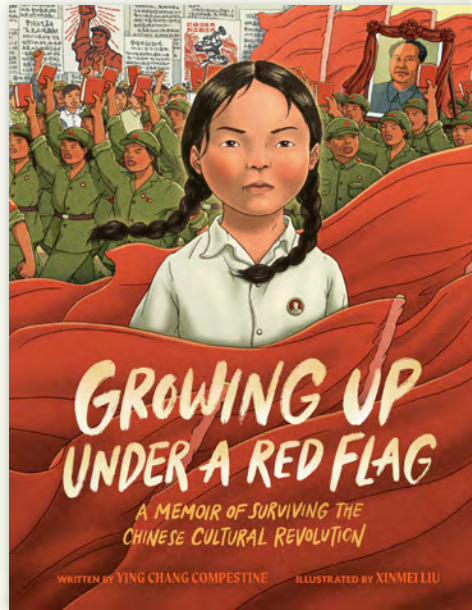
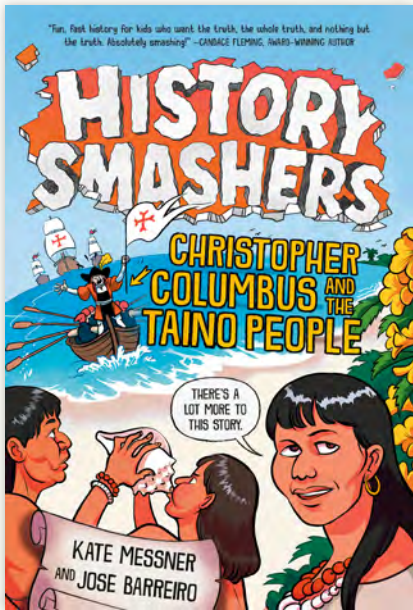




THEMATIC GUIDE

Teaching Nonfiction
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



This guide's activities encourages both early aged and upper-grade elementary students to explore the engaging world of nonfiction while cultivating skills in critical, visual, and informational literacy.

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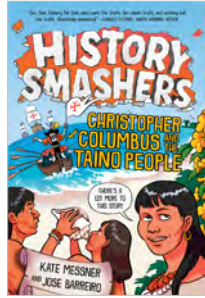
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■ INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published its “Position Statement on the Role of Nonfiction Literature (K-12).” In it, the organization explains that while nonfiction is a gateway to literacy and a favorite genre for children, it has been traditionally underrepresented in classrooms. Highlighting the genre’s role in addressing scientific knowledge, historical silences, contemporary issues, and global injustice, NCTE asserts that “in the urgency of this moment, nonfiction for young people has never been more vibrant or more vital.” For early elementary-aged students, the diverse features and formats of nonfiction literature provide an opportunity to build knowledge and examine the world even before they can read text. In upper-grade elementary classes, nonfiction invites readers to explore interests and genres.

The books in this guide offer a diverse range of features and formats. Teachers can choose any combination of books and strategies to use with whole-class, small-group, or independent reading and writing instruction. The guide’s activities encourage students to explore the engaging world of nonfiction while cultivating skills in critical, visual, and informational literacy.

■ ABOUT THE TITLES IN THIS COLLECTION



History Smashers: Christopher Columbus and the Taino People

KATE MESSNER, JOSE BARREIRO, Illustrated by FALYNN KOCH

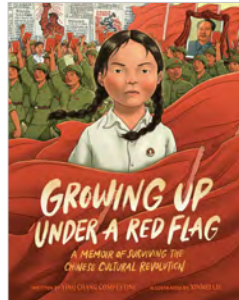
9780593564264

Paperback | Random House Books for Young Readers

224 pages | \$9.99 | Lexile: 1070L

Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

Christopher Columbus and the Taino People, a “history smasher” by Kate Messner and Jose Barreiro, is a fun, fast, graphic-inspired novel that inspires students to reconsider one of our dominant social narratives.



