

Laura sat down next to a table of students and observed them for a moment. They were in the midst of independent reading and researching topics they were passionate about. One student, Toby, stopped briefly to add a few notes to a T-chart he had created in his reading notebook. After about thirty seconds of writing, he got right back into his book. A minute later, another reader at his table, Karyn, stopped and sketched an image in her reading notebook and labeled a few parts. She also returned to her reading quickly and kept going. What was happening in Laura's classroom was not magic, not a fluke moment of student engagement, but business as usual. Laura had cultivated her students' capacity to do this work during independent reading by devoting the first month of school to studying why and how readers use writing as an important tool in their reading and thinking process.

After about thirty minutes, the students transitioned into small groups to discuss what they were learning and thinking about their research topics. The first thing students did was take out their reading notebook entries and their books. The students in the class valued their reading notebooks and chose to write in them on their own for specific reasons. They were aware of the many ways their writing could help them remember what they learned and teach it to others. Karyn glanced at her notes and then began talking, clearly relying on the work she'd just done to support her ideas. Her classmates leaned in, interested. Laura circulated among groups, listening for clues and cues of what students might need more clarification on.

In this chapter, we look closely at how we can use writing to help students engage with the provocative ideas of nonfiction texts. Writing can make nonfiction more accessible to students because it is a forum for slicing and dicing dense forests of facts and ideas into more manageable chunks. A learner's pen or pencil upon the notebook page is like a sword—a weapon, a tool—that helps a student in a sense challenge the nonfiction author to a duel. For teachers, writing is an expansive window for deciding what to teach next when the writing is deep enough and varied enough in its form and function. We have seen the ways writing can become a tool for understanding nonfiction, yet many students don't choose to write and only do so in school when it is required. Most classrooms do not yet look like Laura's, but hers did not always look like this either, and in this chapter, we will explain the key lessons that helped create this "magic" that you can use tomorrow.

When working in classrooms, we see such variety in the types of writing that students create and huge differences in the degree to which this writing is nourishing students' reading processes. On one end of the spectrum, students' writing is close to busywork and may even impede motivation and comprehension because it makes reading seem a chore. On the other end of



In this chapter, you will learn:

- How to help students see the value in writing about nonfiction
- Lessons for introducing student-directed reading notebook entries
- Key lessons to teach students to collect, develop, and revisit their thinking
- Common approaches to writing about reading and their limitations
- Ways to use student notebook entries to decide what to teach next

the spectrum, students write as they read, and it deepens their understanding and involvement because the teacher—like Laura—has built in student ownership and also mines the writing and the attendant talk around it for astoundingly tailored subsequent instruction. The key is authenticity and choice, and in this chapter, we show you how to set this up. While it takes some time to get students in the groove of this work, once it's in place, you will never look back. Even if your students resist writing about reading, the ideas in this chapter will help you decide what to teach tomorrow and will help you leap over these common impasses:

- Students do not write about their reading.
- You are unsure how to get reading notebooks started.
- Students do the minimum required and see writing as a chore.
- Writing about reading has become stale and robotic in your classroom.
- You are unsure how reading notebooks can enhance understanding of nonfiction.

We begin this chapter by showing you how to teach writing about reading in authentic ways that connect to your students, offering you a window into students' thinking about nonfiction so you can decide what to teach next. The majority of the chapter will then take you into classrooms and students' writing so you can learn the lessons that have the biggest impact on students' thinking about nonfiction. You will leave this chapter learning where to put your attention and the practices you might want to reconsider because they don't necessarily offer you or your students ways to develop more thoughtful reading practices.

Why We Really Use Writing as a Tool for Understanding

When researching writing as an access point for understanding, I decided to study my own practices. Over the course of a weekend, I tracked the reasons and ways I authentically used writing as a tool. As a researcher and teacher, I predicted that most of my writing would be in response to ideas and articles I was reading, and while this was part of my weekend, I also found many other authentic ways I wrote. The following is a list of what I found.

OVER THE WEEKEND, I WROTE:

- Emails to friends about upcoming plans
- Emails to colleagues about our shared projects
- Tweets to teachers, authors, and others I follow on Twitter in response to their posts
- A grocery list
- A holiday shopping list
- Margin notes in a book I was reading
- A summary of my weekly running workouts and what my goals were for next week
- Plans for my demonstration lessons coming up
- A comparison chart about what I noticed was similar between dystopian literature and apocalyptic literature for my book club sessions with eighth graders next week
- An outline of what I thought I would speak about at an upcoming parent workshop
- Answers to questions that were sent to me about word study
- Notes from our veterinarian about one cat's health issues
- Meal ideas for a holiday party

I did not set aside special time to write over the weekend, but when I looked at how I spent my time, there were several moments and contexts where writing helped me. Some of the writing was about *remembering*, such as grocery and shopping lists. Some of the writing was about *organizing* my thinking, such as the comparison chart and running workout summary. Some of the writing was about *sharing* with others, such as my emails. Some of the writing was about

recording my thinking for reflection, such as my outline and margin notes. I asked several groups of teachers to replicate this same task—to track how they were using writing authentically in their lives and to record it. When we shared the lists, most of us were surprised at how often we used writing as a tool. After looking across dozens of teachers’ lists, we consolidated our reasons why we write authentically into a few categories. We noticed that none of us wrote because we were told we had to or because we were “accountable.” Instead, we wrote because it served a real and important purpose in our lives. “Writing is often our representation of the world made visible, embodying both process and product” (Emig, 1977, p. 122).

