

The **Primary** Comprehension **Toolkit** Language and Lessons for Active Literacy

Stephanie Harvey & Anne Goudvis

Teacher's Guide



Dedication: To Smokey Daniels—our editor extraordinaire, thoughtful colleague, and good friend.
We're thrilled that you can channel our thinking so clearly and keep us laughing along the way.

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Welcome to The *Toolkit*



*“Teaching the young ones to read is such a treat.
This is the age of wonder, energy, curiosity, silliness, and enthusiasm.”*

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Thinking about Young Readers

Primary teachers have the most important job in all of education—welcoming young children to the amazing world of reading. Helping kids to understand, enjoy, remember, and apply what they read is the most important single gift a teacher can ever give. Learning to read carefully and deeply opens doors that can never be slammed shut. Reading is the gateway to a boundless world of information, amazement, amusement, and problem-solving.

But here’s our little secret: teaching the young ones to read is such a treat! This is the age of wonder, energy, curiosity, silliness, and enthusiasm. K–2 teachers have a unique privilege and responsibility: to get kids off to a strong start with literacy and with school. And we see progress—big-time. We get to savor the learning, the powerful strides, the measurable growth, from month to month, and on through the year. The kids change and grow before our eyes.

And the children in our classrooms are so deliciously different from each other. Between kindergarten and second grade is the biggest developmental span in all of schooling. Some kindergarteners come to us never having read a book or even a sentence, and perhaps unable to write their own names. Meanwhile, other kids are burning through books at school and at home, writing and illustrating their own stories, poems, and informational text. What a range!

But even the youngest of our students can “read” the red octagon that is a stop sign. Regardless of the formal literacy opportunities kids may have had at home, all

primary kids come to us with a vast, lifelong experience of “reading the world,” making sense of what they see, hear, and experience around them. As Regie Routman says, “every child enters the world comprehending, from the moment of their birth” (2007). Indeed, each of our primary students is a veteran comprehender. And it is precisely this emerging thinking that we build upon in our classrooms—and in *The Primary Comprehension Toolkit (PTK)*.

In *PTK* we keep reading simple, focused, and fun. This resource is designed to help K–2 kids understand what they view, hear, and read. For us, the most important goal of all reading—for grownups or kindergarteners—is to make sense of those marks on the page, to construct meaning by merging the author’s words with our own thinking. Research has conclusively shown that skillful readers employ a repertoire of specific cognitive strategies to unlock meaning and provide understanding (Pearson, 1983; Duke, 2006). We want to teach these strategies to kids as early as possible, from kindergarten right on up.

And the little ones can handle it. Children are eager to find out what’s in the world and how it works. Kids are ready to work hard, not because we “motivate” them, but because *they want to know stuff*. As teachers we can draw on all the curiosity, energy, and comprehending experience that kids bring to school, and we systematically link to the skills and strategies that more experienced learners use. People too often underestimate what primary kids can do. But in *The Primary Comprehension Toolkit*, we *start high and go higher*.

Origins of the Program

This new resource grew out of the original *The Comprehension Toolkit* for grades 3–6, which we developed and published in 2005. Since then, we have visited many classrooms around the country where the *Toolkit* has been implemented with intermediate-grade kids. Everywhere we traveled, teachers and district leaders asked us (increasingly loudly) to create a primary version of the *Toolkit*. They wanted a reading comprehension curriculum that could work seamlessly right up through the grades in an elementary building.

So we took the hint, and what a labor of love creating the primary edition has been! Over the past couple of years, we have visited and worked in scores of primary classrooms, learning with kids and teachers in wonderful kindergarten, first-, and second-grade rooms from Boulder to Birmingham to Boston. Out of these intensive years of development and our own innumerable years in elementary classrooms (don’t ask!), we developed the twenty-two lessons that are the core of this new *Primary Comprehension Toolkit* for K–2.

The Primary Comprehension Toolkit is not an add-on or an extra. The *Toolkit* replaces fill-in-the-blank activities and worksheets with engaging practices that foster active thinking and literacy. It helps students negotiate informational text, think about what they are reading, and hold that thinking so that they understand and remember it—and can use it to guide new learning and thinking.

The *Toolkit* provides explicit instruction. It uses techniques of modeling, practice, and application to promote diverse, flexible thinking. It encourages young kids to extend their learning beyond the text at hand, to ask questions that will lead to new learning. With *PTK*, we are able to create intellectually-charged primary grade classrooms that invite deep thinking and welcome questions, discussion, and debate.

