

Units of Study for Teaching Reading
A Workshop Curriculum, Middle School Grades

FAQ Video Transcripts

View this video and more [Frequently Asked Questions](#)

Question: *What does research say about nonfiction?*

Mary Ehrenworth:

We have done a whole new bunch of research on nonfiction, and one of the researchers who changed our thinking around nonfiction, which you're going to see in these nonfiction units in middle school especially, although you started to see them probably already in our fifth grade units, if you happened to use those, is that Nell Duke, when she came to Teachers College two years ago, she talked to us about how, in this country we have more kids than ever getting into college, but in between freshman and sophomore year, almost 2/3 of kids, 60% of kids are dropping out of the harder majors, and the reason they're dropping out of the harder majors, it was the research that came out in the appendix to the common core, they're dropping out of harder majors because they can't handle authentic nonfiction. And when you talk to college professors, it's not textbooks, it's not low-level summaries with little like, "Here's the main idea, "and here's what you should be thinking about it," it's authentic nonfiction articles. It's authentic nonfiction books, like big fat books where you're going to read the whole book. Because actually, synthesizing ideas over hundreds of pages of text is a really different thing than reading a two page article. Synthesizing ideas across a 10, 20, 30 page article is different than a one page article.

So that meant that in our nonfiction work, Nell Duke's research showed that a couple things happened, is that when classes got really hard in high school and college, so picture in your mind a kid who's been in your school in elementary or middle school. Picture that kid going and taking a hard science class, even in high school. The class gets really hard really fast. What does that kid do? So just picture that. Almost all the teachers that we talked to, this is what they say, it's what kids actually do. They come home, and they don't say what you would hope they would say, is they would say, "I really love this class on genetics," or, "I really love this class on forces and motion," or "I really love this class on physics," but the nonfiction texts are giving me some trouble." No, they don't say that. They come home and they usually say, "I don't like that teacher," or, "I don't really like this class," and one of the things to know from all the research, especially Peter Johnston and Alfred Tatum's research, is that when adolescents say "I don't like it," it's code for, "I find it hard." So they're saying "I don't like it," really what they mean is "I'm finding the nonfiction hard."

So one of the things that we're teaching kids now in our nonfiction, so you'll see it especially in Katie's new book, is that the first thing is that you can get ready for harder topics by building up your own background knowledge. Background

Units of Study for Teaching Reading
A Workshop Curriculum, Middle School Grades

knowledge is not a gift from God. Background knowledge is something you can learn how to do. But what we don't want to teach the kids is what I did in my first years of teaching, and I'm so ashamed when I look back at what I was doing, I mean, I taught AP History and AP English for many, many years. And I did it by essentially helping the kids so much that they did well in my class, but they did not go off to college knowing how to do the work for themselves. And so what we don't want to teach the kids with nonfiction, is the teacher is the source of all knowledge. Like, I'll look back at how I used to make PowerPoints for my history class, and I would never do that anymore, 'cause I don't want kids to think that they're going to learn hard history from a PowerPoint their teacher makes. Instead, I want to teach kids that they're going to to learn history by reading a lot of primary and secondary sources, and it's going to take work, and they're not going to get it in a day, it's going to be like days of reading, it's going to be totally fascinating. So that's where our work has really changed in nonfiction, is we're trying to get the kids to read first, whole nonfiction books. And fortunately, there's tons of them, like Young Adult Literature has come out with a whole bunch of nonfiction books for kids, which are fabulous. Everything from like teen versions of *Fast Food Nation*, or like *Chew on This*, to like *Boys in the Boat*, I mean there's just dozens and dozens and dozens of them. To then teaching them to read across articles and videos and websites to get deeply involved in a topic, and to read quickly and rapidly, but read a lot. Especially trying to balance multiple perspectives. So that's the last thing, is that in terms of our research on nonfiction, we're trying to make sure that kids just read a lot more, and are reading different kinds of texts and different kinds of perspectives.