REASONS WHY WE USE WRITING AS A TOOL	
• To remember	
• To record our thinking	
• To share with others	
• To organize our thinking	
• To discover our thinking	

After examining the ways we use writing in our everyday lives, we wanted to understand the reasons why we write about nonfiction reading. In one memorable professional study group activity, we asked participating teachers to list the real reasons why they write about the nonfiction reading in their lives. We used a T-chart to guide the discussion. The left side read, “Types of Nonfiction I Read,” and the right side read, “Why I Choose to Write About This Reading.” Following is a sample chart that shows the types of responses we collected and how the teachers used their writing as an access point for understanding.

After we made this chart of reasons why we write about our nonfiction reading, we discussed what was common among most of us. One teacher had an “aha” moment when she commented, “Ha! No one wrote down that we write because we were given questions to answer or because we are going to be tested on it.” Everyone laughed and nodded.

TYPES OF NONFICTION I READ

WHY I CHOOSE TO WRITE ABOUT THIS READING

Recipes	To remember ingredients to buy To record how I adapted the recipe
Professional books	To gain ideas, organize ideas, and make plans
Travel blogs and books	To remind myself to ask friends who have been to the place for further recommendations
Memoirs	To examine how a person's experiences trigger my own memories and articulate truths about life that the memoir helped me to re-see
News articles	To remember information and to share with others
Feature articles	To collect information and organize it when studying a topic of relevance
Social media posts	To respond and comment and show support To share my opinions; to feel emotionally connected to others; to unwind

Our goal is for students to come to see writing as an access point for understanding—when they see a need for it. Think about this—it's radically different than wanting students to write well when we tell them to, or even when we give them a very high-quality question about their reading. These reflective exercises helped us better understand writing as a tool for understanding, and we wanted to help our students develop these tools too.

Your Turn

Track your “writing as a tool” moments for a full day or weekend and reflect on what you notice. Share these findings with your colleagues. Explain the genuine reasons why you choose writing as a meaning-making tool to your students. Invite them to share their own noticings.

Current Reality: Why Students Write About Reading in School

In order to better understand students' perspectives about why they write about their reading, we were part of a group of teachers who decided to interview students. We are sharing this with you because what we found is a common pattern that can help you get to know your students' perspectives and, if needed, shift them. We took one period and went to every fourth-grade student in a class and asked them two questions:

1. Why did you write about your reading today?
2. Who is the audience for this writing?

After sitting and listening to every student, we tallied up the findings. Students explained the reasons why they wrote about their reading. Most common was the response, "To show the teacher I did my work"; a few students shrugged and explained they did not know why they were writing about their reading; and one student explained she wrote about her reading to remember things that she felt were important. Wary of not overgeneralizing the findings from one classroom, we asked the same two questions in dozens of other classrooms—students from a variety of grade levels and from different parts of the country. The following list shows the most common responses students gave for why they write about their reading in school.

TOP 5 REASONS STUDENTS SAY THEY WRITE ABOUT THEIR READING IN SCHOOL

1. To prove to the teacher they did the reading or assignment
2. Because their teacher said they had to
3. To get a good grade
4. "I don't know why."
5. To remember something

When asked the second question about the audience of their writing about reading, most students shrugged and said they did not know, a few students said "the teacher," two students said "my reading partner," and one student

responded in a way that sounded like a question by tentatively saying, “I am?” Without a real purpose or audience, students often admit they get through the writing with the minimal amount of work and effort because it is a chore and obstacle, not a tool to help them access meaning.

These findings were not surprising to any of the teachers with whom we work. Many students view writing about reading as purposeless busywork. Rather than groan, complain, or blame students for their views, we rolled up our sleeves and spent time rethinking our practices. We can all reflect by discussing the following questions:

- What are we communicating to students about writing about reading?
- What are we modeling for students?
- How are our practices and moves creating these students’ perspectives?
- What else could we try?



Your Turn

Interview your students to find out why they write about their reading. Use our two questions or create your own.

1. Why did you write about your reading today?
2. Who is the audience for this writing?

Once you find out their perspectives, design your lessons based on what you might want to help them shift. Students’ perspectives are an important piece of deciding what to teach next.

Writing About Reading: An Important Tool for Readers and Their Teachers

History and literacy teacher Baynard Woods (2009) gave us direction about what to try with students. He explains the power that students experience when they begin to view writing as not just a school task but a life-changing tool: “When students recognize the thinking inherent in writing, they start to recognize their own thinking and then the thinking that invests the world around them with meaning. When they recognize that the human world is made of thought, they realize that the world can be changed” (p. 19). Students’ sense of agency can be developed when they realize the connections between thinking, writing, and changing their worlds.



Sure, notebook writing improves reading—but more to the point, it helps students and teachers develop rich reading identities. What's your reading persona?

Here is how we put Woods's insights about agency into action. We developed lessons that heighten students' awareness that thinking and writing are tools, and are truly *their* benefit—not ours. The following five lessons help students understand the many authentic reasons why readers use writing as a tool for understanding nonfiction texts. If your students do not use writing authentically right now, these lessons offer you a starting point. For the purposes of this book, we numbered them in this order, but you really could start with whichever one you think would best engage your students. While it makes sense to teach these lessons at the start of the school year, it is never too late to reboot your students' understanding of using writing as a tool.