Growing Up under a Red Flag

YING CHANG COMPESTINE, Illustrated by XINMEI LIU

9780593533987

Hardcover | Rocky Pond Books

40 pages | \$19.99 | Lexile: 800L

Also available: E-Book

In the picture book memoir *Growing Up under a Red Flag*, Ying Chang Compestine dreams of America while growing up during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.



A Kids Book About Juneteenth

GARRISON HAYES

9780744098877

Hardcover | DK Children | 64 pages | \$19.99

Also available: E-Book

Garrison Hayes’s *A Kids Book About Juneteenth* utilizes effectively simplistic space, font, and color to uncover the hidden history around slavery and its impact on today.



Video Games

CHERYL KIM, Illustrated by OLGA LEE

9781662670534

Hardcover | Kane Press | 32 pages | \$18.99 | Lexile: AD760L

Also available: E-Book

Video Games, by Cheryl Kim, is an invitation to explore a common student interest while capturing the exciting process of scientific exploration.



What's Inside a Bird's Nest?

RACHEL IGNATOFSKY

9780593176528

Paperback | Crown Books for Young Readers

48 pages | \$19.99 | Lexile: AD540L

Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

What's Inside a Bird's Nest? author and illustrator Rachel Ignatofsky weaves beautiful and intricate text, graphics, and color as she showcases the curiosities of nature.

■ BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Nonfiction is usually new to elementary students. In order to provide an equitable environment where all students are prepared, the following activities build knowledge, provide access, and generate excitement about the purposes, formats, structures, and varieties of nonfiction text.

INTERACTIVE READ-ALoud

Model how to navigate and enjoy nonfiction with an enthusiastic teacher read-aloud. While reading, emphasize writing structure and style specific to the text and to nonfiction books in general. Provide access and ensure participation by incorporating the classroom projector and whiteboard. In this way, all students can see and experience how nonfiction readers scan pages, peruse headers, focus on infographics, use resources, and generate questions. Plan ahead by marking intentional passages and images to pause and discuss, generating critical-thinking questions at various levels, and selecting important vocabulary to pre-teach and emphasize.

For example, a read-aloud from page 6 of *What's Inside a Bird's Nest?* would include a discussion of the various fonts and images that clue readers into how to read this particular text. Demonstrate how the lowercase font at the bottom of the page on the right is a continuation of the previous narration. If readers stopped at reading the narration, they would miss out on the all-caps font sprinkled throughout the page, which provides specific scientific information and dialogue. Point out that the tree in the upper left is actually a tree map, a graphic organizer that provides labeled examples, in this case, of different birds' nests. This page demonstrates how nonfiction is not necessarily read in order or even from left to right, as students are used to. For more on read-alouds, see prhlink.com/fpreadaloud.

ANCHOR CHARTS

Provide support and prepare a nonfiction-rich environment by creating a set of classroom anchor charts for nonfiction. Anchor charts are informal posters prepared by the teacher or co-created with students. Their purpose is to “anchor” student learning by providing a visible resource students can return to time and again. For younger elementary students, anchor charts can define and differentiate fiction from nonfiction. In other words, a chart titled “fiction” might include “made-up,” “story talk,” “characters and plot,” “illustrations,” and “read in order.” A separate “nonfiction” chart might list “true,” “facts,” “diagrams and charts,” and “read in any order.” As a scaffold, students can watch an informational video on fiction versus nonfiction before creating or discussing these charts. One such video can be found at prhlink.com/ytfictionvsnon.

For older elementary students, an anchor chart might serve as a review and be labeled “What do we already know about nonfiction text?” Student answers can be written on sticky notes and posted on the chart, or the teacher can write answers directly on the chart. One other anchor chart for all grade levels might be titled

“Why do people write nonfiction?” The list might include “to explore an interest,” “to inform about culture or history,” or “to explain the world.” Explain that what students know will change throughout their study, so the charts are works in progress that grow as students read more and varied nonfiction texts. For more information on anchor charts as scaffolds, see prhlink.com/scaffoldstudentlearning.

