

Today's nonfiction for children dazzles readers with intriguing concepts, vibrant writing, and clever formats. Filled with engaging text features, nonfiction books appeal to many young readers. Some of these readers can pick out a text feature with the same lightning speed and certainty that they can name their favorite ice cream flavor. They have no trouble identifying maps, photographs, charts, captions, headings, glossaries, cut-aways, and more. But when questioned about the purpose, function, and usefulness of any given text feature, they may seem about as sure of the answer as I am when asked what's for dinner on a busy school night.

Text features can assist students in comprehending the text; in fact, one of the comprehension strategies that appear on the CAFE Menu is "Use Text Features (Titles, Headings, Captions, Graphic Features)" (Boushey & Moser, 2009). The *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (2010) place a value on students' understanding of text features and structure as well. College and Career Readiness (CCR) Anchor Standard 5 for Reading states that students should be able to: "Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole." In addition, The Reading Standards for Informational Text K-5 expressly mention knowledge and use of text features as an end-of-year expectation in the first, second, and third grade level standards (pages 13-14). These same standards require that grade 4 students are able to describe the structure of a text while their grade 5 counterparts are expected to compare and contrast the structure of two texts by the end of the academic year (page 14). So it is expedient that students have the opportunity to explore text features deeply. Although students may already be familiar with many text features, teachers can model how to look at them from various perspectives.

The chart below demonstrates a way to help students who have some familiarity with text features to analyze them in different ways. Through a series of focused minilessons, the teacher can guide students to understand the **Who, What, Where, Why, and How** of a selected text feature. Using a nonfiction Big Book or nonfiction text excerpt displayed on a Smartboard or overhead projector, the teacher can encourage students to examine its text features. Over the course of five days (or more if needed), the teacher can deliver a minilesson daily with an emphasis on one of the questions listed on the chart. For example, she can ask students to pinpoint a text feature and think about **who** created the text feature—*was it the author? an illustrator? a cartoonist? a mapmaker? Or someone else? Does the book tell readers?* As students contribute, she can record their responses on the chart. By the end of a week or so, the class will have created a useful anchor chart designed to highlight the important characteristics of the text feature. Best of all, students will have gained a multi-dimensional view of the studied text feature that addresses valuable aspects of author's craft. During whole class instruction, guided reading, strategy groups, and one-on-one conferences, the teacher can encourage this type of analysis to deepen comprehension of nonfiction.

| <b>Name of Text Feature:</b>    |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <b>Day 1 Minilesson : WHO?</b>  | • <b>Who</b> probably created this text feature?          |
| <b>Day 2 Minilesson: WHAT?</b>  | • <b>What</b> is the purpose of this text feature?        |
| <b>Day 3 Minilesson: WHERE?</b> | • <b>Where</b> does this text feature appear?             |
| <b>Day 4 Minilesson: WHY?</b>   | • <b>Why</b> is this text feature included in the text?   |
| <b>Day 5 Minilesson: HOW?</b>   | • <b>How</b> does this text feature help you as a reader? |

Discussing these significant characteristics of text features helps students to think critically. They examine questions of author's craft as they reflect on the purpose of the text feature and figure out why the author chose to include it. Children also have the opportunity to analyze how the text features support the structure of the text. Most importantly, they investigate how the text features help them to unlock the meaning of the text.

This school year, readers will encounter some text features for the first time while others are already old friends. As a class learns about text features, the teacher can engage students with open-ended questions when they confer, participate in small group work, and contribute to whole class discussions about nonfiction. Here are some examples of these types of questions:

- *What are some of the text features in this book?*
- *Why do you think the author wrote this book? How does the use of text features support the author's purpose?*
- *How would the book be different without a certain text feature?*
- *Which text features are most useful to you as a reader? Why?*
- *What text feature would you add to this book if you were the author? Where would you place it in the book? How would your text feature help the reader?*
- *After reading two books on the same nonfiction topic, examine the text features in each and then compare them. Did the authors include the same types of text features? Which book used the text features more effectively?*
- *What is an original text feature that you could design for a nonfiction book?*

To extend the study of text features, teachers can offer children a "behind the scenes" look at the world of book making. Children can consider the work of the author in conjunction with others who had a hand in bringing a nonfiction text and its often sophisticated text features to life. Readers might enjoy learning about photographers, artists, illustrators, cartoonists, book designers, and even cartographers who might have contributed supportive text features to the book.

Through an in-depth study of text features, students will be better prepared to comprehend the text more fully. They will come to recognize text features for what they really are—vital elements that make the text more accessible and interesting for readers. They will be able to tackle text features with confidence!

#### Work Consulted

Boushey, G., & Moser, J. (2009). *The CAFÉ book*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. Washington, D.C. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers.