of this genre.

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Introduction

A few years ago we were preparing a big workshop on how to teach nonfiction writing. In our workshops we like to feature lots of student writing. But when we started digging for wonderful, quirky, voice-filled examples of content-area writing, we ran into a snag—we couldn't find much. We had stacks of terrific narrative, fiction, and poetry, but very little wonderful nonfiction writing by students. In an effort to stem a mounting sense of panic, we telephoned Don Graves and told him about our dilemma.

"You know what researchers say when something like that happens," Don said with a chuckle. "No data *is* data."

"You mean—"

"I mean you've got to pay attention to the fact that you don't have many nonfiction samples from students," he said. "That's got to tell you something."

He was right. It wasn't due to chance that we had trouble digging up student nonfiction samples. Rather, this lack indicated a larger problem in our writing classrooms.

For almost twenty years we have been advocates of the writing process approach to teaching writing. We believe that this approach has had a dramatic, highly positive effect on thousands of classrooms. But this effect has been largely limited to expressive writing: poetry, memoir, personal

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narrative. When we visit classrooms we are often impressed by the quality of student writing in these expressive genres. But other types of student writing—reports, persuasive and expository essays—have not seen a similar transformation. Too often we see the same tired encyclopedia-inspired writing that is so hard to read.

That's where we come in. We see this book as filling the need for teachers who are challenged to teach the kind of writing that draws less on students' stories, memories, and histories, and more on the concrete "out there" world. We bring to this book the same mind-set that we brought to the first *Craft Lessons:* the idea that good writing isn't produced by magic, but by learning to arrange particular words in a particular order to create a particular effect. Such writing doesn't have to be drab, dull, or unreadable. A number of tangible subskills are involved. When we teach students these skills we help them to master a kind of writing that will be crucial as they continue to learn about the world around them.

But let's not forget that we are working with children and young adolescents. Lauren Loewy wrote "All abawt thee oyl sPil" (Appendix C) when she was in first grade, and it really sounds like first-grade writing. She lists a few facts, and isn't shy about expressing her outrage. Her writing has voice. Shelley Harwayne argues that teachers should foster more childlike writing in students, the "kind of writing only they can do." We heartily agree. Where did people ever get the idea that when children write reports they should sound like miniature environmental experts who work for the U.S. government? We need to create classrooms where our students can truly be themselves, where they can bring their passion, knowledge, quirky humor, and authentic voice to this kind of writing.

How to Use This Book

Nonfiction writing is a huge world that encompasses all-about books, scientific writing, biography, reports, how-to, expository, and persuasive writing, feature articles, and much more. When we lived in Alabama our first-grade son learned the technology to make terrific PowerPoint presentations about the planets or endangered animals. In other schools older students have mastered the use of HyperStudio to present information in an engaging format. Tom Romano has expanded the frontiers of content-area writing with his ideas on the "multigenre research paper."

Are we sympathetic to such work? You bet. But in this book we have resisted the temptation to rush headlong into the world of creative nonfiction genres. Although a few of these craft lessons address these, most of them stay pretty close to the meat-and-potatoes content-area writing students do with teachers' guidance on a daily basis.

This book is divided into K–2, 3–4, and middle school (grades 5–8) sections. These divisions, however arbitrary, reflect various differences between emerging, competent, and fluent writers. Not only are middle school students older than second graders, but they also are able to read more chal-

lenging texts. And they live in a more demanding curricular world where they will be expected to create more sophisticated and complex nonfiction texts.

We begin each section with a brief introduction to those particular students—their characteristics, quirks, strengths, and passions. You'll notice that each section begins with a handful of "exploratory craft lessons." William Zinsser has written that "students need to learn an unpretentious prose about the world around them." We agree. These exploratory craft lessons focus on how students can write, think, and talk their way into a better understanding of their topics.

Each section contains a wide range of craft lessons. But in each section you'll find a critical mass of lessons directed at the genre that seems most appropriate for that particular age. In the K–2 section, for example, a number of craft lessons focus on the all-about or concept book. In the 3–4 section there are a number of craft lessons pertaining to biography. In the 5–8 section you'll find a series of craft lessons that address expository writing.

Every craft lesson in this book follows the same format:

- **Name** of the craft lesson or writing skill.
- **Discussion** of the lesson, telling why we chose it. Here we talk about the specific need the craft lesson is designed to meet.
- **How to Teach It**—Concrete language a teacher might use to bring the craft lesson to students in either a workshop mini-lesson, individual conference, or small-group discussion. Both authors of this book share a strong distaste for "scripted" teaching. At the same time, we recognize that teaching is an isolating profession. It is our experience that teachers hunger for specific ideas and language they can use as a springboard into their own teaching. We expect and encourage you to take the words provided and tailor them until the craft lesson feels like your own.
- **Resource Material** lists the book or text referred to in the craft lesson. Occasionally we suggest additional texts that can be used to teach the lesson. At times we refer to a passage, poem, or piece of student writing that can be found in the Appendixes.

After the original *Craft Lessons: Teaching Writing K–8* was published, we received this letter from a teacher. She wrote in part:

> Your book made me feel as if there was a wonderful teacher down the hall doing exciting things with her students during writing time. Every day I poked my head into her room and watched how she taught. Sometimes I used her ideas, books for modeling, even her words, exactly as she did. Other times the craft lesson she did sparked an idea for a different craft lesson I could do. The important thing was that I wasn't alone. Her door was open, and I knew I could pop in and observe—and borrow her ideas!—whenever I felt like it.

We hope you'll use this new book in the same spirit.

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