NONFICTION WORD WALLS

Because nonfiction text integrates genre-specific features and subject-specific language, students may need intentional vocabulary instruction essential for comprehension. Rather than assigning the entire list at one time, pre-teach only the words that will be important in a particular day’s lesson. Ask students to stop and note when words are used in the text(s). After reading, have students rephrase meanings with partners or in writing. Words addressed can then be added to the classroom word wall, and students can engage in games and activities to solidify their learning.

- **Text-Feature Word Wall:** A text-feature word wall prepares students for the varying structures of nonfiction texts. This type of word wall prepares students to read nonfiction differently than fiction. Examples of genre-specific vocabulary throughout this text set, as well as other nonfiction texts, include *bullet points, chart, cross section, font, graphic, header, infographic, table, resources, subtitle, and textbox*.
- **Content-Specific Word Wall:** Another type of nonfiction word wall is text-specific and focuses on building content vocabulary. For example, if the whole class is reading *A Kids Book About Juneteenth*, the word wall might include *campaign, capture, chattel slavery, compromise, election, Emancipation Proclamation, inhumanity, oppression, and profitable*.
- **Traveling Word Wall:** Traveling word walls are built by students in their folders or notebooks. While the list might contain the same vocabulary as the classroom word wall, it is also handy during independent or self-selected reading, where students can note bolded or other words they determine to be new, important, or confusing. For instance, a student who selects the book *Video Games* might record subject-specific words such as *arcade, cathode-ray tube, code, console, hardware, programmers, and software*.

■ USING NONFICTION TO TEACH READING & WRITING

The following activities leverage nonfiction literature to support students as critical readers, writers, and thinkers.

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

Whereas fiction books center on theme, nonfiction texts address complex ideas and their supporting details. Support elementary students' access to these "big ideas" with the use of essential questions. Questioning deepens comprehension by asking students to grapple with content through reading, writing, and discussion. Questions model how to set a purpose for reading, how to engage in text, and how to think critically. Ultimately, students should ask and seek answers to their own questions as they explore nonfiction. The following essential questions frame some of the big ideas in these books and can be used for reading, writing, and discussion.

1. What can we learn by reading about different places, people, and times?
2. Why is it important to listen to many voices when we read about history?
3. How can studying our history cause important change?
4. How can exploring curiosities and interests lead to life-changing scientific discoveries?
5. Why is protecting nature so important?
6. In what ways is reading a nonfiction book different from reading a fiction story?
7. What can illustrations, graphs, and other images teach us that words cannot?
8. What does it mean to read a nonfiction book with a critical eye?
9. What questions should we ask about the author and the content of a nonfiction book?
10. How can telling our story through memoir impact our own and others' views?

MIND'S EYE

The complex vocabulary of nonfiction texts can be challenging to young readers. Before reading a nonfiction text with the class, read aloud a sampling of words students will encounter. Choose words important to comprehension, words that evoke strong feelings or images. Read the list slowly and dramatically, providing time for students to create mental pictures in their "mind's eye." Once the list has been read, students can respond in one of four ways:

- Draw a picture representing their mental image.
- Compose a question about what they will read.
- Make a prediction about what they will read.
- Describe a feeling evoked by the mental picture.

For example, a word list for the book *Video Games* might include Egypt, dice, dominoes, pinball, and level up. Students might draw a timeline with the games

in historical order, or they might describe the euphoric feeling of leveling up in their favorite game. After students have completed one of the tasks, encourage them to share their thinking with a partner or group in order to see the different interpretations classmates produced, and to encourage reading the text in order to see if predictions come true or questions get answered. After reading, discuss how thinking changed as students read and how the strategy helped them stay engaged in complex text. For a video about the Mind’s Eye strategy, see prhlink.com/ytmindseye.

