Penguin Random House
SECONDARY EDUCATION

Inspire Teaching and Learning with Outstanding Books

THEMATIC GUIDE

Teaching Nonfiction

MIDDLE SCHOOL

This guide's activities encourage middle school students to explore the engaging world of nonfiction while cultivating skills in critical, visual, and informational literacy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published its "Position Statement on the Role of Nonfiction Literature (K–12)" (ncte.org/statement/role-of-nonfiction-literature-k-12). In it, they explain that while nonfiction is a gateway to literacy and a preferred genre for many students, 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."

In middle school, nonfiction not only offers authentic and relevant material for language arts classes; informational texts also provide an opportunity to build content knowledge in science, social studies, and technical courses. Nonfiction books are authentic examples of disciplinary literacy, modeling how to think, talk, and write like scientists, historians, artists, and more.

The books in this set offer a diverse range of topics and formats. Teachers can choose one or 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

Different Kinds of Minds:
A Guide to Your Brain

TEMPLE GRANDIN, PH.D.; Adapted by ANN D. KOFFSKY

9780593352885

Random House Books for Young Readers | Paperback
$9.99 | 240 pages | Lexile: 1060L | Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

In *Different Kinds of Minds*, Temple Grandin encourages young readers to discover what kind of thinkers they are in order to make the world a better place.

How To Talk So People Will Listen:
And Sound Confident (Even When You're Not)

LIZZIE WATERWORTH

9780744083125

DK Children | Hardcover | $14.99 | 176 pages
Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

Lizzie Waterworth's *How to Talk So People Will Listen* unpacks a "confidence toolbox" that empowers middle schoolers to find their voice even when they feel awkward or nervous.

The Mona Lisa Vanishes:
A Legendary Painter, a Shocking Heist, and the Birth of a Global Celebrity

NICHOLAS DAY; ILLUSTRATED BY BRETT HELQUIST

9780593643846

Random House Studio | Hardcover
$19.99 | 288 pages | Lexile: 1060L | Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

Nonfiction thriller *The Mona Lisa Vanishes*, by Nicholas Day, chronicles the daring theft of da Vinci's masterpiece while providing a compelling argument for the power of observation.

No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference

GRETA THUNBERG

9780143133568

Penguin Books | Paperback
$12.00 | 160 pages | Lexile: 940L | Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference curates a collection of speeches where climate activist Greta Thunberg compels her audience to think and act locally and globally.

Shackled:
A Tale of Wronged Kids, Rogue Judges, and a Town that Looked Away

CANDY J. COOPER

9781662620133

Calkins Creek | Hardcover
$19.99 | 192 pages | Lexile: 1140L | Also available: E-Book

Candy J. Cooper's *Shackled* narrates the shocking story of Pennsylvania children purposely imprisoned so that corrupt government officials and business leaders could profit.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

In order to provide an equitable environment where all students are prepared, the following activities build knowledge, provide access, and generate interest in nonfiction text.

ANCHOR CHARTS

Prepare an information-rich environment by creating classroom anchor charts for nonfiction. Anchor charts are informal posters prepared by the teacher or co-created with students. Their purpose is to "anchor" learning by providing a visible resource students can return to. Charts can be hand drawn or created digitally. In middle school, one type of anchor chart reminds students of the many genres of nonfiction text, which can, in turn, encourage students to read not only for information, but for curiosity, enjoyment, and inspiration. Genres might include: *memoir, biography, scientific report, how-to guide, investigative journalism, historical narrative,* and *documentary*. Another type of anchor chart lists nonfiction text features, such as *index, glossary, headings, source notes, captions, images, diagrams*, and *annotated notes*. Emphasize not all nonfiction books are the same genre or have the same features, and facilitate a walkthrough of several texts to model how to recognize genre and use features. For more on anchor charts, see prhlink.com/anchorcharts.

NONFICTION WORD WALLS

Because nonfiction text integrates domain-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 discuss when and how these 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.

- Content-Specific Word Wall: One type of nonfiction word wall is text-specific and focuses on building academic vocabulary knowledge around a specific content. For example, if the whole class is reading *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*, the word wall might include *biosphere, carbon budget, carbon dioxide, carbon emissions, climate change, climate neutrality, global equity, global warming, greenhouse gases, feedback loops, fossil fuels,* and *zero carbon solutions*.
- 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, traveling word walls are also handy during independent or self-selected reading, where students can jot down words they individually determine to be new, important, or confusing. For instance, a student who selects the book *Shackled* might record content-specific words such as *arbitrary sentencing, corruption complicity, kickbacks, plea bargain, organized crime, restorative justice,* and *zero tolerance*.

