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INFORMATIONAL WRITING CAN BE INFORMATIONAL LEARNING: A GUEST BLOG POST BY CHRISTOPHER LEHMAN

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NOTE FROM STACEY: Many classrooms are engaged in informational writing right now. I know it can be challenging to teach students how to craft informational writing that teaches (rather than copying what they learn from nonfiction texts) and has voice. Therefore, I turned to Chris Lehman whose newest book, *Energize Research Reading and Writing: Fresh Strategies to Spark Interest, Develop Independence, and Meet Key Common Core Standards, Grades 4-8*, tackles this topic (and others like it) head-on. His guest post contains excellent tips for making informational writing more meaningful, educational, and fun!

I live a big part of my life in informational texts – I write professional books for educators, read professional books, blogs, am drawn to informational television (from cooking shows to NOVA specials, I'm hooked), I love articles on nearly anything, Google news feeds, you name it and I am there.

There is often one piece of nonfiction, however, that has driven me bonkers: that stack of student “informational essays” (or books, or reports, or brochures, or whatever) that you bring home to grade. Many teachers, across content areas, say the same things: “My students copy everything,” or, “They just spit back facts, after facts, after facts,” or worse, “When I read their pieces they are so dry... it's boring to read them all!”

A larger issue, even beyond the regurgitation of facts into paragraphs, is that many times our students are not *really* learning when they write. You ask, “can you tell me more about the life cycle of a frog that you wrote about?” and the child says, “um... baby frog to big frog?”

Informational writing should be connected with informational learning. Good news is that and it can—and be actually fun to do in the process.



At a keynote at Teachers College, Dr. Tony Wagner described interviewing leaders of businesses and asking what they wanted to see from their employee's writing. Some of the leaders of DELL Computer, he said, responded with something very interesting: "We'd like our future employees to have more *voice* in their writing. People come to us knowing a lot, but we want them to be able to communicate it clearly with others. Even be *interesting* as they do it." What a shift of thinking! Informational writing is not just a store house of "things I know," instead it is written for an audience and should teach them. In other words, the paper is a classroom and the words and images a writer includes become the teacher.

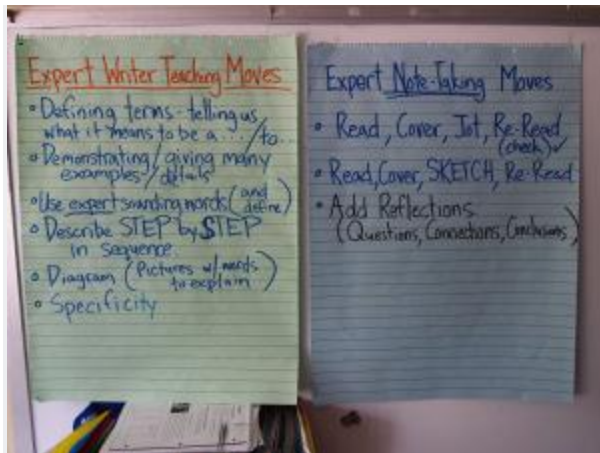
We can bring this shift in thinking to our own instruction, thinking of informational writing as *teaching*, not just regurgitating facts. I wrote *Energize Research Reading and Writing* in the company of kids, elementary and middle schoolers, and I was so inspired—as always—by how when we make even small revisions to our instructional practices our students often make big, incredible changes in their work.

One of these is adding a new step to our student's informational writing process. Now, many of our students tend to have two main steps:

- 1) take notes,
- 2) write a draft.

Alternatively, students' informational writing can change dramatically when we include an extra step in between:

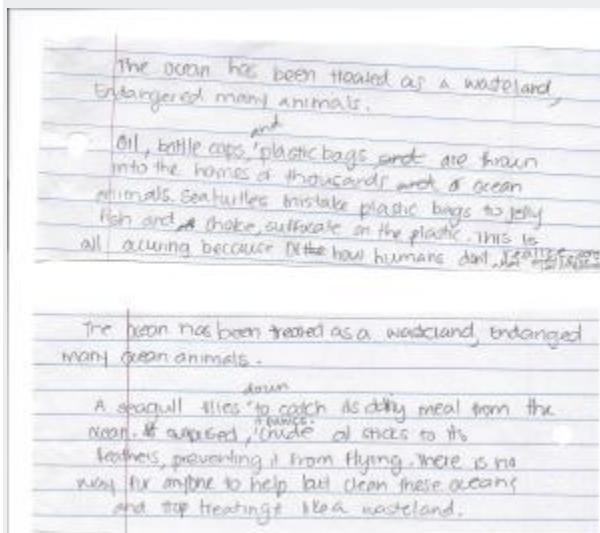
- 1) take notes,
- 2) experiment with those notes by *teaching-through-writing*,
- 3) write a draft.