PEER REVIEWS

Invite students to market their favorite nonfiction books. Peer reviews are a fun and effective way to harness the power of positive peer pressure and entice elementary readers to read something new. Peer reviews can be written or verbal. Student reviewers can use sentence starters to leave a review inside a book pocket or on a sticky note. Prompts might include “I would recommend because ...,” “I would not recommend because ...,” “My favorite feature of this book is ...,” and “This is a _____ book” (memoir, science, history, etc.). Lower-grade students might be provided check boxes or multiple-choice answers, and upper-grade students can write a short paragraph. Alternatively, students can present their reviews out loud to a partner, small group, or the whole class. A digital version can be made using Padlet, a free bulletin board integrating text, video, audio, and more (padlet.com/site/product/education).

INDEPENDENT READING CONFERENCES

During self-selected reading time, promote nonfiction with browsable books and provide students with individualized instruction and feedback using independent reading conferences. In the nonfiction reading conference, teachers can listen to students perform a quiet read-aloud, work on whole-class skill focuses, and attend to individualized needs. As opposed to traditional conferences that focus on plot, theme, and other fiction elements, the nonfiction conference addresses text structure, big ideas, and other nonfiction considerations including point of view, perspective, and author’s expertise. Teachers take notes as students read and respond, then they can refer to these notes at the next conference. For more on independent reading conferences, see prhlink.com/irconferences.

A reading conference on *Growing Up under a Red Flag* might include the following questions:

- What made you choose this book?
- Did you know about China or the cultural revolution before picking up this book?
- What can you tell me about the author? (Take a look at the author’s note and book flaps.)

- What is the most interesting fact you've read?
- Can you show me how you "read" the pictures on pages 2–7? What do you see? What do these colorful and interesting illustrations tell you about this time in the author's life?
- Will you whisper-read a sentence or two for me?
- Is anything confusing so far? Are there any words you'd like to talk about together?
- What do you hope to learn as you continue reading?

MENTOR TEXTS

Mentor texts are model essays, books, or multimodal works that inspire students to see themselves as writers while deconstructing and reflecting on their reading. Modeling a variety of relevant and diverse nonfiction texts, such as the books in this guide, helps students connect to their own interests and backgrounds while examining the purposeful choices nonfiction writers make. In selecting a specific portion to use as a mentor text, consider the writing purpose. Ask students to analyze the mentor piece before applying its style, format, or a specific element to their own writing. Apply the writers workshop method and co-construct the first sentence, paragraph, or element together as a class. More on mentor texts can be found at prhlink.com/mentortextsedu. Specific examples from this text set include:

- Draw a nature picture and label it like a diagram, like the "feathers" page in *What's Inside a Bird's Nest?*
- Write a three-sentence introduction to a picture book about science or a special-interest topic. Include two words that are specific to your topic, as in the introduction to *Video Games*.
- Modeling your work on *A Kids Book About Juneteenth*, create a two-page spread about an important time in history. Use color and text size to emphasize your purpose.
- Select one of Columbus's journal entries from *Christopher Columbus and the Taino People*. Write another journal entry on the same topic, but this time in the voice of a Taino child. Keeping in mind that the Taino language was an oral one, prepare to deliver your journal entry out loud.
- Review the last illustration in *Growing Up under a Red Flag*, where the Golden Gate Bridge and American food symbolize how the author's dreams have come true. Choose a time in your own life when you wished for something or when a wish came true. Write one to five sentences about and/or illustrate the event, choosing details that help communicate your purpose.

■ USING NONFICTION TO TEACH VISUAL LITERACY

The following activities foster students' visual literacies as they explore images, infographics, and other multimodal components of nonfiction text.

