

Dive into NON-FICTION

Though tricky to grasp, with the right models children can master more formal registers, say

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“Dwarfed by the vast expanse of the open ocean, the biggest animal that has ever lived on our planet: a blue whale. Thirty metres long and weighing over 200 tonnes, it’s far bigger than even the biggest dinosaur. Its tongue weighs as much as an elephant, its heart is the size of a car and some of its blood vessels are so wide you could swim down them...”

The unmistakable voice of Sir David Attenborough – a voice that grabs us unawares and plunges us deep into a hitherto unknown world. He fills our minds with cinematic images, and that’s before we’ve even opened our eyes to absorb the visual feast on screen.

We often find non-fiction is met with groans of tedium, especially after teaching a particularly compelling narrative (and here we are talking about teachers, not children!), but teaching factual writing doesn’t have to be about wading through pedestrian prose. After all, Attenborough’s visceral delivery comes close to poetry.

In fact, a closer look at Attenborough’s description of the blue whale – which uses comparison, repetition for emphases and a close-up view – shows it to be reminiscent of the way Ted Hughes introduces us to the Iron Man. Contrasting these two pieces would certainly make for an interesting study into the differences between fiction and non-fiction. Is

there always a clear distinction between writing to inform and writing to entertain? What makes Attenborough’s work recognisable as non-fiction despite its dramatic, poetic style? It is vividly descriptive, but perhaps not what you would expect to find in a story.

And then, of course, there are the non-fiction forms that require a sparser style: police / accident reports, experimental write-ups and the like. This stripped-back register is often the hardest of all to master, reliant as it is on disciplined vocabulary and non-emotive detail.

Reaching greater depths

Getting to grips with the ‘voice’ (the appropriate vocabulary and grammar choices) of non-fiction presents a challenge to children of all writing abilities. We’ve written previously in these pages that the best writers are the avid readers; that we can help children towards Greater Depth writing by putting amazing models of fiction before them and showing how to synthesise

these with the desired subject matter. Non-fiction writing, however, is often more demanding because even the most obsessive readers seldom bury themselves in information texts to the extent that appropriate models of language are at their fingertips.

There is a range of non-fiction registers, but the hardest are those that skew toward the more formal and more impersonal. We speak informally and personally in almost all circumstances; the fiction we read is largely personal and, increasingly, towards the informal end of the spectrum; even some popular informative and journalistic writing is informal in style. This is why an impersonal style that conveys academic seriousness in the science and humanities is the most difficult hurdle to overcome.

Our solution is, again, marvellous models to internalise and use in synthesis.

■ Choral reading of high-quality, appropriate non-fiction can be a part of any non-fiction English sequence of work. The repeated reading aloud of a text seems to put vocabulary and sentence structures into the memory in a way that reading-to-self does not.

■ Top-quality non-fiction models may be found in many in-school topic texts, but also be aware that there are transcripts available online for BBC documentaries, such as Attenborough’s *Blue Planet*.

“Sticking to formulaic choices hinders the acquisition of a secure non-fiction voice”

■ Transcripts provide the perfect opportunity for children to practise reading aloud, adopting the original narrator's voice. They can act as models for writing, serving as a bridge from oral to written language. If your school subscribes to Discovery Education's Espresso, remember that the transcripts available for their topic videos and news pieces also provide a range of wonderful models of non-fiction language.

■ Select an extended piece of age-appropriate non-fiction and rewrite one paragraph / section in an inappropriate style (e.g making it informal and / or personal) ahead of your lesson. Present the text as if all is well, and wait for children to spot the shift in register. Once this has been identified, they can collaborate in trying to rewrite the doctored section so it matches the style of the rest of the piece.

■ Always keep in mind that language is acquired through imitation, and even your most avid readers are unlikely to be reading enough non-chronological reports in their spare time to give them access to appropriate models for their own information pieces!

Following the Golden Thread

In addition, furthermore, moreover, however, consequently, in conclusion – adverbials such as these have been offered to, modelled for and pressed upon children (sometimes in the form of checklists) for a long time now, but too often we see them being used inappropriately by young writers who don't fully grasp their function. And even amongst those outstanding writers whose prose fiction is heading towards Greater Depth territory, adherence to these formulaic choices hinders the acquisition of a secure non-fiction voice.

We believe this is because grammar and vocabulary is being used to drive the text structure, whereas it should be completely the other way around.

One route into coherent text structure is what we have called the Golden Thread – which is basically a fun way of saying 'theme'. Whatever you call it, the process is as follows: decide on a viewpoint, state it at the outset, and refer to it repeatedly throughout the piece.

■ If you're writing about the Blue Whale, your viewpoint might be that the creature is astonishingly huge, yet tiny in comparison to the ocean. As you compose, everything refers back to this, providing a Golden Thread that runs through the piece.

■ If you are writing about Roman soldiers as part of a topic, you might state that the Roman army was extraordinarily successful and the main reason for the spread of the Roman Empire; then, when you detail their weapons, their armour, their training and professional status, each point can refer back to – and serve to illustrate – the stated viewpoint. This way, coherence is achieved.

Note that this works with other non-fiction text-types, too.

■ When writing a recount of an event or outing, state from the outset that it was brilliant / exciting / disappointing (etc) and then refer back to this so that each element of the recount illustrates the point.

■ You might even experiment with this in instructions: "This recipe is going to show you how to make the most delicious milkshake you have ever tasted"; "These instructions are vital – they may well save your life." Illustrating these bold claims within the steps that follow will produce a Golden Thread that holds the whole piece together better than any list of adverbials.

Just as with great fiction, the best information writing arises not from formulae, but rather, from thorough knowledge of content synthesised with appropriate models of language. Immersion in wonderful models of story-language runs throughout any good primary school experience, of course – and for some lucky children, this begins (and continues) at home. Internalising the range of non-fiction styles may lack the immediate appeal of storytime, but if we select the best examples to share, we will find there a different kind of artistry, and provide for children a source of language that will serve them well through secondary education and beyond.



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