MENTOR TEXTS

Mentor texts are model essays, books, or multimodal works that introduce or clarify the genre and inspire students to see themselves as nonfiction readers and writers. 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 reading or writing purpose. Ask students to analyze the mentor piece before applying its style, format, or a specific element to their own analysis or writing. If using the mentor text to model reading analysis, plan stopping points and questions that invite student thinking and collaboration. If using the mentor text as a writing exemplar, apply the writers workshop method and co-construct the first sentence, paragraph, or element together. More on mentor texts can be found at prhlink.com/mentortextsedu. Specific examples from this collection, where mentor texts can inspire reading and writing, include:

- Select a famous, historic crime and provide a short synopsis in the form of a crime thriller such as those in the "Last Words" section of *The Mona Lisa Vanishes* (pp. 243–247).
- With *Different Kinds of Minds*' pages 67–69 for inspiration, draw a diagram or image of an idea you have for making a process quicker, better, or more efficient.
- Create a "toolbox" of tips for something you are skilled at, such as in *How to Talk So People Will Listen*.
- Using a model speech introduction from *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*, write the intro to an original speech where you persuade leaders to take important action.
- Similar to the style of *Shackled*, research a recent political scandal and summarize one contributing aspect of it in the form of an investigative journalism report.

INDEPENDENT READING ACTIVITIES

In content classes, students read nonfiction texts independently for a number of purposes. Whether students are reading a variety of self-selected titles for interest, or they are reading the same or different titles in order to support primary instruction, the following activities leverage nonfiction literature to build capacity in critical reading, writing, and thinking.

BROWSABLE NONFICTION

Create a nonfiction-rich environment with a browsable classroom library. In content classes, independently reading nonfiction texts that are course-related can build background knowledge and support current instruction. Self-selected nonfiction books that are not content related promote choice and engage students in topics that make them curious. Provide time each week for students to browse titles and read silently. Books should be displayed with titles visible in bins, shelves, or trays. Ask students to "hold their thinking" while reading by responding to text. Model how to take double-column notes or another annotation technique. For instance, students reticent about public speaking might be drawn to *How to Talk So People Will Listen*. For active note-taking, students might compile a list of the book's "confidence toolbox" tips, jotting these down one by one as they read. Rather than testing students on completion or comprehension, these notes and regular student-teacher reading conferences serve as a learning record.

INDEPENDENT READING CONFERENCES

During self-selected reading time, provide students with individualized instruction using independent reading conferences. In the nonfiction reading conference, teachers listen to students perform a quiet read-aloud, work on whole-class reading 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. Teachers take notes as students respond, and both can refer to these notes at the next conference. For more on independent reading conferences, see prhlink.com/irconferences.

A reading conference on *Different Kinds of Minds* might include the following questions:

- What made you choose this book?
- What can you tell me about the author? (Take a look at the author's note and book flaps.)
- What is Temple Grandin's purpose in writing this book for middle schoolers? How do you know? Can you show me a supporting passage?
- What are some significant vocabulary words you are noting as you read?
- How would you summarize Grandin's big ideas in this book?

- Is anything confusing so far? Are there words or passages you'd like to discuss together?
- What do you hope to learn as you continue reading?

DIALECTICAL JOURNAL

To promote active, close reading, ask students to keep a dialectical response journal while reading independently. Dialectical journals are double-column pages that list specific quotations and ideas from the book on the left and responses to text on the right. Responses might include analysis, questions, connections, reactions, or any other notes that help students engage with the text. Model and discuss some sample entries before asking students to take notes independently. These response journals can be brought to book circles, small-group activities, and class seminars, providing textual evidence to support student thinking and discussion. The journals can also provide ideas and evidence for culminating writing products. For more information, see prhlink.com/anchorcharts.