SEE, THINK, WONDER

In *Christopher Columbus and the Taino People*, the author utilizes maps, illustrations, cartoons, and artifact photos to provide context and deepen comprehension. Show the class one or more of these multimodal forms of representation and ask students to analyze their meaning and use. Applying the "See, Think, Wonder" routine, lead students through the three analysis rounds, each time providing a more detailed lens. Students should consider:

- What do I see? (What details stick out?)
- What do I think? (What about the image or wording makes me think that?)
- What does this make me wonder? (What questions or big ideas does this image raise?)

One visual that works well is the world map on page 140, which portrays not only the continents of North and South America, Africa, Europe, and Asia, but also includes two unlabeled text boxes listing animals, plants, foods, and more. As students work through their observations, hypotheses, and questions, they should surmise that the text boxes represent the impacts of Columbus's voyages on both the Taino and the Europeans. Through repeated cycles of observation, students should notice that the map includes arrows indicating the positive and negative effects of the voyages. Ask students to partner up and summarize their visual analysis in writing or out loud. As a scaffold for multilingual and other diverse learners, provide a sentence frame such as "The Columbian Exchange introduced positive imports such as (pineapples, avocados, and chocolate), but also negative exports like (rats and disease)." For more on "See, Think, Wonder," check out Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero (prhlink.com/seethinkwonder).

THINKING MAPS

An important component of information literacy is understanding how researchers in various fields construct and communicate knowledge. Practice how to unlock multimodal, complex information in nonfiction text with the use of thinking maps, which are visual patterns linked to specific critical thinking skills. Select one type of thinking map to introduce at a time (www.thinkingmaps.com), then discuss an example of that map in a nonfiction picture book. Examples from *What's Inside a Bird's Nest?* include:

- Bird anatomy on page 28 (brace map)
- Beaks, feet, and wings on page 29 (tree map)
- Process of returning to the nest to lay eggs on pages 35–36 (flow map)
- Human actions and impacts on page 38 (multiflow map)

Once students have discussed a model thinking map in the sample text, ask them to identify that same thinking map in other nonfiction texts, or to try their hand at creating the same type of map to communicate different research. Discuss: *How do nonfiction authors combine research, text, and illustrations to convey knowledge in a way that is different than fiction? Why are these visual forms of knowledge and communication important to understand and use?*

ISPY

In *Growing Up under a Red Flag*, author Ying Chang Compestine and illustrator Xinmei Liu utilize clear, purposeful language and vivid imagery, color, and facial expressions to help young readers access complex political ideas. Using the “I Spy” protocol, help students analyze the relationship between print and nonprint text elements in order to decode text and develop deeper comprehension. Select a two-page spread, such as the Red Guard invasion on pages 12–13. Introduce the process to the class:

- Take thirty seconds to peruse an image individually (ignoring print text for now), making sure to look at every detail, like colors, actions, objects, and facial expressions.
- List or tell a classmate everything you “spied.” Together, label these items. (Labels can be written directly on individual photocopies of the text or, if scaffolds are needed, students can use a predetermined word list or premade sticky notes.)
- Partner-read the text while finger-tracing, picking out words that match what you “spied.”
- In partners, create a verbal or written summary sentence that explains the gist of the text.

While analyzing the images, students might notice the raised fists and angry expressions of the soldiers, the crushed flowers, and the loudspeakers. When looking for matching text, students might select “Red Guards,” “stomping on the flowers,” and “speakers blared.” As a final step, read the text on the page in its entirety, either to the class, back in partners, or together as a choral read. Discuss: *How does taking time to preview graphics help make me a better reader? How does it help me understand events I didn’t know about before?*

NONFICTION COMICS

Engage young readers in nonfiction storytelling by harnessing the power of sequential art. Project on the class whiteboard an example of nonfiction graphic storytelling, like one of the many comic sections of *Christopher Columbus and the Taino People*. Ask students: *How are these comic sections different from the rest of the book?* Students should note the use of text boxes containing minimal language and the images that tell big parts of the story. Ask: *What would happen*

if we didn't take a good look at these images? Discuss how readers would only get part of the story, and that “reading” a graphic novel or other nonfiction graphics means using different skills than reading fiction. Now challenge students to take a different part of the text that is written traditionally and create a graphic story that conveys the same information with fewer words and the addition of images. Model the activity first, emphasizing how the text box should highlight the main idea, and the images should expand that idea with details. Students can work individually or in partners to create a digital comic with the National Council of Teachers of English's Comic Creator (prhlink.com/nctecomcreator), a doodle video using Pixton (www.pixton.com/), a storyboard with StoryboardThat (www.storyboardthat.com/), or a flip video using Flipsnack (www.flipsnack.com/).