Why Nonfiction?

With all the concern *that* kids read, we often forget the importance of *what* they read.

In conventional schooling, we have relied almost exclusively upon fiction—stories, fairy tales, folk tales, etc.—to introduce literacy to young ones. And there’s nothing wrong with that magical body of literature as a foundation for kids’ early literacy experience. Indeed, some of the *Toolkit* lessons and the *Toolkit* Trade Book Pack include stories, narrative text, and even delectable poetry.

But fiction doesn’t necessarily entice everyone—and nonfiction can be a different, equally powerful *way in* to reading, especially for little kids. Listen as they gasp when you reveal the cover of a book about spiders, sharks, or dinosaurs. Hear their

“wows” when they learn about tornados, tidal waves, and coral reefs. Questions bubble right out of them when their curiosity is activated: “How does that work? How many? When? Why? What if?” When kids encounter fascinating topics, amazing information, and dramatic photos, they want to know more. They talk with friends and, over time, create their own writing, drawings, posters, and books. And there’s no better genre than nonfiction to spur thinking in our developing readers. After all, they can get information from nonfiction without even having to read the words. Photos, illustrations, maps, and the like convey stimulating content and compelling information all on their own. There is nothing like a large *National Geographic* coffee table book opened to a two-page spread of a solar system map to get even the youngest kids thinking and wondering about space!

You get the picture. As much as we love and read fiction ourselves, we worry that nonfiction is underrepresented in schools. And this underrepresentation is despite the fact that so many kids love nonfiction, grown-ups buy it, life requires it, and standardized tests include it even more than fiction in their high-stakes questions. So in the *Toolkit*, the majority of our lessons and materials focus on that broad range of fascinating “true” material called *informational* or *nonfiction* text.

In the *Toolkit* we have expanded our notion of nonfiction to include any form or genre from which we learn information. The *Toolkit* offers magazines, feature articles, large posters, realistic fiction picture books, poetry, and nonfiction trade books to expand kids’ appetites for investigating the real world through reading.



Getting Started with Nonfiction

As we get ready to teach the *Toolkit* lessons, we set up our classrooms for nonfiction instruction and we help our kids understand the characteristics of nonfiction. We want them to understand the nature of nonfiction and differentiate it from other genres. Here are some suggestions for setting the stage for nonfiction literacy instruction.

- Flood the room with nonfiction on the widest range of topics and levels—trade books, picture books, big books, wordless books, short nonfiction guided-reading books, posters, magazines, newspapers, and the like. Don't forget to talk with your school librarian, who is likely the best resource for texts and topics. Also head to your public library, where they will generally lend scads of books to public schools for several weeks at a time. And don't ignore online resources, which continue to grow by leaps and bounds every year. To that end, check out the list of books, magazines, and web sites for short text and interesting topics in the bibliography in *Keep Reading! A Source Book of Short Text*.
- Fill the room with accessible tools and resources—markers, pencils, Post-its in a variety of sizes, drawing paper, differentiated writing paper, construction paper, scissors, glue, etc. Arrange them in baskets at students' tables and in convenient locations around the room so kids can get to them easily.
- Subscribe to magazines such as *National Geographic Young Explorer*, *Time for Kids*, *Scholastic News*, *Click*, *Appleseeds*, and *Ask*. If money is tight, you don't need a subscription for each classroom. A couple of school-wide subscriptions can go a long way to support our kids as they read, write, and think about information. The *TFK* posters and magazines and the *National Geographic Young Explorer* magazine included in the *Toolkit* can give you a taste of what is available.
- Don't miss opportunities to find and save large format text. They promote visual literacy and give young learners a great chance to think and wonder about the images as well as the text. You simply can't have too many Big Books or posters for primary kids for both modeling and shared reading. Think of ways to find materials for little cost or even for free. Old photographic calendars are a gold mine! World Wildlife Fund calendars are among the best. People just throw them away, so get the word out that you want them. Bookstores often sell calendars for half price in early January. Posters abound at fast food restaurants which are usually happy to save them for a passionate teacher! Think creatively to scare up resources.
- Place books in baskets in accessible locations around the room. Label them by topic—animals, space, cultures, Antarctica, ecology, etc.