STUDENT-CREATED QUESTIONS

Challenge students to generate their own questions before, during, and after reading. Before reading, student-generated questions can set a purpose for reading and facilitate inquiry and engagement. During reading, student-created questions capture big ideas and author's purpose. After reading, student questions serve as retrieval practice in order to move learning into long-term memory. Model for students how to create questions at multiple levels of thinking. Provide sentence starters that promote open-ended questions at multiple levels of thinking, such as prhlink.com/creativeqs. Ask students to create their own questions about the text they are reading, making sure to include questions at every level. As an extension, ask students to develop answers, as well. Discuss: *How does generating your own questions before, during, and after reading help you understand and engage with a text?* For more on using student-generated questions to promote critical thinking, see prhlink.com/deeperthinking.

SMALL-GROUP ACTIVITIES

Small-group and partner activities provide students the opportunity to process their thinking in a low-stakes environment. The following activities foster critical and visual literacies as students explore or create images, video, and other multimodal components of nonfiction text.

NONFICTION BOOK CIRCLES

Whether students are all reading the same book, choosing from a small list of books, or each reading a different book, book circles provide an opportunity to speak, listen, and think about the complexities of content-rich nonfiction. In the content classroom, book circles promote a low-stakes environment for readers to take risks when analyzing and discussing texts.

- If students in the circle are reading the same nonfiction book, circles can meet to discuss a specific topic, structural element, or passage that supports the teacher's whole-group instruction. Students can rotate through self-selected roles each time the group meets, such as text expert, questioner, summarizer, and vocabulary whiz.
- If students in the circle are reading different nonfiction books, circles can meet to share what members are reading, cite specific passages, and discuss how the book connects to course content or personal interests.

A multimodal alternative to traditional book circles is to meet or record the group's activity using a digital collaboration tool such as Zoom, Flip, or Padlet. With these tools, students use emojis, likes, and posts as they collaborate, plus they can edit, rerecord, or rewrite their responses before sharing with their peer audience.

ONE-PAGER

Challenge partner teams to create multimodal one-pagers in order to share their takeaways from nonfiction reading. With one-pagers, students use hand-drawn or digital text and images to organize and hold their thinking about a text. While one-pagers can be completed individually, asking students to partner up promotes awareness and use of diverse skills and thinking. Teams can choose to use original art or embed online images. Teachers can provide templates for those who wish to use them. Set minimum expectations for each partner team, such as: one image, two direct quotations, and three original synthesis points. For example, a one-pager on *How to Talk So People Will Listen* might include a picture of a megaphone, the top two toolkit tips, and a discussion of calmness, confidence, and connection. A one-pager on *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* might include a digital photo of Greta Thunberg, two of her original hashtags, and the book's three big ideas: advocacy, urgency, and accountability. Information, examples, and templates for one-pagers can be found at cultofpedagogy.com/one-pagers.

SEE, THINK, ME, WE

In *Shackled* and *Different Kinds of Minds*, as in other nonfiction, the authors utilize photographs and other illustrations to provide context and deepen comprehension. Show the class one or more of these multimodal forms of representation, and ask students to analyze complexities and make connections. With the "See, Think, Me, We" routine, students initially work through the four analysis rounds independently, each time providing a more detailed lens. Students consider:

- What do I see? (What details do I observe?)
- What do I think? (What about the image or accompanying words makes me think that?)
- What connections can I make? (How does this work relate to me?)
- What broader connections can I make? (How does it relate to bigger ideas and issues?)

After students note their observations, ask them to discuss their analysis with a partner. As a scaffold for diverse learners, provide sentence frames such as " I see ...," "I think ...," "A connection I made is ...," and "This connects to the bigger idea of ...." One visual that works well in *Shackled* is the collection of artifacts on page 116, which personalizes the kids-for-cash scandal. In *Different Kinds of Minds*, students can analyze the hug machine image on page 79, connecting its purpose to weighted blankets for humans and ThunderShirts for dogs. After partners have completed discussions, ask: *How does the inclusion of photographs and images help clarify, extend, or change our thinking while reading nonfiction?* For more on "See, Think, Me, We," see prhlink.com/seethinkwonder.

MULTIMEDIA ANALYSIS

Challenge students to analyze and evaluate the treatment of a nonfiction topic or title in different mediums. For instance, *The Mona Lisa Vanishes* raises multiple questions about the significance of da Vinci's iconic painting both before and after its daring theft. Invite students to analyze the artwork as well as the questions it raises by reading and viewing a text excerpt, a movie clip, and a news story with interactive links. Project a digital image of the Mona Lisa on the classroom whiteboard, and reread with students the following excerpt on page 154:

> *Lisa Gherardini herself lived in a world of strict social codes. Her behavior was carefully controlled. She couldn't break the rules. But in his portrait of her, Leonardo could and does. This is the irony of the Mona Lisa. It's a painting that breaks the rules—but it is of a woman who could break none.*

Discuss with students what behaviors would be controlled for women of Lisa Gherardini's time. What "rules" might a woman from this period wish to break?

