

## Pairing Fiction and Nonfiction

Ever students gather around the nonfiction shelves in the library asking, “Do you have any more books about the *Titanic*?” or “Where are the shark books?” Curious history buffs can’t resist learning more about presidents or past wars, while science sleuths search out books about tiny insects and gigantic dinosaurs. How can we capitalize on these students’ interests and natural curiosity? One way is by weaving nonfiction texts into our daily reading fare. In this column, we suggest three places to boost students’ learning and engagement by coupling fiction and nonfiction texts: during read-aloud time, as an introduction to content-area units, and to enhance small-group instruction. For a complete list of the books mentioned here, turn to “Comprehensive Bibliography” on p.62.

### During Read-Aloud Time

Many of us gravitate toward fiction texts when selecting books to share during read-aloud or storytime in the library. To reach those readers who find facts fascinating, look for well-written nonfiction texts to pair with your favorite stories. The inclusion of such texts will not only enhance the read-aloud experience but also provide an opportunity to discuss the works from a writer’s perspective. For example, after reading a pairing of texts, prompt listeners to ponder the following questions:

- What was the author’s purpose for writing each of these books?



**“Pairing fiction and nonfiction texts can enrich the learning in primary and intermediate classrooms in memorable, meaningful ways.”**

- How do the writers’ styles differ from one text to the other?
- Which book did you enjoy more? Why?
- What else do you notice about these two different texts?
- How does reading both of these books better help you to understand the topic?

We know your days are busy, and it is tempting to try to read both books in one sitting. Depending on the age and attention span of your listeners, however, it may be more beneficial to take your time while reading and discussing the two books. You might decide to read one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, or read them on two consecutive days. Whichever format you choose, it is essential to set aside time for enriching conversations before, during, and after the read-aloud. Let’s look at a few examples to illustrate this point.

During a paired read-aloud, primary-grade listeners will travel to the library with a colony of book-loving bats in Brian Lies’ rhyming tale *Bats at the Library*. Soon after you can transport them to faraway Iraq by sharing the biography *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* by Jeanette Winter. After reading, draw attention to the fact that these two authors both wrote about the importance of books and libraries but from different points of view and for different purposes. Some other primary pairings might include:

- *The Perfect Nest* by Catherine Friend (fiction)
- *An Egg Is Quiet* by Dianna Hutts Aston (nonfiction)
- *The Rattlebang Picnic* by Margaret Mahy (fiction)
- *Volcanoes* by Sally M. Walker (nonfiction)
- *Sheep Blast Off!* by Nancy Shaw (fiction)
- *The Solar System* by Carmen Bredeson (nonfiction)

To highlight the possibilities within fiction and nonfiction pairings for middle-grade readers, you might read excerpts from *Titanic: Disaster at Sea* by Martin Jenkins. Students will be hooked after hearing this intriguing text and seeing its informative pictures. Bring another perspective to this riveting topic by reading segments from Daisy Corning Stone Spedden’s *Polar the Titanic Bear*, which weaves fact and fiction into an engaging version of the *Titanic* disaster. Students will be off to find more books, both fiction and nonfiction, spurred on by this text pairing.

Another time you might sample biographies, beginning with a picture book such as *The Remarkable Benjamin Franklin* by Cheryl Harness. Partner



this with several chapters from the amusing *Ben and Me: An Astonishing Life of Benjamin Franklin by His Good Mouse Amos* by Robert Lawson. Discuss the information readers can glean from both texts. Use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the two selections. Then provide additional titles for interested readers.

## As an Introduction to Content Areas

As you prepare for content-area units of instruction, consider launching the study with a combination of fiction and nonfiction picture books. Whether you teach primary- or intermediate-grade students, an engaging picture book can build students' background knowledge, introduce pertinent vocabulary, and lead to meaningful conversations. Once students' interests are piqued, they will want to read and learn even more about the topic.

For primary students learning about the difference between needs and wants, begin with the picture book *Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts, where Jeremy's grandmother tries to teach him the difference between wanting "those shoes" and needing winter boots. After reading this thought-provoking story, make a two-column chart listing items that students identify as needs and those they categorize as wants.

As you teach about Abraham Lincoln and George Washington prior to Presidents' Day, it is helpful for students to hear biographies that breathe life into historical figures. A well-chosen picture-book biography such as *George Did It* by Suzanne Tripp Jurmain or *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers* by Karen B. Winnick helps young learners connect with the human side of these famous men.


With listeners in the intermediate grades, read the following pairings aloud as an appealing way to raise interest, build background knowledge, and spark curiosity at the onset of a unit on immigration. Begin with *Lady Liberty: A Biography* by Doreen Rappaport and discuss how many people were involved in the creation of this renowned American symbol. Compare and contrast the information presented in a second informational picture book, *The Story of the Statue of Liberty* by Betsy Maestro. Then read Eve Bunting's *A Picnic in October* or several chapters in *Liberty!* by Allan Drummond. Use the preceding questions as a guide to encouraging critical thinking as students compare and contrast the fiction and nonfiction titles. It is possible that students will report that they get a more complete picture of the value of the Statue of Liberty by studying it from different points of view.

## In Small-Group Instruction

Whether you are facilitating a guided reading group, preparing learners to discuss a book during literature circles, or assisting children as they select books for independent reading, keep the balance between fiction and nonfiction in mind.

For example, if a first-grade group is reading books from the Fly Guy series by Tedd Arnold, pair them with a nonfiction text such as the Rookie Read-About Science series title *Flies Are Fascinating* by Valerie Wilkinson. For second-graders reading Frog and Toad books by Arnold Lobel during small-group instruction, divide the group in half and challenge one group to research frogs by reading selected parts of *Nic Bishop Frogs* while the other learns about toads from Joanne Ryder's poems in *Toad by the Road: A Year in the Life of These Amazing Amphibians*. For independent reading, introduce Magic Tree House fans to the handy research guides Mary Pope Osborne has written to accompany many of her fiction titles.

Teachers in the intermediate grades can deftly integrate science, social studies, and reading when learning about a topic like earthquakes. Begin by reading aloud segments of Seymour Simon's *Earthquakes*, highlighting the text, pertinent vocabulary, and the outstanding photography. Extend that initial learning and deepen understanding during literature circles. Students can move back in time as they read Kristiana Gregory's *Earthquake at Dawn*, Laurence Yep's *The Earth Dragon Awakes: The San Francisco Earthquake of 1906*, or *Earthquake! A Story of Old San Francisco* by Kathleen V. Kudlinski. Beginning with Simon's facts sets the stage for understanding the events in the novels, a boost to comprehension for all readers. To further enhance their learning and facilitate additional discussion, intrigued readers might go to the Internet to locate more facts, including those from newspaper articles related to this historic event.

Pairing fiction and nonfiction texts can enrich the learning in primary and intermediate classrooms in memorable, meaningful ways. Whether they are read aloud to the whole class, used to kick off a unit in science or social studies, or integrated into small-group instruction, these partnerships are valuable for several reasons. As students compare and contrast the content and approaches used by different writers, they are engaged in critical thinking, both about the content and also about the craft of writing. In addition, they are building background for upcoming study, a particular boon to English-language learners. Then key vocabulary can be discussed as it is introduced, another step toward strengthening comprehension of content. Meeting new terms in one book and seeing them again in the other can facilitate acquisition of those words. Finally, these pairings are motivating, inviting readers to work across genres to delve even further into topics that now hold their interest. What a winning combination for teachers, librarians, and students alike. 

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