- Place some texts in baskets by author, as some authors are particularly known for their nonfiction writing: Gail Gibbons, Helen Cowcher, Joanna Cole, Louise Borden, Ann Rockwell, Seymour Simon, Stephen Kramer, Donald Crews, Tomie dePaola, Kathryn Lasky, and Andrea Davis Pinkney, to name a few—or any other nonfiction writers that you love.
- Model how to skim and scan a nonfiction text, looking at the cover, photos, illustrations, and bold print to get an idea of what the book is about and determine our interest in it.
- Hold what our friend and colleague Kathy Leerson calls “a book frenzy.” Children sit in a circle with nonfiction texts in their hands. Give them each about 30 seconds or so to soak up the text—skimming and scanning—before you announce that it’s time to hand it over to the next child and try a new one. Continue this for 15 minutes or so. Most kids will emerge as committed nonfiction readers who can’t wait to get their hands on the book that really grabbed them!
- Encourage kids to pore over nonfiction materials individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Get them to notice how these texts look different from the stories they have read. Have kids talk about and record what they notice about the text and about nonfiction in general.
- Show how you review the books in your nonfiction collection, classifying them by topic, author, or informational genre. Model the difference between books that are science related and those that are social studies related. This is a great way to get young kids to think about the difference between these two content areas. And remember to explain that sometimes a topic in a book may be both scientific and cultural. For example, books about the rainforest might have scientific information about deforestation and the destruction of animal habitat, but also include cultural information about the lifestyles of the people who live in the rainforest.
- Model the differences between fiction and nonfiction and some truths about each genre.
 - Nonfiction is true and real. Fiction is made up but can seem real.
 - The term *nonfiction* is confusing for young kids. They get thrown off by the *non*. They often think it means *not real*, so clarify this from the get-go.
 - Show how to check out the cover to get an idea of whether a text is fiction or nonfiction.
 - Show nonfiction books and explain that they give us true information. We can usually tell by the cover what a nonfiction text is going to teach us, whereas the cover of a fiction book does not always reveal explicitly what it is about.
 - When there are photographs rather than drawings, the text is usually nonfiction.
 - When the animals are talking, it is almost certainly fiction!
 - Pay attention to the photographs and illustrations in the text. Visuals are of great importance in nonfiction and we want kids to include art when they write nonfiction—creating posters, picture books, etc.

- Note the many different features sprinkled throughout nonfiction texts: graphs, charts, maps, etc. (Nonfiction features are explained in depth in several lessons in Strategy Book 1.
- Model, use, and make sure kids understand vocabulary that is particularly useful when investigating nonfiction: *true*, *accurate*, *real*, *information*, *photo*, *image*, *research*, etc. These terms will be explored in further depth in the *Toolkit* lessons.
- Co-construct an Anchor Chart entitled *Characteristics of Nonfiction*. Record what kids have learned about nonfiction as well as anything else you believe should be on the chart.
- Co-construct a large Venn diagram with the headings *Nonfiction*, *Both*, *Fiction*. Have kids think about not only how nonfiction and fiction are different, but also how they are similar.

Some differences: Nonfiction has real information. Fiction is made up. Fiction has characters. Nonfiction does not, etc.

Some similarities: Both have titles on the cover, both have illustrations, both have authors who have written them, etc.

Nonfiction Features that Give Information and Signal Importance

Text Features

Fonts and Effects Text features are those nonfiction features that are created with words and symbols. Teachers can share examples and explicitly teach different fonts and effects, such as titles, headings, subheads, captions, labels, framed text, bold print, color print, italics, bullets, and so on. We can remind kids that font and effect differences should be viewed as signal flags that say, “This important. Pay attention.”

Text Organizers Teachers can teach about how texts are organized by sharing examples such as indexes, glossaries, tables of contents, chapter headings, and appendices. When kids are looking through texts for information, understanding the purpose of these text organizers is very helpful.

Visual Features

Illustrations and Photographs Visual literacy is key. Illustrations play a prominent role in nonfiction learning. The most common visual features are illustrations and photographs. Nonfiction trade books and magazines brim with colorful visual features that kidnap young readers and carry them deeper into meaning.

Graphics More elaborate and specific visual features include diagrams, cut-aways, cross-sections, overlays, maps, distribution maps, word bubbles, tables, graphs, and charts. These visual features inform nonfiction readers of important information.