Next, show students a short video clip from the 2003 film *Mona Lisa Smile*, where an art professor challenges the expected gender roles of 1960's women (prhlink.com/monalisasmile). Discuss: *How were women in midcentury America*

similar or different to Lisa Gherardini? Why did the film choose a title based on da Vinci's iconic painting? How does art, be it painting, film, or another medium, serve to reflect and challenge society? As an extension, show students the online article "Mona Lisa Comes to Life in Computer-Generated Living Portrait" (prhlink.com/smithsoniannfguide). Ask students to read and reflect: *Why might the living portrait of Mona Lisa be "unsettling"? What rules does new technology allow the subject of the painting to break?*

WHOLE-GROUP ACTIVITIES

Whole groups provide students authentic audiences and broader forums for the exchange of ideas. The following activities focus on informational literacy as students 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). For example, after reading the "Intolerance" chapter of *Shackled*, students can reflect on how imprisonment impacts prisoners. Or, after reading the chapter "The Man with the Wrong Name" in *The Mona Lisa Vanishes*, students can re-examine their thinking about bias in forensic science. In *How to Talk So People Will Listen*, readers might compare their readiness to speak in public before and after being introduced to the confidence toolbox. Model how to apply the "I Used to Think … Now I Think …" routine and provide time to use it with peers. Using turn and talks or think/write/pair/shares, students can stop throughout the reading and reflect with peers on their changed thinking. Discuss: *How does the strategy help me think about my thinking and the thinking of others? Why is it important to read, research, or consider multiple viewpoints?*

CLAIM, EVIDENCE, REASONING

Different Kinds of Minds provides a unique opportunity for students to critically evaluate the perspective of the author. Read the book's introduction section together. Ask: *What reason is given for why the author wrote this book?* Discuss the author's stated desire to "make the world a better place" (p. 7). Next, show students the TED Talk "The World Needs All Kinds of Minds" (prhlink.com/tedtalkminds). As they watch, ask students to note anything they hear that is interesting, surprising, or connected to something the author mentions in her book introduction. After viewing, ask students to use the "Claim, Evidence, Reasoning" framework to evaluate Grandin's argument that we need different kinds of minds. Provide or model a three-columned note-taker with spaces to record Grandin's claims, evidence, and reasoning. Students may need to watch the video twice, once to capture the gist, and a second time to record claims and evidence. After viewing, ask students to discuss their claims,

evidence, and reasoning, first with a partner, then with the class. In the small group, share: *What are Grandin's main claims, and how does she support them? Is her reasoning and evidence sound? How did watching the video add to our understanding of the book's meaning?* After the group discussion, emphasize the ideas of purpose and point of view in nonfiction literature.

CIRCLE OF VIEWPOINTS

The Mona Lisa Vanishes explores complex issues with multiple perspectives. Ask students to explore these diverse points of view by applying the "Circle of Viewpoints" strategy (prhlink.com/circleviewpoints) while reflecting on a key excerpt. In the section called "The Story of Eduardo de Valfierno Hits Close to Home," the author asserts: "We live in a conspiratorial age, and the conspiracy theories about the Mona Lisa theft reflect our own time … In a conspiracy theory, belief matters more than facts. Belief in a conspiracy inevitably leads you away from facts" (p. 238). After re-reading this section, ask students to complete the following steps:

1. Brainstorm a list of different perspectives that can be inferred from the excerpt and/or the broader text. (Students might choose Alphonse Bertillon, Louis Lépine, Eduardo de Valfierno, Vincenzo Peruggia, or even Leonardo da Vinci himself.)
2. Choose one of those perspectives to explore in writing, using these sentence-starters:
   - I am thinking of … from the viewpoint of … (Introduce the topic and viewpoint.)
   - I think … (Describe the topic from your adopted viewpoint.)
   - A question I have from this viewpoint is … (Ask a question from this viewpoint.)
3. Share your written perspectives in small groups.