Teaching-through-writing is simple to demonstrate and a blast to watch kids try. It involves choosing a fact, then trying out a way to teach it. Here are steps I tend to use:

- 1) Jot a fact about your subject on the top of a page (or slip of paper, or note card, or post-it).
- 2) Think about ways that nonfiction authors and television shows teach information, like making comparisons or telling a story (I describe a lesson to help students study these examples for ways authors teach in Chapter 4 of *Energize Research Reading and Writing*).
- 3) Experiment with one of those way of teaching *through* your writing.
- 4) Then do this whole thing again, experimenting with a different way of teaching that same fact.

Here, for example, are Sara's experiments with teaching-through-writing a fact. She learned through her reading that oceans are being treated as wastelands and animals are becoming endangered from our actions. In her first experiment she writes a list of striking facts; in her second experiment tries out describing the fact through an invented anecdote:



Having this “I need to teach others” feeling—as opposed to “I need to prove I read some stuff” feeling—makes dramatic changes for our young informational writers.

This teaching-through-writing can then be extended to almost anything, for instance:

- Teaching expert vocabulary to your readers, using everything from direct definitions through to devising context clues—just like published authors.
- Teaching the process of something by writing small fact after small fact in a sequence—instead of just writing one large fact like, “sharks catch fish.”
- Teaching through visuals, not just grabbing any photo you find online but really making careful decisions about the main ideas you are writing about—just as professional photographers and illustrators do.

From all of these experiments, you can support students in understanding that informational writers do not just teach through their words, they also teach through how they structure their writing. You can help your students do this by simply sorting and categorizing their experiments. In Chapter 5, I describe helping students move away from pre-done, perhaps overly explicit graphic organizers (I am thinking of the ubiquitous “Study a State” packets fourth graders sometimes get: “On this page write 3 facts about the state’s motto, bird, and fruit”) and instead learn writing habits of informational writers, such as carefully arranging your ideas so your reader can really learn them and giving your reader language that directs their thinking. Thinking: *Should I organize some of these experiments in a cause and effect structure? What if I tried grouping them and imagining the subheadings I could include?*

As students sort the experiments they have already done their drafts begin to take shape. They then can write around those pieces, using those teaching-through-writing skills they have been learning. Teach them transitions to include as well. I have found it powerful to help kids know not just lists of transition phrases but more importantly the purposes for them; to group these together behind a purpose. For example:

- Phrases that “move forward” like *for example, in addition, also*;
- Phrases that “turn a corner” such as *in contrast, however*;
- Phrases that “give directions” to your reader *notice how, there are three main points, consider*.

As a student writes they can think, “am I moving forward to a similar idea or getting ready to turn a corner?” Again the idea here is to support your students in thinking of themselves as careful *teachers* of information, not just as proving they read.



And the pay off? Yes, their writing skill will take dramatic leaps and bounds. Yes, their development and structure will move more towards Common Core expectations. Yes, the pieces are way more interesting to read (hallelujah). And yes, they *learn* more about their topics through the process! The act of working and reworking, visiting and revisiting, in role as *teachers* of information helps our students synthesize their understanding about their topics and practice essential habits of great informational writers.

So here is to happy writing... and learning... and a classroom full of teaching!

Christopher Lehman is an author, speaker, and Senior Staff Developer at the [Teachers College Reading and Writing Project](#) at Columbia University. He is author of [Energize Research Reading and Writing](#), of [A Quick Guide to Reviving Disengaged Writers](#), and co-author with Lucy Calkins and Mary Eherenworth of [Pathways to the Common Core](#). You can find him on his [blog](#) and follow him on Twitter [@iChrisLehman](#).

Some possible discussion questions:

How does writing impact learning and how does teaching impact writing?

How would giving students more voice in their writing affect their career readiness?

What aspects of the “teaching-through-writing” process will develop the deeper understanding of the content? How does it help?

“Having this ‘I need to teach others’ feeling—as opposed to ‘I need to prove I read some stuff’ feeling—makes dramatic changes for our young informational writers.” Why might this be true and what ‘dramatic changes’ would you anticipate with your students?

This article is based on students in grades 4-8. Would it also be applicable for high school or college students? What adaptations might be made in order to make most effective with older students?

What would this look like in teacher planning?