

A Place for *Wonder*

Reading and Writing Nonfiction in the Primary Grades



Georgia Heard & Jennifer McDonough



Stenhouse Publishers
Portland, Maine

A Place for Wonder: Reading and Writing in the Primary Grades by Georgia Heard and Jennifer McDonough.
© 2009 Stenhouse Publishers. No reproduction without written permission from publisher.

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

Chapter One: Creating a Wonder World: 7
Centers, Projects, and Clubs

Introduction..... 8

1. The Wonder Center 11

2. Wonder of the Week 14

3. Pondering Time and Whole-Class Shared Research 17

4. Pet Observation and Wonder Journals 22

5. The Discovery Table 28

6. The Observation Window 34

7. One Small Square 36

8. A Listening Walk 41

9. The Wonder Club 45

Books for Creating a Wonder World 50

Chapter Two: Nonfiction Writing from the Heart 57

Introduction..... 58

1. What Are Your Three Wonders? 59

2. Wonder Boxes 64

3. Heart Wonders..... 66

4. Books of Wonder: Writing Nonfiction from the Heart..... 70

Books for Nonfiction Writing from the Heart..... 77

Chapter Three: Nonfiction Research Wonder Writing.. 79

Introduction.....	80
1. Exploring Nonfiction Books: Sorting and Cataloguing.....	86
2. Exploring Nonfiction Books: Structures and Features.....	94
3. Getting Started: Choosing Research Wonder Topics	99
4. Nonfiction Writing: Trying On Topics	103
5. Nonfiction Writing: Creating a Table of Contents	109
6. Nonfiction Writing: Designing Chapters.....	113
7. Exploring and Researching Questions	115
8. Exploring and Researching Questions: Inferring	122
9. Exploring and Researching Questions: Ask an Expert	125
10. Nonfiction Writing: Leads/Beginnings	130
11. Nonfiction Writing: Wow Words.....	131
12. Nonfiction Writing: Other Craft Lessons.....	135
13. Nonfiction Writing: Elaboration	137
14. Nonfiction Writing: Diagrams	139
15. Writing Partner Revision	141
16. Editing: Using Word Wall Words.....	142
17. Partner Editing: Capitals and Periods	144
18. Publishing and Celebrating	147
Conclusion	148
Books for Nonfiction Research Wonder Writing.....	152
Appendix	155
Resources	169
Bibliography	175

Chapter One

Creating a Wonder World: Centers, Projects, and Clubs



*It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know
than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate.*

~ Rachel Carson

Introduction

Recently, I had the pleasure of listening to my friend and colleague Ralph Fletcher give a writing seminar. He asked us to draw a map of an outdoor place where we spent time in our childhoods: backyards, streets, vacant lots, woods. He then asked us to mark an *X* on a spot that evoked a sense of wonder and mystery. I drew a map of my backyard in Virginia. I marked an *X* on the small creek that meandered behind our house—I spent many hours of wonder there—a place where king snakes slithered next to our Keds-covered feet, and crayfish peered at us from under the rocks where they lurked.

As I was driving home, I thought about why so many of our schools and classrooms aren't places of wonder. If we asked children to make a map of their classrooms, and then mark an *X* on a place they feel is a wonder spot, a place where they are excited to learn and to explore, a place where they can discover new things, where would that place be? The classroom library? Sitting next to the fish tank on the shelf? Rummaging through the art box filled with colored markers and paper? We need to think about creating primary classroom environments that give children the opportunity for wonder, mystery, and discovery; an environment that speaks to young children's inherent curiosity and innate yearning for exploration is a classroom where children are passionate about learning and love school.

I remember once visiting a first-grade classroom in New York City where the sense of wonder was evident everywhere. If I were to draw an *X* on the places in this classroom where I would want to explore, investigate, and learn, my entire map would be covered with *X*s. The teacher had propped a spring cherry tree branch in full bloom in a corner of the room; various spider webs woven from string hung from the ceiling; hundreds of books were stuffed in baskets and on bookshelves; colorful beanbag chairs nearby beckoned readers; an aquarium bubbled quietly in the background; and posters of mentors, such as Martin Luther King, were displayed on the walls. When I stepped into the classroom, the first graders were in the middle of the room practicing a play they had written about Rosa Parks. Chairs were lined in rows to simulate the bus on which Rosa Parks rode that historic day when she refused to give up her seat. Outside, I saw the small garden the children had planted on a once-barren lot in front of the school. The teacher created an environment of

wonder and discovery, and the results were tangible as I observed how her students were so engaged and enthusiastic about learning.

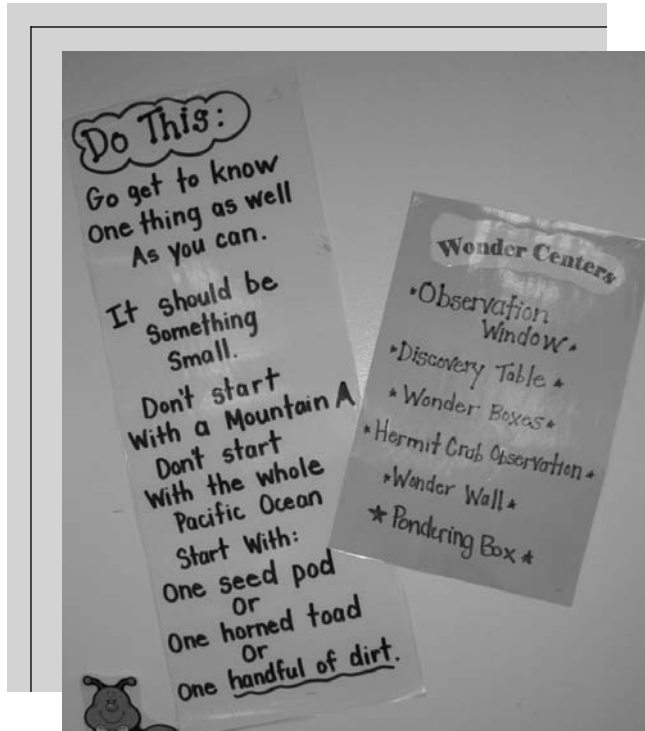


We invite you to stand back and observe your classrooms. Where are the places of wonder and discovery? An observation window? A shelf displaying shells, rocks, and other natural objects? Are there living creatures (including plants) that children care for and observe? What places in the classroom would the children mark a wonder *X* on? And if we extend our wonder maps beyond the classroom, are there any natural resources near your classroom that the children could visit and explore?

Our children's lives run the risk of becoming two dimensional in the present day's technology-driven society. The worlds of Internet and video games are becoming just as substantial to children as their reality. One student in San Diego commented that he liked to play indoors because that's where all the electrical outlets are (from Richard Louv's *The Last Child in the Woods*). Classrooms can provide alternative environments to lure young children into continuing their passion for learning. Creating a "wonder" classroom environment is the foundation from which deeper and more sustained explorations can take place.

After I gave a workshop on creating a wonder environment, Ms. Buck, a wonderful primary teacher in Canada, wrote to me about setting up a wonder environment in her kindergarten classroom. She sent this letter to the parents explaining and preparing them for the important work the class was embarking on:

Our class is planning to launch an exploration of a new theme — The Wonder World. I am hoping this theme will help my students respond to the natural world with wonderment and awe. We will further extend concepts . . . by gathering data through our senses; we will do sound surveys during outdoor walks; we will look at objects great and small. There will be opportunities for students to wonder, to ask questions, and to pose problems and then we will explore ways to get answers. We will be using our study of the Wonder World as a springboard for math, language, science, art, and music activities.



A menu of wonder centers for students to choose from

teachers have explored wonder centers once a week, and throughout the year, as a way of encouraging curiosity and wonder all year long.

We encourage setting up wonder centers early in the school year so that when any natural wonder occurs—the wind sweeps the leaves off the trees, the snow begins to fall, or a bird lands on the windowsill—the children will be ready to write it down!

Wonder Centers and Projects

1. The Wonder Center
2. Wonder of the Week
3. Pondering Time and Whole-Class Shared Research
4. Pet Observation and Wonder Journals
5. The Discovery Table
6. The Observation Window
7. One Small Square
8. A Listening Walk
9. The Wonder Club

In this chapter, we map out a menu of ideas to create a “wonder world” that will help encourage children’s curiosity and exploration. These ideas can be set up as centers, if you already have the routine of centers established in your classroom, as Jen did; if you don’t have center time established, you can introduce these ideas during a nonfiction writing study unit. The questions generated from the centers, as well as the group research on a particular question, model the exploration students will do later on as they write nonfiction. Other

Curricular and State Standards Connections to Chapter 1

- ✓ Stimulate curiosity
- ✓ Learn through inquiry
- ✓ Learn through observation
- ✓ Gather data through senses
- ✓ Stimulate imagination and creativity
- ✓ Respond with wonderment and awe
- ✓ Find or determine answers to questions derived from curiosity about everyday experiences
- ✓ Recognize and solve problems through observation and active exploration

1. The Wonder Center

I'm more interested in arousing enthusiasm in kids than in teaching the facts. The facts may change, but that enthusiasm for exploring the world will remain with them the rest of their lives.

~ Seymour Simon

When my son was younger, he asked many questions whenever we drove in the car together. It was often difficult to drive and concentrate on answering the questions at the same time: "Why is the sky blue?" "Where does rain come from?" "What's in outer space?" As I stopped at intersections or changed lanes on the highway, I tried to explain some of the ways the world

worked. I made a promise to myself that I would always do my best to answer each of his questions as thoughtfully as I could. I didn't want to dampen his enthusiasm for exploring the world. Sometimes he would stump me, and I'd

Resource Materials

- ✓ Large chart
- ✓ Markers
- ✓ Sticky notes