Before starting the activity, emphasize the importance of seeing other perspectives and respecting all voices during discussions about controversial issues. Consider referencing or creating class norms prior to the discussion. Ask students: *Were these mistakes in the investigation simply missteps where detectives or others failed to use observation over assumption? Is the author correct in blaming these failures on conspiracy theories? What lessons about contemporary conspiracy theories can we learn from* The Mona Lisa Vanishes?

SPACECAT ANALYSIS

Ask students to conduct a close read of nonfiction text using the "SPACECAT" rhetorical analysis protocol. For example, students might analyze Greta Thunberg's "Unpopular" speech in *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* (pp. 12–14), delivered at the U.N. Climate Change Conference in December 2018. In the "SPACECAT" protocol, students think critically and discuss meaningfully the

argument and craft a speaker or author employs, ultimately determining her purpose and how it is supported by authorial choice. Ask students to identify and analyze specific words, phrases, and sentences aligned to the speaker, purpose, audience, context, exigence (rhetorical situation), choices, appeals, and tone. Partners can compare their thinking before discussing as a whole class. In "Unpopular," students might identify Greta's emotional appeal to politicians who are grandparents, her logical argument about children doing the work adults should be doing, and her ethical appeal concerning countries that live in luxury. After partners complete their analysis, ask the class: *How might we define Greta's specific purpose(s)? How do the choices made in "Unpopular" support that purpose?* Students should see how Thunberg's rhetorical choices result in a chiding, ironic tone that reveals her ultimate purpose, to warn those in power that "the real power belongs to the people" (p. 14). As an extension, show students the video of Greta's "Unpopular" address (prhlink.com/gretaunpopular). Ask: *How does watching the video confirm, extend, or change your interpretation of Thunberg's text?*

SYNTHESIS ACTIVITIES

The following activities provide opportunities to reflect on the big ideas in this collection.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions represent important issues, themes, and takeaways from the books in this collection and can be used for journal writing, essays, and conversation starters.

1. Why is it important to value different kinds of thinkers?
2. What does it mean to be an advocate?
3. How can studying our history cause important change?
4. How do we speak truth to power?
5. What is equity and how does it apply to the climate crisis?
6. What is our responsibility toward the planet?
7. What is the relationship between politics and science? Between politics and art?
8. What is the value of observation and evidence? What is the value of imagination?
9. Is a "zero tolerance" policy ever appropriate?
10. How can we improve our social justice system?

SOCRATIC SEMINAR

To promote civic discourse with diverse views, conduct a Socratic seminar based on a close-read of nonfiction text. Prior to the seminar, discuss with students what an ideal seminar looks and sounds like, including participation, active listening, and respect of multiple viewpoints. Ask students to set a class goal, such as "I will contribute to the discussion at least one time," as well as a personal goal, such as "I will mention a classmate's name and extend on or disagree with his thinking." Students should record their goals on paper or sticky notes, which are visible during the seminar. During the discussion, take a facilitator's role. Ask a low-risk opening question to encourage total class participation in a round-robin response. This question can be provided the night before. Its purpose is to identify the text's main ideas. Second, move to a core question for the purpose of analyzing text details. End with a closing question that promotes personalization. After the seminar, ask students to evaluate their own and classmates' speaking, thinking, and listening. Did they meet their class and personal goals? What should the class do differently next time? How did the seminar deepen their understanding of the nonfiction work?

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING (PBL)

Nonfiction texts like the books in this set provide middle school readers the opportunity to learn about the world around them, including what needs to change. Whether it is challenging the juvenile justice system, taking responsibility for climate change, 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 PBL activities inspired by the texts in this set include:

- Design or improve a tool that addresses a technical need. Consider human and animal needs (*Different Kinds of Minds*).
- Organize an awareness event at a local park or venue (*No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*).
- Make a podcast, video, or website about a place, person, or time in history that needs its story told (*Shackled*, *The Mona Lisa Vanishes*).
- Write and deliver a speech about a topic of local, national, or global significance (*How to Talk So People Will Listen*, *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*).

RESOURCES

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
- "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" www.ncte.org/statement/role-of-nonfiction-literature-k-12
- "Reading with Purpose in the Content Areas" www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/reading-purpose-content
- "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, to browse more nonfiction titles.

Penguin Random House EDUCATION

Penguin Random House Education
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
penguinrandomhouseeducation.com
Queries: k12education@penguinrandomhouse.com