MULTIMEDIA PRODUCTS

Even the youngest students can recognize various elements of multimodal nonfiction and reproduce them with digital tools to clarify comprehension, word recognition, sentence structure, and other reading and writing skills. Provide students a purpose and an audience, and ask them to recreate some aspect of a nonfiction book using a different mode or medium. For example:

- Reread and retell the haircut segment (or other portion) of *Growing Up under a Red Flag* in the form of a digital storybook using www.flipsnack.com or www.wixie.com.
- Create a read-aloud video showcasing text features in *A Kids Book About Juneteenth*. Students can find editable video templates at www.canva.com.
- After listening to a sample science podcast segment from www.brainson.org/, interview another student answering science questions from *Video Games*. Record and edit the podcast using support.audacityteam.org/basics/recording-desktop-audio.
- Select a specific process in *What's Inside a Bird's Nest?*, and reframe it as a digital slide deck using Google slides or www.slidesgo.com.
- Using www.mapline.com or another map creator, build a map with digital pins illustrating one of the voyages discussed in *Christopher Columbus and the Taino People*.

■ USING NONFICTION TO TEACH INFORMATION LITERACY

The following activities challenge students to analyze, contextualize, and evaluate nonfiction sources while considering multiple voices and perspectives.

I USED TO THINK ... NOW I THINK ...

While reading a nonfiction text that challenges accepted cultural narratives, encourage students to reflect on their changed thinking by using the “I Used to Think ... Now I Think ...” protocol (prhlink.com/usedtothinknf). As an example, *Christopher Columbus and the Taino People* challenges traditional portrayals of Columbus as a brave and skilled explorer who discovered a new world. Facilitate a read-aloud/think-aloud of pages 7–9, where the author frames this portrayal of Columbus as a “myth” or “origin story.” While reading about origin myths such as Black Panther and Peter Parker on page 8, stop and ask students: *What other origin myths can you think of? What does referring to Columbus’s voyage as an origin myth tell us about the author’s viewpoint?* Explain to students that the author will interject her perspective all through the text and encourage them to consider their own thinking at these points. Model how to apply the “I Used to Think ... Now I Think ...” reflective routine and provide time to use it with peers. Using either verbal turn-and-talks or written think/write/pair/shares, students can stop throughout the reading and reflect with peers on their changed thinking. As a class, discuss: *How does this strategy help me think about my thinking and the thinking of others? Why is it important to read more than one viewpoint?*

CLAIM, SUPPORT, QUESTION

A Kids Book About Juneteenth provides a unique opportunity for students to critically evaluate the perspective of the author. Read with students the “About the Author” page at the end of the text. Ask: *What reason is given for why the author wrote this book?* Discuss the author’s stated “drive to understand our shared history.” Next, show students the video clip “What is Juneteenth? With Content Creator Garrison Hayes” (prhlink.com/ytgarrisonhayes).

After viewing, ask students to use the Claim, Support, Question (prhlink.com/claimsupportq) framework to identify why Hayes thinks we should know about and celebrate Juneteenth. Students may need to watch the video twice, once to capture the gist and a second time to record claims and evidence. Claims will include “We should celebrate the right things” and “Juneteenth is truly American history.” Evidence might include “You can’t understand America without understanding what came before, during, and after that first Juneteenth celebration.” After viewing, ask students to share their claims, support, and questions. Ask: *How did watching the video add to our understanding of the book’s meaning?* Stamp the ideas of perspective and point of view in nonfiction literature.

PLUSES AND MINUSES

Expository nonfiction texts like *Video Games* illustrate the curiosity, passion, and determination that leads to scientific discovery and knowledge acquisition. Whether readers have enjoyed *Video Games* as a self-selected book or read it together as a whole-class lesson, ask them to analyze and evaluate the positives and negatives it presents in gaming innovation over time. Select two chunks of text that illustrate changes in gaming. One possibility is pages 22–23, which discuss the rise of home video games in the 1980s, and page 26, which illustrates the impact of cell phone technology in the 2010s. Focusing on both illustrations and text, ask students to reread these sections and create a pros-cons list demonstrating positive and negative impacts of video game science. Alternatively, the class can simply vote with their thumbs. Students might list:

- **Pros:** Lots of choice, replacement of joysticks with a simple controller, faster, more colorful and imaginative games and characters, and ability to game anywhere, anytime
- **Cons:** Lack of outside time, lack of peer play

After students have finished their lists, ask them to share, then create a unified class list on the classroom whiteboard. Discuss which items on their lists came directly from text, and which they inferred from the illustrations. Ask: *How might we describe the overall attitude of the author toward her subject?* Discuss how the book takes a positive tone towards gaming innovation, as evidenced in its positive language (LEVEL UP! And GAME ON!) and its linear, historical framework, which illustrates the growth of gaming from Egyptian board games to cell phones.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Nonfiction texts like the books in this set provide young readers the opportunity to learn about the world around them, including what needs to change. Whether it is correcting traditional social narratives, taking responsibility for the natural world, or creating new technology, these titles encourage students to see themselves as action takers and change makers. Using one or more of the text-set books as inspiration, solicit student input and, as a class, create a shared project that enables all students to take transformative action. Take pictures of the action and share on a school bulletin board, district website, or local news station. Examples of project-based learning activities inspired by the texts in this set include:

- Design or improve a community garden at school. Include and label flowers and plants for birds, bugs, and pollinators (*What's Inside a Bird's Nest?*).
- Organize a cleanup day at a local stream or park (*What's Inside a Bird's Nest?*).
- Create a game proposal for a new video game that inspires players to think creatively and act positively. Include purpose, rules, characters, examples of graphics, and other details (*Video Games*).
- Make a podcast, video, or website about a place, person, or time in history that needs its story told (*Christopher Columbus and the Taino People*).
- Create a community mural that communicates student learning about a social justice issue (*A Kids Book About Juneteenth*).

■ CONCLUSION & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

As educators, we know the importance of developing our students' critical, visual, and informational literacy skills. We hope this guide has provided the framework to do that. Feel free to adapt any of the strategies to other nonfiction titles. Should you like to explore further, the following resources provide more information and ideas for engaging students in nonfiction.

Guiding Students to Develop Multimodal Literacy

www.edutopia.org/article/guiding-students-develop-multimodal-literacy/

Media Literacy in the Classroom: Teacher Fellows Share

prhlink.com/pulitzermedialiteracy

How to Incorporate Visual Literacy in Your Instruction

www.edutopia.org/article/how-incorporate-visual-literacy-your-instruction

Position Statement on the Role of Nonfiction Literature

ncte.org/statement/role-of-nonfiction-literature-k-12/

Teaching Information Literacy Skills

www.readingrockets.org/topics/content-area-literacy/articles/teaching-information-literacy-skills

■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Laura Reis Mayer is a professional learning consultant from Asheville, NC. She develops content and facilitates learning for national education organizations. A twice-renewed National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT), she taught middle school, high school, and college English, speech, drama, and literacy. She has written more than forty teacher guides for multiple publishers.

Visit our website, [PenguinRandomHouseEducation.com](https://www.penguinrandomhouseeducation.com),
to browse more nonfiction titles.



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